

Theology Matters

Orphaned Children Sing Lonely Songs: Why We're Losing the Person of the Father

By Gerrit Dawson

The Loss of the Father

The person of the Father is disappearing from our life as a church. Seminarians are trained now not only to avoid pronouns for God, but to eschew use of "Father" for the first person of the Triune God. The Father is disappearing from our liturgies, sermons and theological conversations. For example, in the past year, fewer than half of the ministers entering our local presbytery named the Father in their statements of faith. Sometimes, the functional descriptions of Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer were substituted for the historic Trinitarian terms. Even among generally conservative pastors, there was a tendency to write about *God*, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. These ministers affirmed the Trinity of God but would not name the Father explicitly as the first person. So—does it matter? In terms of our theology and our pastoral care, our spiritual growth and our mission, does it matter if we lose the Father?

I started seriously examining this issue after one disturbing exchange during the presbytery examination of a candidate for ordination. I had asked about the absence of the person of the Father in her statement of faith. The

candidate explained that in Scripture "God is referred to as many different metaphors and names..." Another minister then followed up by asking if this candidate would baptize a child in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. She replied, "Well, gosh, I never have thought about that." I had to make a transcript from the video of the meeting just to confirm that I really heard the words. The candidate went on to explain that such a baptismal formula "certainly would be an option, that that's most appropriate...but it may be that we come up with something different, as a church." She went on to pass her examination with overwhelming affirmation.

Putting the obvious polity questions aside, what pierced me was the realization that, within our common understanding as a presbytery, the person of the Father has been reduced to an option in worship, preaching and theological conversation. I made an appointment with our examinations committee a few months later. They listened intently to my concerns, and affirmed that candidates must indeed be Trinitarian in belief. Yet, their conclusion about the Father was that the committee had so many areas in which candidates needed examination that they simply didn't have the leisure to linger over issues of

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“God language.” My concerns were noted, but not viewed as urgent. Is that it, then? Is affirming the person of the Father merely a matter of what metaphorical language we choose? May we replace the Father with Creator, or God, and do no harm to our theology, our worship and our pastoral care?

This article is an apologetic for the absolute necessity of affirming the Father, and more, for the recovery of the glorious, priceless gift the church has in being able to name God as Father. But before moving to that defense, I'd like to push a few more edges. For as I studied, I wondered, “Why is the church eliminating the Father from our worship and theology? Moreover, in whose interests is it to remove the name Father from our Christian discourse? What is gained by getting rid of the Father?”

The Pastoral Impulse to Remove the Father

The first answer to my questions is pastoral. We have learned that naming God as Father is painful to those who have had bad experiences with their earthly fathers. Some in our congregations have fathers who abandoned them when they were very young. The reasons for the leaving make little difference in the depth of the wound. The children experience themselves as *leaveable*, whether through divorce, untimely death, alcoholism or workaholicism. The result is the fear that no man will ever want to stay for long, and from this pain has grown anger toward “father.”

Conversely, some in our midst had fathers who did not leave them but stayed too close. There was the incessant pressure of demands for achievement and perfection. Nothing they ever did was satisfactory. The thought of the word “father” evokes feelings of never measuring up, of always being found wanting. Other fathers were closer still, venting their rage and guilt upon their little ones so that “father” does not mean protection, but pain. Home was not a safe place when Father was there, but rather a house of horrors.

For these diminished children, God may not seem to be a loving, reliable presence. Rather, God, especially if named Father, may seem to be the deity that can never be pleased, the angry, violating tyrant, or the indifferent, unreachable ruler who has no time for us. For quite honest reasons, then, people may have inherited a strong, negative reaction to naming God as Father. Sensitive pastors might, in response, begin to reduce or even eliminate talk of God the Father. By temperament, most ministers I know want to ease pain, not cause it. So we might make a determined effort to bring in metaphors related to God as mother or other images (the problem of those who had nightmare mothers would yet remain!). We might well refrain from mentioning the Father in sermons and prayers. All this would be done out of concern for the broken.

The forces pushing for the elimination of Father from the church, though, are comprised of far more than tender-hearted ministers. Left alone, people with pastoral hearts

would eventually come back round to introducing the true Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Pastors live in the real world, and have strong common sense. We know that the father-wound in people is not healed by eliminating all reference to the Father. We've had enough psychology to know that avoiding does not create wholeness. Why, the very anger against their fathers which some of our members carry reveals just how much each person longs for the great Father who will protect, instruct, and offer boundaries and security. The answer to father-pain is not the end of the father-role but its healing and redemption. Compassionate pastoral common sense, however, has not been left alone. Other, powerful influences have been at work.

Radical Feminism

At the outset, it is important to note the difference between individuals and the collective. Christian pastors respond with heartfelt compassion to the wounds of individuals and the brokenness in the interconnected relationships which are an integral part of their lives. The personal pain of individuals may take a very different shape, however, when taken out of the context of their organic relationships and joined to the organized response to father-wounding by transpersonal movements. Anger arises from pain, and those layered emotions have driven some to want to be done with father language altogether. The collective experiences of many women living with unhealed wounds and a resulting, smoldering rage have coalesced into a spiritual force in radical feminism. Obviously, the push to eliminate the Father arises most immediately from feminist circles. The chain of reasoning runs like this: calling God *Father* is considered to mean that God is male. As the formula made famous by Mary Daly says, “If God is male, then male is God.” Thus calling God the Father leads to the oppression of women by men inflamed to dominate by the authority of the masculine deity.

Another way to articulate this is to assert that the Father is associated with patriarchy, and patriarchy is associated with the long historical repression of women. Retaining the Father in worship and theology thus perpetuates the abuse and allegedly empowers men in their continued role as oppressors. Moreover, the masculinity of the first person of the Christian Trinity tends to overshadow the feminine aspects of deity and blocks women from relating to God and being empowered as women by God. Hence, from more radical feminists comes the push to give voice to women's imaginings of who God seems to be. Thus, we have seen the rise of Sophia or other references to the goddess which are offered to make our view of God more “balanced.”

Feminist concerns, then, have an interest in the removal of the Father from our usual language in theology and worship. My explanation is simple, but so are the feminist theological reasons for dethroning the Father. They represent the organized response to the pain of father-wounds described above that have hardened into a steady anger, sustained by a sense of injustice which must be

rectified. Thus, the changes in language many ministers might have considered out of pastoral concern are now enacted as compulsory due to the very real anger which is unleashed against those who do not comply. These corrections may come in the form of lowered grades in seminary courses, outright scolding in meetings, or more subtle communication that the worship leader using the historically orthodox language is simply ignorant and behind the times. The push from feminist circles is a known source for the erosion of naming God as Father.

The Father and Abortion

Less obvious, however, is the stake the pro-abortion constituency has in eliminating the Father. A bit of reflection, however, will bring it to light. The message from the pro-choice side of the abortion issue revolves around asserting the right of a woman sovereignly to make decisions about her own body. This reasoning builds strongly on feminist concerns. No outside force, particularly no man, should be able to infringe on those rights. Through the ages, masculine oppression has kept many women continually pregnant, perhaps against their deeper will. The resulting children have kept women tied to the home, and thus kept them away from education, independence or the realization of their full potential. Limiting abortion access in any way thus limits the freedom of women to make choices and, therefore would return women to the centuries of subjugation. It would enable men to enact power over women through any form of forced sex. Abortion rights, then, are a symbol of protecting choices for women, and hence, in this line of thinking, of protecting women themselves.

When tied into deep feelings of defending a freedom that seems simultaneously hard-won and precariously held every moment, the idea of abortion rights exerts a powerful influence over our minds and hearts. Only such a mighty spiritual force could explain contemporary attitudes toward abortion. For it takes such a powerful cultural atmosphere to keep us from reckoning with the obvious: abortion is the killing of a human life.

Nearly every week, new and wondrous pictures of life inside the womb are published. We see the development of the child in its earliest days, and we know, "Here is human life." Our advancements in medicine only further establish that the life inside the womb is that of a human being. The logic is almost absurdly apparent to any one not breathing steadily the air of our culture. Have you ever tried explaining abortion to a child? Children are shocked by the thought. They instantly recognize that it is killing a baby and intuitively make the leap: it could have been me.

A second powerful force also keeps us from seeing and thinking clearly about abortion. Guilt. The reality of abortion is so stark, that to grasp it is to deal with the collective blood on our hands. The nation is so steeped in guilt (40 million legal abortions now since *Roe v. Wade*) that it is a soul-rending experience to face the reality that

abortion is the killing of a human life. Millions of mothers—and fathers—suffer in guilt and depression over the abortion of their children. Their souls are seared. But many have no place where they may unburden themselves. The cultural mandate advocating abortion rights keeps these parents' pain buried. They're not supposed to feel this way! So the wounds fester in the deep reaches of their being. Writing this bluntly is uncomfortable. I know that even now my readers are squirming, fuming, or putting this article aside. It seems brutal, even cruel to write this way. But it is the truth.

Now what does this have to do with the role of the Father in our theology and worship? Merely everything. For the key to keeping us from facing this reality is to keep the language away from babies, mothers and fathers, and firmly on the language of women and their bodies.

We may see this through reflecting on the report of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to the 214th (2002) General Assembly Committee on Health and Social issues. The issue was late-term abortions and the question of whether or not it is right to abort a baby who could survive if allowed to be born. In the report, which was approved with only minor revisions by the committee and the General Assembly, we see no mention of fathers, and certainly no use of the word "baby." There is one mention of "families," but it is in the context of offering "support for women and families to help make unwanted pregnancies less likely to occur" rather than any context of family decision-making and child rearing. The entire focus is atomistic, viewing human beings as individuals in independent isolation rather than as created beings who have their life in and through relationships.

For instance, we read in the policy, "When an individual woman faces the decision whether to abort a pregnancy, the issue is intensely personal...." The father of the child, who is responsible according to historic Christian understanding for both mother and child, is not named, and certainly not listed as having any part in the decision. The choice belongs sovereignly to the woman and concerns her body alone. The assertion that abortion decisions are "intensely personal" obscures the reality that conception and birth are intensely *interpersonal*.

Let us consider what effect there would be on the issue, and this policy advice, if reflection on God the Father who gave his Son Jesus Christ for the world were included. The arrival of the Son of God in the flesh revealed what had before only been hinted: the one God is not a solitary monad, but a three-personed God, who has his very being in an eternal relationship of love. That God is Father means that God lives in relationship to his creation as the one who creates, sustains, protects, disciplines, nourishes and guides. But more, there is a relational quality at the very heart of God. This relational quality is built into us as human beings made in the image of God. We are not here as isolated individuals seeking independent fulfillment of our personal destinies. We are creatures

conceived through the relationship of our fathers and mothers, who survived the helplessness of childhood only because of our relationship to others, and who continue to live in the world as those necessarily in dependent relationship to other people. An essential part of who we are is our relatedness: to parents, siblings, spouses, friends, children, caregivers and care-receivers.

In the image of God, then, we relate to others. God eternally relates in love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That love, when creation, and thus time, began, opened out to make us, those who live in the image of God. We exist profoundly in relationship: we have access to our Father, the privilege of calling him Abba, by the grace of his only Son Jesus, to whom we are united by the Holy Spirit. This relationship is so intimate that the union of husband and wife is but an illustration of it. So we read in Ephesians 5 that even the mutual self-giving of marriage is seen as flowing from the Son who laid down his life for his bride, the church (Eph. 5: 29-33).

All our familial relationships, then, draw their life and pattern from the Triune God. To recognize that God is the Father reminds us that our very being as persons in relationship is derived from him (Eph. 3: 14-5). We are not individuals in isolation. Certainly we are not isolated when we unite sexually and a child is conceived. Abortion is never just about a woman and her body. It always, profoundly, concerns a man, a woman, and *their* baby. This familial relating is grounded eternally in the God whom we meet in Jesus as *Father*.

God the Father is the founding safeguard of all human life. We come into being by relationship, after the pattern and image of the Triune God, eternally related as three in one Being of love. Issues of life, then, derive from God's Fatherhood. He is the creator, protector and sustainer of all life. We are each conceived in relationship and reared in constant relating. Abortion arguments attempt to isolate one individual, the woman, from fathers, motherhood, and children. But God the Father, whom we confess with our first breath in the Apostle's Creed, will not allow this to be done.

Thus, to secure abortion in the mind of the church as a right, and to keep us from waking to the rending, fragmenting effects of abortion, the Father simply has to be removed from the center of Christian thought. Check the language coming from the groups advocating "reproductive rights."¹ The person of the Father is nowhere to be found.

The Father and Homosexuality

The person of the Father is noticeably absent as well from those advancing explicitly "gay" theology or the "progressive" theology that underlies advocacy for legitimizing homosexual behavior and endorsing ordination of active homosexuals. For instance, in Chris Glaser's book of daily reflections for gay men and lesbians, there are 365 opportunities to name God in prayer.² Only twice, however, is God addressed as father, and then immediately in conjunction with "mother." The

theological presentations and sermons offered through the Covenant Network and the Witherspoon Society rarely mention the Father, and those are nearly always the result of biblical quotation. My searches of their material have never yielded any positive advancement or sustained consideration of the church's historic confession of the Father in worship and proclamation. Further, the person of the Father is nearly always absent from statements of faith in our presbytery from those most open to "progressive" changes in our ordination standards. Why is this so?

What connections could there be between the pro-gay agenda and the reduction or removal of the Father from Christian discourse? What in advancing the goodness of homosexuality requires the diminishment of the person of the Father? These are incendiary questions. I expect that my answers will again produce discomfort. But the intuitions born both of pastoral work in the frontlines and biblical/theological work in the study seem to bear out the same conclusion: *the gay agenda in our church has a deep interest in occluding the person of the Father.*

Tracing the connection will take some sustained reasoning and some crossing of disciplines. Perhaps a beginning place for answering the theological question lies in the realm of psychology. The quality of relationship with their earthly fathers experienced by many homosexuals could offer a clue to the theological position that absents the Father. In his research of the relevant literature, psychiatrist Jeffrey Satinover notes that "rigorous scientific data demonstrates...that the family environment plays a critical role in the development of homosexuality." Satinover declares that psychoanalysts consistently have seen that:

...in the lives of their homosexual patients there was *unusually often* an emotional mismatch between the child and same-sex parent (such as a father who subtly or overtly rejects a son who has many "feminine" traits); or an emotional mismatch between the child and the opposite sex parent; or sexual abuse of a child by either the same sex or opposite sex parent; and most often the rejection of a child by same-sex peers.³

This "emotional mismatch" between a father and his girl or boy can be so severe as to lead to a sense of inner trauma in the child. The extent of this injury may or may not match what we would observe from the outside. What seems to matter, though, is the child's perception of the wounding.

Narrowing Satinover's language just to focus on fathers for our purposes, we see that the consequences of inner trauma may work out two ways:

1) The first is the trauma caused by the [boy's] subjective experience of [the father's] lack of availability, rejection, or even harsh verbal, physical or sexual attack.... This may give rise to the [boy's] *profound longing* for love from that [father], a longing

he may likely enact in later relations with peers of the same sex....

2) The second is the trauma caused by the [girl's] subjective experience of the [father's] lack of availability, rejection, or even harsh verbal, physical or sexual attack. This may give rise to the [girl's] *fear* of that [father], which likely will show itself later as a heightened wariness and avoidance of opposite-sex relations....⁴

The inner trauma of these distorted relationships with their fathers has an “unusually high” history in gay men and lesbians.

Anecdotally, my pastoral work with men struggling with same-sex attraction bears this out repeatedly.⁵ These men describe intense longing for their fathers’ presence, affection, touch, and approval in childhood. They feel an acute lack of the masculine-affirming presence of their fathers in their lives. In short, they say over and over that their homosexuality is not, at the root, about sex. For these men, the issue is the nourishing of their manhood through a masculine encounter that offers affirmation. They ache for the word and touch of the Father.

In his stunningly documented book, *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, psychologist and researcher Joseph Nicolosi writes:

In fifteen years, I have spoken with hundreds of homosexual men. Perhaps there are exceptions, but I have never met a single homosexual man who said he had a close, loving, and respectful relationship with his father....it seems very rare for a man who struggles with homosexuality to feel that he was sufficiently loved, affirmed and mentored by his father while growing up or to feel that he identified with his father as a male role model.⁶

James Dobson comments on Nicolosi’s work with compassionate sensitivity:

Homosexuality is not primarily about sex. It is about everything else, including loneliness, rejection, affirmation, intimacy, identity, relationships, parenting, self-hatred, gender confusion, and a search for belonging. This explains why the homosexual experience is so intense—and why there is such anger expressed against those who are perceived as disrespecting gays and lesbians or making their experience more painful. I suppose if we who are straight had walked in the shoes of those in that “other world,” we would be angry too.⁷

Thus we recognize in homosexuality the frequent presence of a deep woundedness. This bruising is particularly related to the relationship with parents. Thus, there can often be found father-wounds which exercise a profound, lasting effect in the child’s life. This pain is compounded frequently by the sense of being out of step with one’s

gender, and thus with one’s siblings, peers, and the society in general. Homosexuality is a hard, hard road, and, except in the rarest of incidences, certainly no freely chosen way of life.

My work with, and love for, homosexual men fills me with compassion on this issue. I have had to learn, though, to distinguish between the lives of individuals and the agenda of organized groups.⁸ For unreconciled pain can harden into anger. As noted above with feminism, taken collectively, this steady rage can become a powerful spiritual force. Now if the focused anger and sustained passion is based on a faulty way of dealing with the pain at its root, the organized effort then becomes destructive. Its goal, albeit unknowingly, becomes the establishment of attitudes or lifestyles that, in the end, will not deliver the affirmation and freedom that is claimed. The gay agenda in our church seeks a blessing, a legitimizing from the institution. (Why else would there be such an effort to gain access to the established church when our country freely permits the founding of new churches?) Even if gained, however, this official recognition would not salve the inner wound. In fact, it would isolate people in their brokenness, driving the pain underground, and stealing all hope of transformation under the insistence that no change is needed or to be desired. Seeking the blessing of a wound rather than its healing leaves one still diminished. Hence the gay agenda in our church, while coming under words of inclusion and welcome, would ultimately be the cruelest in success to its most ardent supporters.

Meanwhile, that agenda seeks to push the Father to the sidelines of worship and theological discourse. Working from a deep pool of earthly father-wounds among many of its constituents, the homosexual agenda seeks, overtly or not, to drive the divine Father away from consciousness. Why? First, we recall that all earthly parenthood is derived from the heavenly Father. Ephesians 3:14-15 tells us that it is the Father, the *pater*, from whom all earthly *patria* (all fatherhood, even the very familial structure of human life together) is derived. Our familial relations, then, are imprinted from the divine source. Yet we know that as humans we tend to get it all reversed. Rather than shape our lives according to what has been revealed of God, we project onto God based on our human experience. Thus, in Satinover’s description of the fear, and the resulting anger, towards an earthly father, we can see how this would be thrown back against the heavenly Father. We would see the person of God the Father as the very source of our pain, the one giving an imprimatur to our hurtful human fathers. It only makes sense, then, that lesbianism, radical feminism and a diminishing acknowledgement of God as Father have gone quite naturally together.

But what of Satinover’s description of the inner wounding that has produced an intense *longing* for the father? Wouldn’t we expect homosexual men to find immense comfort in the person of the Father and the wonderful biblical descriptions of God’s fatherhood? Indeed they do, as the men I work with will testify.⁹ But the longing of

individuals struggling to leave the homosexual lifestyle may be opposed by the spiritual ethos that has coalesced around the agenda of an activist group. If the problem has been defined as the need to find personal and societal affirmation of homosexuality, then the father-longing must be pushed away. For the demand to have homosexual behavior blessed cannot coexist with the biblical person of the Father. Hence, the activist agenda cuts men off from the very source of their healing. The one Father who alone has the salve for the wound must be avoided. So men are exiled to strive for the impossible dream of finding living water in a land that is ever a desert.

Moreover, the Father evokes the fullness of the biblical revelation and the ensuing centuries of orthodox theology in the church. The Father as first person of the Trinity also carries the weight of the divine monarchy. He is, in historic orthodoxy, the first among eternal equals. The Father is the eternal Source while the Son is eternally *begotten* of the Father and the Spirit eternally *proceeds* from the Father. Naming the Father thus evokes the entire Godhead and the history of his revelation to us. This means that the Father stands for the law and its ethical demands. Biblical Judaism and Christianity do not permit homosexual behavior. Intuitively, then, we know that naming the Father while yet affirming homosexual behavior would set us up in open rebellion against his authority. Thus, the gay agenda is rebellious against the Father at its core. It has placed men in a terrible conundrum. An imprinted, reinforced way of coping with woundedness is pitted as a good gift of God against the biblical demands for wholeness that seem, from that perspective, impossibly distant, alien, unnecessary and even cruel. Though borne of genuine pain and ardently seeking blessing, this movement is at best deceptively harmful to its followers by offering a promise that can never be delivered. Worse, it is ultimately defiant against the Father and against God's plan of redemption. Open rebellion, though, is difficult to justify and sustain. So to advance the cause, the Father must be relegated to the sidelines.

But there is also a deeper motivation in diminishing the presence of the Father in worship and theology. The person of the Father evokes a sense of shame for men engaging in homosexual behavior. The very vehemence denying this shame will testify to its power. The men I work with consistently report a feeling of not being "man enough," and of being disappointments to the fathers they long for. Their homosexual behavior, while at its core was seeking affirmation of masculinity, has actually produced further shame and emasculation of the spirit within these men. More, if we are not man enough before our earthly fathers, we are certainly filled with dread that we are a disappointment to the heavenly Father, to his order of creation and his laws. Shame is an intolerable emotion to live with. We cannot remain in a perpetual state of conscious shame. It either drives us to turn from what causes the shame, or to drown out the shaming voice. Such a sense of shame is a powerful factor in the unusually high incidence of drug abuse and suicide among

homosexuals. It also drives the fierce need to be rid of the Father in Christian discourse.

Powerful forces in the church, then, continue to push against the Father, driving his name from our prayers and sermons. Normal, sensitive pastors and other worship leaders pick up on the pain signals coming from feminism, abortion rights proponents, and the gay agenda. They see individuals who bear wounds, and these leaders wish to cause no further pain. The agenda of the collective movements, though, transcends individuals and exerts a mighty spiritual force. Under that influence, we acquiesce to the diminishment of the Father. Whenever we might otherwise seek to reintroduce the Father something besides compassion blocks us. We are stymied by the spiritual powers arrayed against the Father. Intimidation and fear of the anger we will provoke in those constituencies prevents us from naming Him. What has happened, then, is that we have given away the very instruments needed for healing these angry, broken ones. We by our silence seal off access to the Person for whom we most long, who has the power and the desire to love us, to change us, to make us new, clean and whole.

Letting pain and anger set the terms for discourse is never a good idea. Allowing brokenness to determine whether we will proclaim what has been revealed is a quick way to distortion. The church, with all its hurting members, requires leaders who will recover the person of the Father. How will they do it?

Recovering the Father

We have seen the reasons *why* we are losing the Father in the PC(USA). All the influences identified above have combined to exert an atmospheric pressure on church leaders. Any minister or theologian who can sense the air of our church culture knows better than to use a masculine pronoun for God or openly name the Father in situations where peers are present. It just makes one look out of step, as if one were an ignorant fundamentalist. One would seem insensitive to the pains of others and out of touch with the great concerns of the day. We will need a mighty good reason, then, for being counter-cultural in our recovery of the person of the Father. Thankfully, there are foundational biblical and theological grounds for doing so. Moreover, real pastoral care for the deep father-wounds around us requires the person of the Father. Thus it is laid upon all who have ears to hear and courage to stand the task of recalling our heritage, and claiming it confidently again.

As we prepare to approach the scriptural evidence and mandate for recovering the Father, we may turn to professor T.F. Torrance's reminder of how the church has always, and must always, do theology:

Perhaps the most difficult part of theology is the struggle we have with ourselves, with the habits of mind which we have formed uncritically or have

acquired in some field of knowledge and then seek with an arbitrary self-will to impose upon the subject matter. We have to remind ourselves unceasingly that in our knowing of God, God always comes first, that in a genuine theology we do not think out of a centre in ourselves but out of a centre in God and his activity in grace toward us....

Theology of this kind is possible only because God has already condescended to come to us, and has indeed laid hold of our humanity, dwelt in it and adapted it to himself. In Jesus Christ he has translated his divine Word into human form and lifted up our human mind to understand himself. Hence in theological inquiry we are driven back upon Jesus Christ as the proper ground for communion and speech with God.¹⁰

Our knowledge of God, our language about God, our form of worship, the names we take on our lips to address God come first and foremost not out of a center in ourselves, but from the revelation of a God who condescends to be known. So we turn to the sacred record of God's revelation, itself a revelation from God, and inquire of it. What do the Scriptures teach of God the Father?

The Biblical Record

Of the more than 200 times God is identified as the Father in the Bible, only 18 occur in the Old Testament. That is just enough for the idea, unique among the surrounding religions, to have been established in the mind of Israel. It would only be with the coming of Jesus Christ the Son enfleshed, however, that the real revelation of the person of the Father could be grasped. These few Old Testament passages are nevertheless highly significant, and we may make three key observations.

First, we notice the extreme reticence to articulate such an intimate knowledge of and relationship to the Holy One. Of the eighteen references to Father, in only five do we read of humans actually daring to pray by calling on God as Father. Moreover, two of those incidences are actually the voice of the Lord describing how his people called out to him (Ps. 89:26, Jer. 3:4), and a third depicts the names we will use when we see the Messiah (Is. 9:6). Only late in Isaiah do we actually hear a person bold enough to claim such a relationship with God, when the prophet cries out on behalf of his people, "But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name" (Is. 63:16). Just a few verses later comes a similar cry, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father" (Is. 64:8) as the prophet pleads from the agony of exile for God to come down and save his people. Direct naming of God's paternal relationship with us is so bold as to occur only out of extreme need when Israel cries out for God to remember the deepest covenantal relationship he has with his children.

Second, we notice that God is willing to name himself as Father, though he just gives a taste of this reality to the

people who lived before the incarnation. Of these mere seven references to himself as Father, four involve specifically the Lord's anointed: either Solomon (I Chr. 17:13, 22:10, 28:6) or the mysterious double reference to David and the coming Messiah/King (Ps. 2:7). A fifth occurs in God's exchange with Job and involves his relationship to creation (Job 38:28). In only two passages, then, do we hear God naming himself as Father to his people. Both come from Jeremiah. The first describes the Lord's great yearning for his people to come to him in repentance, "I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me" (Jer. 3:19). The second occurs in the same chapter where God declares, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." As part of the promise to bring the people home from exile and to create a new covenant with the people, one written on the heart, God declares, "I will lead them...on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father" (Jer. 31:9). The gift of knowing God as Father involves the giving of the new covenant, which we know to be the coming of the Son.

Third, the Old Testament references to God as Father are unanimously positive, bespeaking intimacy, tender concern, and redemptive discipline. The idea that God as Father represents oppression, or that his patriarchy is bad news for the weak and marginalized is absolutely not found in the Scriptures. The textual reality fairly cries out for me to be polemical: if we have believed that God as Father diminishes any of us, we have been blind biblical scholars, trading the jewels of our heritage for the mere currency of the day. These six remaining Old Testament passages employ God as Father in describing his marvelous dealings with his people. Taking each in turn, we may see borne out the overwhelming goodness of this name.

The very first mention is a simile recalling the exodus, "There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place" (Deu. 1:31). The Father loves his children so much and regards them so closely as to know when they are weak, to expend his strength on their behalf, to do for them what they cannot do for themselves, to pick them up out of harm, to bring them to safety, to steadfastly continue this loving care all the way until the children live in the promised land. This Father who redeems and sustains in the circumstances of our history and even our daily living is none other than our Maker. Moses sang, "Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?" (Deu. 32:6). We have a familial duty to return thanks to our Father, rendered through our worship and our obedience, *because the creating Father is good*, giving us the very gift of life.

This Father is full of compassion, particularly to vulnerable women, the diminished, and the hurting. It is his nature as Father that establishes our ethic of justice and mercy for the marginalized, an ethic distinctive among the nations that surrounded Israel. For we read in Psalm 68, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in

his holy dwelling.” The fatherhood of God extends to those who have lost the protection (a good and needed, not repressive, care) of their earthly fathers and husbands: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps. 103:13). We read on to learn that this compassion involves the forgiveness of sins and the healing of diseases. When the Psalmist thought of the Father, he sang of having a life redeemed from the pit, of having the desires of the soul satisfied, of entering a joyful relationship with One whose love is higher than the heavens. The Father, in fact, is associated with offering freely all we are longing for in the midst of our earthly brokenness.

This Father’s discipline of us, realized in the adversities of life, is no sadistic or capricious use of power against the weak. Proverbs reminds us that only the rebellious, in their defiant misery, would look at God that way. We are enjoined, rather, “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Pro. 3:11-12). Indeed, those who have been harshly disciplined without the love of a good father may call such a passage a fiction. But note that the discipline towards a child born of delight begins with the nature of the heavenly Father, and is patterned, albeit imperfectly, among the best of earthly fathers.

Finally, God’s fatherhood in the Old Testament establishes the community and inter-relatedness of God’s people and the resulting justice that must be enacted among us. In Malachi 2:10, we read, “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?” That God may be understood as Father calls each to look up from self and acknowledge that we exist by the will of another. This one Father created us all, and we are related to each other by the reality that each lives in dependent relationship to the one Father. Moreover, God as Father may expect grateful obedience from each and all. This response is expressed through the way we mirror his good Fatherhood: not breaking, but keeping faith with one another.

In summary, though the Old Testament passages referring to the Father are few, they establish Father as being intricately bound to the character of the God who loves and saves, forgives and heals, his people. They establish how the very ethic of our community life is based on God’s character and his being as Father. And, they point us to the messianic days, the days of God’s arrival in the flesh.

The New Testament Witness

These 18 passages would have remained but longings and hints were it not for the incarnation. We know the reality of the Father because the Son has come into our midst. The true establishment of the person of the Father rests on the revelation of Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. This cannot be overstated or emphasized enough. If Jesus is

Immanuel, then who he is, what he does and all he says is nothing less than God himself acting and speaking. Jesus reveals to us who God is in himself. We read in Hebrews, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of God’s being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:1-3). In other words, in seeing Jesus, we may say confidently, “This is who God is.” We need not hesitate or fear that we will be contradicted by some other religious knowledge of God. This revelation is supreme.

Jesus called God his Father and commanded us to address God as Father. He did not suggest this as a helpful metaphor but as the divinely given Name. The four gospels contain more than 145 direct references to God as Father from the lips of Jesus. Moreover, the Father is named in every other book of the New Testament except 3 John. (The great primacy John’s gospel and other epistles place on the Father, however, make it safe to say that the Father is firmly established throughout the New Testament.) By examining just five of these passages, we may see Jesus’ use of the Father was more than a chummy nickname or an optional turn of phrase. Rather, the central reality of the gospel is the eternal Father-Son relationship that has now opened out to embrace us. United to Christ Jesus by the Spirit, we as adopted daughters and sons now pray to our Father who is his Father.

1. Matthew 11:27. We hear Jesus declare, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” There is an exclusivity to the relationship between Jesus and his Father. They share an intimacy of which no one else may naturally, or by any right, partake. Their communion involves a) essence (“I and the Father are one” Jn. 10:30), b) purpose (“Father...yet not my will, but yours be done” Lk. 22:42) and c) action (“whatever the Father does, the Son also does” Jn. 5:19). What Jesus has from the Father and knows of the Father is his alone.¹¹ The Father cannot be known, that is apprehended and related to, without the revealing, uniting work of the Son. This revelation of God as his Father is thus the gift of Jesus to us. It is not a human invention, it does not come out of ourselves, but from God. To know the first person of the Triune God as Father is a gift from the Son who chooses to reveal him to us by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

2. John 14:20. The “Father” is not a metaphor but a name. It is not a name among many, but the supreme name by which God has given himself to be known. Jesus, who perfectly reveals the Father, uses this name and instructs us to do the same. This is a gift of stunning intimacy. In John 14:11, Jesus declares that “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” This echoes the passage considered above with a description of exclusive, eternal

intimacy, Then, nine verses later, in a surprising twist, Jesus makes another affirmation: “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, *and you are in me, and I am in you.*” The eternal Father-Son relationship opens out to include us, mere humans, in the circle of Triune life and love! What has been established in the incarnation is the taking up of our humanity into the life of God. Through the full course of Jesus’ obedience, the redeeming of our broken, fallen nature is accomplished. Sin is forgiven through the cross, and a new, restored humanity is established in the resurrection. Jesus is in himself the “new and living way” (Heb. 10:20) connecting the Father with his human children. To be united to Christ through the Holy Spirit is to be taken into the communion of the Father and the Son. We taste of this intimacy now in part, but one day we will partake in glorious fullness.

3. John 20:17. Hence, Jesus gives us a wonderful gift in not only inviting, but commanding us to call God Father as well. We dare to do this, not because we are sons and daughters of God in essence, as Jesus is, but by our adoption in Christ. By our union with the Son, we too take the intimate name of Father on our lips. In John 20, the newly resurrected Jesus tells Mary, “Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” The resurrected Jesus gives his union with the Father to us as a gift. In Christ, Jesus’ Father is our Father, Jesus’ God is our God. Here, as in John 14, we are invited in to the very Triune life of God through the victory of the incarnate Son in the power of the faith-creating Spirit. Again, we are instructed by our Lord to consider as Father the one whom Jesus called Father. What he did as only-begotten Son, we do now by virtue of glorious union with Christ, by the gift of adoption.

4. The Lord’s Prayer. Of course, if the theology in these passages does not persuade us, at the most basic level, we hear Jesus simply instruct us, “Pray then in this way, ‘Our Father...’” (Mt 6:9) and “When you pray, say ‘Father...’” (Lk: 11:2). This is the way Jesus taught us, even commanded us to pray! This scandalous intimacy was being given to the disciples. “Father” is not merely one name among many, or one humanly invented metaphor among many, but a name above names. This was a precious, priceless gift of daring intimacy from our Lord and not any patriarchal imposition by sinful mortals. By what authority would we turn aside from the gift of this command? For example, to set aside the Father (even by silence) in a statement of faith designed to express a full understanding of essential Christian teaching is an audacious move. It means a turning from the clear, well-attested command of Jesus to use Father in our address of God.

5. Romans 8:15-16. In the Pauline epistles, we see that the cry of “Abba, Father!” is the witness of the Spirit within us that we are children of God. In fact, the calling out in prayer, “Abba, Father” is itself the activity of the Holy Spirit within us! In a lovely Triune passage, Paul writes, “God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:6). This cannot be

overstressed: the Holy Spirit is the one who places in our hearts and mouths the phrase, “Abba, Father.” This is not our invention; it is God’s work and words. This is the form of address the Spirit chooses to place in the hearts of those who have been adopted in Christ as the redeemed children of God. To ignore, set aside, or silence mention of the Father, then, is to quench the Holy Spirit, to suppress the speech the Spirit desires to utter through us. Not only do we miss out on the blessed assurance of such prayer, but we insult and grieve the Spirit by declaring that the Spirit’s chosen words are inadequate.

The Patristic Witness

Though the vast patristic writings on the Triune God are beyond our scope here, they bear massive corroboration with the biblical witness. One particular insight may help us understand theologically why Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not optional names among many but the very names by which God has given himself to be known in his Triune being. The great Athanasius, in the Arian debates, understood that before God was Creator, he was Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He writes, “Therefore it is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call Him Father, than to name Him from His works only and call Him Unoriginate. For the latter title, as I have said, does nothing more than signify all the works, individually and collectively, which have come to be at the will of God through the Word; but the title Father has its significance and its bearing only from the Son.”¹² There was a “time” when God was not, for instance, Creator nor Redeemer nor Sustainer—for those nouns refer to actions of God toward creation, which is not eternal. There never was, however, a “time” when God was not Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the eternal communion of love that is God. We may look at the world and glean that God is Creator. But when we look at Jesus, who is revealed to be the divine Son in our midst, we see further back, and we see more clearly: God is Father. Thus, the way God has given himself to be known is as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the language God chose to reveal himself to us *as he really is* in the divine being. The relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit is the heart of the gospel revelation and the fundamental insight enshrined in the ancient ecumenical creeds and later in our Reformation confessions. To lose the Father by neglect or intentional setting aside is to render two thousand years of Trinitarian thought virtually incomprehensible. It is to cut ourselves off from our heritage as well as from the world wide communion of Christians who affirm Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

An Inadequate, Albeit Popular, Substitute

The use of substitute names, such as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, is woefully inadequate as these denote functions not persons. Moreover, they are confusing, as these functions can be applied to more than one divine person.

For example, when we say “Creator” do we mean the eternal Son by whom all things were made (Col. 1:16)? Or do we mean the Creator Spirit who hovered over the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2) and who re-creates us in new life (John 3:6)? When we say the “Redeemer” do we mean the eternal Father who carried his people Israel out of bondage as a father carries a child (Deut. 1:31)? Or do we mean the Spirit who has sealed us for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30)? When we say “Sustainer” do we mean the Lord our sustainer in Psalm 54:4, more likely a reference to the Father? Or the divine Son who “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3)? Surely we cannot mean the Holy Spirit, for the use of Sustainer as a term for the Holy Spirit is nowhere found in Scripture!

The principle of perichoresis, or mutual indwelling, tells us that wherever one of the divine persons is, there the others are also. Their “job descriptions” in the divine economy interchange and intertwine throughout the history of our redemption. So, for example, using a phrase such as “Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer” could be a designation simply for the Father, or simply for the Son, or simply for the Holy Spirit. The proper names enshrined in the New Testament revelation are the one God in three divine persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For centuries the church sacrificed, bled, and gave to preserve, celebrate, and protect this most precious revelation. These names are not merely names among names imagined by humanity, nor metaphors among metaphors—they are the names above all names, the names revealed, the names God has given in costly, beloved revelation to us.

Conclusion

Back in the fourth century, as the church struggled to preserve the divinity of the Son amidst the Arian controversy, Hilary of Poitiers undertook to write a treatise on the Holy Trinity. In it, he notes our human tendency to attempt to improve on revelation by making God more compatible with our needs and our desires. His words centuries later are still apt:

While I was thus engaged there came to light certain fallacies of rash and wicked men, hopeless for themselves and merciless towards others, who made their own feeble nature the measure of the might of God’s nature.... Whereas the true work of religion is a service of obedience; and these were men heedless of their own weakness, reckless of Divine realities, who undertook to improve upon the teaching of God.... My soul has been burning to answer these insane attacks. I call to mind that the very centre of a saving faith is the belief not merely in God, but in *God as a Father*....¹³

We have seen that the reasons underlying the movement to eliminate the Father are, in individuals, born at first of a great woundedness, often relating to earthly father-wounds. When, however, the unhealed pains of individuals coalesce in the agenda of specific interest groups, a spiritual force arises. Swept up in this collective woundedness, and the resulting focused anger, a movement not grounded in the Word may seek a remedy

which is ultimately destructive. Thus we encounter those “heedless of their own weakness, reckless of Divine realities, who undertook to improve upon the teaching of God.” Such are all movements that desire to push the person of the Father out of its absolutely central position in Christian discourse.

As I have researched, I have felt with Hilary that “my soul has been burning to answer these insane attacks.” For what more insane theological act could the church commit than to try to get rid of the Father? The Father sent to us the beloved Son and the blessed Spirit. The Father is the very one who possesses the healing power so craved by these wounded, enraged sheep in our flocks. Hilary went on to write,

The Lord said that the nations were to be baptized *in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*. The words of the faith are clear; the heretics do their utmost to involve the meaning in doubt. We may not on this account add to the appointed form, yet we must set a limit to their license of interpretation.... we must emphasize the truth which those Names convey. We must proclaim, exactly as we shall find them in the words of Scripture, the majesty and functions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and so debar the heretics from robbing these Names of their connotation of Divine character, and compel them by means of these very Names to confine their use of terms to their proper meaning... He has assigned the Names—Father, Son and Holy Ghost,—which are our information of the Divine nature.¹⁴

There are no legitimate biblical or theological grounds for what we are doing to the person of the Father. We are, at best, bowing to pressure out of well-intentioned but misguided pastoral concern for those with father-wounds. But the merest reflection has established that eliminating the Father is no pastoral way to heal such trauma. Less innocently, then, we are succumbing to the ethos of a culture that counts ignorance and hesitancy about God as the mark of a desired, agnostic humility. For the Christian minister and theologian, such an ignorance is not permitted. We have a priceless heritage, the gift that cannot be priced, of being able to pray to our Abba Father through his Son Jesus in the power and grace of the blessed Holy Spirit. We must never let the Father be taken away from his children. At the worst, then, participating in the diminishment of the Father is to join those who rage out of woundedness that has hardened into rebellion. It is to prefer our ideas to what has been revealed. It is to choose our way of coping over against God’s way of healing.

In closing, we realize that our finite minds cannot ever grasp all that the Triune God is, nor can our language ever name him adequately. That fact, however, does not render us mute in worship and theology. Nor should it rob our proclamation of all confidence. Rather, awareness of human limits sends us flying to the place where God, not we, has spoken—in Jesus Christ as attested through Holy

Scripture. Thomas Torrance reminds us, “However, when we know the Father in and through Jesus Christ, we become aware that he infinitely exceeds all that we can think and say of him. The very God and Father, to whom we are given access through the Son, we know to be unlimited and inexhaustible in his divine reality.”¹⁵ This is the kind of humility, however, that does not thus fall so limp in thought and worship that it allows all manner of speculation to rise up in place of Biblical knowledge. Rather, this humility calls us to rigorous obedience to what has been established of God’s nature and will in

Scripture, so that our minds might be formed by divine realities which, while they are more wonderful than we can ever fathom, yet truly usher us into God’s presence and transform us into his likeness. For Torrance is just as quick to remind us, “Since in Jesus Christ we are really enabled to know God in accordance with his own nature as Father and Son, we may know him in a way that is godly and precise.”¹⁶ Godly humility in the face of revelation calls us to rigorous defense of the Father. We may, with confidence, return the Father to our people, in prayer, song, sermon and theology. Thus they may be healed, and worship no longer as the lost and fatherless, the pained and angry, but in the joy of those adopted eternally through the well-beloved Son by their faithful, loving heavenly Father.

¹ See, for example, the website of The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, www.rcc.org.

² Chris Glaser, *The Word is Out: Daily Reflections for Lesbian and Gay Men*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996.
³ Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996, 104, emphasis mine.
⁴ Ibid. 107.
⁵ Accepted in the Beloved is a discipleship and support group for men struggling with same sex attraction. It meets biweekly in our church.
⁶ Joseph Nicolosi, *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2002, 31.
⁷ James Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys*, Wheaton: Tyndale House, 123. Dobson had access to Nicolosi’s manuscript before publication.
⁸ Cf. Satinover’s description of this, and the deliberate conflation of gay politic and personal homosexual pain by the movement. 20-22
⁹ One man commented, looking at the peaceful, broken relieved look of the son whose head was pressed against the chest of the welcoming father in Rembrandt’s painting of the Return of the Prodigal Son, “That’s what we’re all looking for in our homosexuality. That’s the place we’re trying to be, even if we seek it through a counterfeit.”
¹⁰ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, London: SCM Press, 1965, 9-10.
¹¹ Of course further reflection on the New Testament reveals the person of the Holy Spirit, who also shares in this divine communion of the Three-Personed God. The mutual knowing of the Father and the incarnate Son occurs in and through the bonds of the Spirit. For our limited purposes, though, it is enough to see the unique and exclusive Father-Son relationship in Mt. 11.
¹² Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1.9.34.
¹³ Hilary, *On the Trinity*, 1.15,17.
¹⁴ Ibid. 2.5.
¹⁵ T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 53.
¹⁶ Ibid.

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A Crushing Disappointment: The Proposed PCUSA Policy Statement on “Living Faithfully with Families in Transition”

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

There could scarcely be a better moment than today for a “mainline” U.S. denomination to have another look at its teachings on family. The past generation has seen dizzying changes in U.S. family patterns: decreases in marriage rates; rises in the age of first marriage; declines in the age of puberty and first sexual intercourse; an upsurge in dual-income couples; falling birth rates and larger numbers of childless persons; delayed childbearing, with the attendant fertility problems; the rise of cohabitation, and other short-term, provisional sexual relationships; increases in births out of wedlock; soaring divorce rates; vast numbers of children growing up apart from their fathers; a proliferation of active individuals and couples past the age of childrearing, as well as higher numbers of older persons dependent upon the care of others.

Almost every family (including my own) has seen several of these trends played out among its own members. Every pastor could name numerous families in the congregation that have experienced conflict and heartache as they have tried to resist or adjust to the changes. Because the changes in American families hit so close to home, it is both a delicate and a necessary task to make some moral assessment. Are these developments of the past generation mostly blessings, mostly curses, or some confusing mixture of the two? By what standard shall we distinguish the blessings from the curses?

Surely a denomination like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ought to have something important to say about the American family in 2003. Consider a few of the treasures in the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the PCUSA constitution that might be brought to view:

- The understanding of marriage as “an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind” (Westminster Confession, 6.131).
- The prototype of parental and filial love exhibited by the Father and Son (John 5 and 14).
- The comparisons of the covenant between God and his people to a marriage (Hosea 1-3, Ephesians 5).

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- New Testament teaching that believers become children of God through adoption.
- The understanding of baptism as the act by which a person is “enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance of the sons of God” (Second Helvetic Confession, 5.187).
- The counsel on childrearing found in various parts of the Scriptures (throughout Proverbs, Ephesians 6:1-4).
- The many biblical injunctions against adultery, prostitution, fornication, divorce, homosexual relations, and all conduct that violates God’s design for marriage.
- The numerous scriptural appeals for compassion upon widows and orphans, who suffered when family support structures failed them.
- The concern in the Confession of 1967 about “anarchy in sexual relationships,” as opposed to “the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ” expressed in marital and parental love. The confession warns, “the church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time” (0.47).

A Crushing Disappointment

The policy statement on “Living Faithfully with Families in Transition” now being proposed by the denomination’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to the upcoming GA can be found on the PCUSA website at pcusa.org/ga215/business/commbooks/comm07.pdf. It is labeled as Item 07-02.

We must ask: Does this proposal lead men and women into the full meaning of life together in families? Does it draw deeply from the biblical and confessional teachings on marriage, childrearing, adoption, baptism, and so forth? Does it aid Presbyterians in moral discernment? Does it point them toward patterns of family life that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8)? Does it extend an effective compassion to those who have been caught in the moral confusion of our time? Does it direct church members toward specific actions that they can take in their own lives, their local churches, and their communities to strengthen their own and other families?

By these standards, the ACSWP proposal is a crushing disappointment. The document gives evidence of great labor on the part of ACSWP and its task force that studied

“families in transition” over five years. The footnotes and bibliography in the 47-page “full text rationale” show a wide reading and acquaintance with relevant biblical and confessional texts and current social science research. But at almost every crucial point, the proposed policy statement refuses to make moral distinctions or offer practical help. It does not so much deny biblical teachings as it side-steps them. Similarly, it ducks the clear implications of social science research into family problems.

The place to start in evaluating “Families in Transition” is the recommendations. These are the only part of the larger document being mailed to commissioners to the 215th General Assembly (2003). They are also the only part that is supposed to authorize actions by the denomination. Consider the unusual characteristics of these recommendations for church policy on family:

- The recommendations never attempt to define their subject matter, the family.
- The recommendations affirm, “Family life, in a variety of forms, is integral to created life, common to all peoples, and a vehicle through which humans are formed” (p. 1). But neither they nor the full-text rationale ever explain why this is so. They never delve into the biblical, philosophical, and theological notions that God created humans, male and female, to live in families.
- The recommendations mention marriage only once, within a list of the “many configurations of people who lovingly bond as family” (p. 2). They do not even hint that marriage may have a particular place in God’s providence for humankind. They take no account of the fact, briefly noted in the rationale (p. 5), that “three-fourths of us [PCUSA members] are currently married.” Of course, if we include the numbers of Presbyterians who were formerly married, or hope to be married in the future, or have parents who are married, it becomes evident that the overwhelming majority of church members has a vital personal interest in marriage. But the ACSWP proposal, oddly, does not share this interest.
- The recommendations give no specific guidance on childrearing. They state, helpfully, that “Christian families have the responsibility of teaching and practicing the beliefs and values that exhibit faithfulness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ” (p. 1). But they offer no insights into how contemporary Presbyterian parents might best fulfill that awesome responsibility.
- The recommendations mention adoption only twice, in the long list of the “many configurations of families.” They have nothing to say about whether adoption ought to be encouraged or discouraged, or how it might be encouraged or discouraged.
- In the end, the three dense pages of recommendations contain little beyond platitudes about calling the church “to renew its commitment to nurturing and sustaining family life in all of the cultures of all the peoples who comprise the entire human family” (Recommendations, p. 2). There is no specific recommendation that would change a single program in a single local church.

Choosing among ‘Biblical Traditions’

Only two paragraphs in the recommendations deal with “biblical traditions” regarding families. (Note the choice of the term “traditions,” rather than the more authoritative “teachings” or “commandments.”) These paragraphs contain no citations of any particular biblical passages. Instead ACSWP presents its own formulation of two selected elements of those “traditions” that appear to be congruent with its moral relativism about “diverse family forms.”

The first selected element is ACSWP’s observation that “biblical traditions present God as working through diverse family structures” (p. 1). The recommendations jump from this accurate observation to the dubious conclusion that: “Ultimately the structure of one’s family is not as important as how we allow God’s life giving and redeeming spirit to shape and work through our families” (p. 1). They do not seem to allow for the possibility that God might be doing two things at once: sending out his Spirit to penetrate even the most dysfunctional families, and at the same time working to transform the unrighteous “structures” of those families. The fact that God’s grace was extended to and through the prostitute Rahab, the adulterous King David, and the cohabiting Samaritan woman does not imply that God is indifferent to prostitution, adultery, and cohabitation.

The second selected element is ACSWP’s apt admonition that “the biblical traditions strongly warn not to promote one’s own family’s welfare over the inclusion and well-being of others” (p. 1). There is ample textual support in the Gospels for the assertion that “Jesus made clear that no family structure or relationship, whether defined by blood, law, or culture, should be exalted over loyalty to God” (p. 1). But once again the ACSWP recommendations leap to a questionable conclusion: that “all forms of family can be instruments that open us to service and participation in the larger community as servants of God” (p. 1-2). Is it true, for example, that an adulterous *ménage à trois* and a faithful Christian marriage are equally fit instruments to prepare children to serve God’s kingdom?

The recommendations contain only one-half sentence citing the PCUSA confessions. This is a passing reference to the “strong statements” in the Second Helvetic Confession “affirming the absolute importance of family-sustaining activities as ‘holy and truly good works’ equal in value to all other human activities” (p. 1). The other half of the sentence also mentions “John Calvin’s concept of the family as ‘little church.’” But ACSWP does nothing further to develop either of these rich concepts from our Reformed heritage.

A Sleeper Clause

The last page of the recommendations is an eye-wearying list of dozens of “previous General Assembly actions” that are to be reaffirmed. In most cases, the current ACSWP proposal gives over the most cursory account of those past statements. There is no mention of any points of controversy that this year’s commissioners might wish to

revisit before giving a blanket approval to all those statements. Since the commissioners have not received any copies of those earlier documents, they will have virtually no information on which to judge the continuing validity of actions dating back to 26 years ago. The commissioners are being asked, in effect, to place a blind faith in ACSWP's good opinion of those past actions.

The recommendations also request that the 2003 Assembly endorse one document that was never approved by a previous Assembly. This is "A Vision for Family Ministries" that was adopted by the PCUSA's former Education and Congregational Nurture Ministry Unit in 1992. No copy of this document was included with the "Families in Transition" recommendations that were mailed to all commissioners. Commissioners will have to search for the document in an appendix to the full-text rationale that is available only on the PCUSA website.

Most of this "Vision" consists of the sort of relativist platitudes—"We celebrate the beautiful variety of relationships, and commit ourselves as people of God to work for and witness to the love and justice of God in all human relationships"—that are already too common in the proposed 2003 policy statement. There is, however, a sleeper clause in the 1992 "Vision." It is an affirmation that "we commit ourselves to shaping an inclusive and caring community of faith in which single persons, single parent families, blended families, families with members of homosexual orientation...may experience acceptance, support and spiritual nourishment."

The question that commissioners must ask is: Does this promised "acceptance" and "support" imply the church's moral approval of heterosexual and homosexual relations beyond the bounds of marriage? If so, ACSWP's proposed 2003 statement harbors a disguised attempt to undermine the longstanding teachings of the PCUSA and the Church universal on sexual morality.

This interpretation is supported by the stunningly complete absence of those teachings from the "Families in Transition" recommendations and full-text rationale.

The only reference to the biblical roots of this teaching is a single phrase toward the back of the full-text rationale, noting that Paul "vigorously rejected all 'sexual immorality'" (p. 27). The ACSWP authors make no effort to define "sexual immorality," and they say nothing about it in their recommendations. Indeed, their placement of quotes around the phrase suggests that they see "sexual immorality" as a category in Paul's thought, but not their own.

Regarding homosexuality, the rationale states merely that "Presbyterians hold starkly different views with regard to same-sex families" (p. 16). It says nothing about PCUSA constitutional standards expressing disapproval of homosexual relations. Those standards are supported by large majorities of church members. They have withstood 25 years of challenges, gaining increasing backing from the presbyteries in recent years.

A New Ethic: No 'Privilege,' No 'Stigma'

Clearly, the ethical framework upon which ACSWP has built its proposal does not come from the biblical and confessional teachings on marriage, parenthood, and adoption. What, then, is the framework? The recommendations give only a few glimpses. Most revealing is the clause which "calls upon the church to reject principles or policies that would stigmatize any persons, and particularly the most vulnerable persons (children, the poor, the disabled, and so forth), based on family form" (p. 2).

This clause would be unremarkable if the meaning of "stigmatize" were to exclude a whole class of persons from the church and its ministries, treating them as uniquely sinful. The Gospel speaks strongly against this kind of moral caste system. But an examination of the full-text rationale shows that this rejection of "stigmatizing" means much more. It means that the church ought never to recognize any distinctions between "family forms." All should be regarded as equally moral and equally beneficial.

The rationale contends that "church and social policies should not discriminate among these [different forms of families], but support all such families equally" (p. 12). It objects vehemently to any normative vision of family form that some families might realize more fully than others. "Therefore, no particular form of family that has existed in human history or that exists today should be privileged as the Christian family form," declares ACSWP (p. 30).

Beneath these rigid ideological axioms lies a particular modern school of sociological thinking. This school holds that marriage, parenthood, and adoption are merely external, "forms" of no inherent value. What really matters, in this view, are the larger social functions (economic security, education of the young, etc.) that are served by the forms. Thus the rationale asserts, as if it were self-evident: "There is no universal form of 'the family.' There are, of course, functions that every society must organize" (pp. 31-32). Moreover, the ACSWP authors maintain that "many forms of family [are] doing the work of families equally well."

This refusal to "discriminate" prevents ACSWP from offering a useful definition of family. The best it can do is the following convoluted "description of contemporary U.S. families" on the penultimate page of the rationale: "A family is persons in any stage in the life cycle who are comprehensively bonded by birth, kinship, marriage, adoption, covenant, or mutual consent. At the center of such bonding is an enduring commitment to love and nurturance, mutual support in just relationships, and personal care and fidelity particularly through major life transitions and crises" (p. 32).

Dodging Past the Bible

So how can ACSWP adhere to its view in the face of so much contrary biblical testimony? It employs a series of dodges. First, the rationale delays its discussion of the “biblical traditions” for 23 pages. By this point, 70 percent of the way through the document, the basic themes have already been decided.

Second, the sections on the Old and New Testaments both spend far more space in sketching the social context of family life in the ancient Near East than in considering how the Scriptures themselves address that context. Indeed, they interpret much of what the Scriptures do say as a reflection of that background. For example, the apostle Paul “was deeply influenced both by Jewish law and tradition and by prevalent Greek moral culture concerning family, marriage, and especially sexuality” (p. 27). ACSWP apparently finds it difficult to hear the direct divine message that Paul and the other biblical authors believed that they had received.

Third, the rationale baldly asserts that the Bible supports its ideological assumptions. Frequently, these assertions are made without reference to any particular passages, and without any consideration of contrary scriptural evidence. “It is not possible to discern any single model of family structure in the Hebrew Scriptures,” according to ACSWP (p. 24). “In this overarching theological perspective [of the Old Testament], family form is less important than the function of the family as a place of faithfully committed right relationship with other adults, with children, with neighbors and strangers, and with God” (p. 25). The mass of Old Testament teaching on marriage and parenthood—with not a single verse speaking in terms like “the function of the family as a place of faithfully committed right relationships”—seems to have no influence upon the ACSWP authors.

Similarly, the rationale claims that “Paul’s letters contain no direct teaching about family in general” (p. 27). When faced with multiple counter-examples from Colossians 3, Ephesians 5-6, I Timothy 2 and 6, and I Corinthians 14, a new dodge emerges: these passages are dismissed as not “authentically Pauline” (pp.27-28). The fact that the Church still holds these passages, and similar passages in I Peter 2-3 and Titus 2, to be canonical and authoritative apparently does not matter to ACSWP.

The rationale charges that these New Testament household codes “originated in Aristotle’s teaching” (p. 28). They allegedly represent “a resurgent conservatism of a later first century generation” (p.28) that had nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Defying a basic principle of Reformed biblical interpretation, ACSWP uses one scripture passage to invalidate a host of others: “Clearly, the content and spirit of these restrictive regulations [regarding marital and parent-child relationships] are very different from the egalitarian familial community envisioned in the gospels as well as the new, profoundly free community in Christ that Paul envisions in Galatians 3:28” (p. 28). The authors never imagine the possibility

that the household codes might complement, rather than contradict, Galatians 3:28.

Ducking Social Science Results

The rationale handles social science research in a manner analogous to its treatment of the Bible. Adamant in its conviction that all “family forms” are equal, ACSWP dodges any evidence to the contrary. It asserts, “Social science data shows that there is no predominant family form in the U.S.” (p. 16). This conclusion is manufactured via a statistical trick: The rationale counts childless couples, married couples with children in the home, and married couples whose adult children have left home as three completely different “family forms.” (In fact, of course, the same couple may pass through all three stages over the course of its married life.) When those three categories are added together, it becomes clear that marriage remains a common element in most U.S. families (and most families throughout the course of history, all around the world).

Despite the growing body of research indicating that divorce, cohabitation, and single parenthood do not yield the same results for adults and children that marriage does, the rationale insists that there are no significant differences. It reports that “75-80 percent of children who have experienced divorce and 90 percent of children in intact families score within the normal range of achievement and adjustment” (p. 11). Then it fudges the 10-15 percent difference, inferring that most “children of single-parent families, step- or blended-families are doing just fine” (p. 12). ACSWP does not raise the possibility that there might be many children in such families who are “within the normal range,” but still feel deep hurts from the absence of a parent (usually the father). The authors cite one scholar who hypothesizes that the poorer well-being of children in single-parent homes is mostly due to “less income” and “frequent residential moves that keep such families from establishing a stable community” (p. 12)—as if this hypothesis proved that single parenthood were not a problem in itself.

Of course, it is important to assure despairing single parents that there is hope for them and their children. It does not improve their situation, though, to pretend that they face no greater obstacles than married parents. On the contrary, a frank recognition of those obstacles is the first step toward offering single parents the support that they need from the church and society. But this is just the recognition that ACSWP refuses to make. It evades the issue: “Clearly, a warm, loving family of any form is a better environment for a child than a hostile, conflicted family of any form.” (Note the unstated assumption that intact marriages and families with a parent absent by someone’s choice have equal probabilities of being “warm and loving” or “hostile and conflicted.”)

Regarding “same-sex families,” the rationale cites only a single review article finding that only “some slight differences exist in attitudes and behaviors” of children

raised in such families (p. 16). ACSWP takes no notice of the incompleteness and methodological shortcomings of much of the research on which the review article was based, as well as the prior pro-homosexual commitments of many of the researchers. Nor does it cite any social scientists who question whether households with “two daddies” or “two mommies” ought to be encouraged.

Where Have We Heard This Before?

ACSWP’s relativism regarding “family forms” does not imply that it has no values that it aims to promote. When it puts aside one set of moral categories—in this case, the biblical teachings on marriage, childrearing, and adoption—it substitutes a new set. In place of marriage, the rationale exalts “committed relationships.” It lays down the moral principle that “it is in committed relationships that sexual intimacy is best expressed” (p.32). Likewise, the love of a mother and father for their children is reduced to the function of “nurturance.” If stigmatizing means judging that some relationships are healthier than others, then ACSWP knows how to stigmatize. It deplores “the predominance of patriarchal interest” (p.24) in the Old Testament and the high teen pregnancy rates in the United States today (p.15).

The theological problem with these new moral categories is that they lack any anchor in a transcendent revelation of God’s will. The Scriptures, for instance, do not supply any guidelines for “committed relationships.” The practical problem is that these categories are almost impossible to define in any objective sense. What does “committed” mean, for example? This approach leaves no room for accountability to any kind of standard.

Yet ACSWP’s new morality is not really new at all. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has heard this same line of thinking before. In 1991 the General Assembly debated a report from its Special Committee on Human Sexuality entitled “Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Social Justice.” That report criticized traditional sexual ethics that “have focused on the form rather than the substance of sexual relationships” (Minutes of

the 203rd General Assembly, Part I, p. 280). It proposed a new approach: “The moral norm for Christians ought not be marriage, but rather justice-love. Rather than inquiring whether sexual activity is premarital, marital, or post-marital, we should be asking whether the relation is responsible, the dynamics genuinely mutual, and the loving full of joyful caring” (p. 288).

The “justice-love” report dodged biblical teachings by emphasizing “the richness and diversity within Scripture” (p. 273). It argued that the “Christian tradition does not endorse one correct form for family life” (p. 285), and “there is no one family form that is statistically normative in this [U.S.] society” (p. 285). It offered only the haziest of practical guidance for Christian families: “The challenge before the church is to discern and support those family patterns that display genuine moral substance and possibility, that support growth in the capacity for justice-love, and that serve human needs with enthusiasm” (p. 285).

This 1991 report was defeated overwhelmingly. The Assembly adopted instead a pastoral letter that proclaimed: “We have reaffirmed in no uncertain terms the authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We have strongly reaffirmed the sanctity of the marriage covenant between one man and one woman to be a God-given relationship to be honored by marital fidelity. We continue to abide by the 1978 and 1979 positions of the Presbyterian church on homosexuality.” The 215th General Assembly (2003) will do well to give a similar response to the current ACSWP proposal on “Families in Transition.”

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