

Paterology: The Person and Work of God the Father

Introduction

In 2004, under the guidance of Frank Griffith, I read the book, *The Forgotten Father*.

Tom Smail, in his book *The Forgotten Father*, argues that in our present day, both evangelicals and charismatics have neglected the study of God the Father. He says:

Indeed when one widens the scope and looks at vital modern Christian movements of any kind, one has to admit that emphasis upon and devotion to the Father has not been a main characteristic of many of them. Evangelicals have been concerned chiefly with Christ the Son, his divine person, his adequate atonement, his real resurrection and have of course not denied, but not made much of the fact that the Son is only the Son because he comes from the Father.

Charismatics on the other hand have often switched the emphasis from the Son to the Spirit as the sovereign source of renewal, power, and spiritual gifts and fruit.”¹

Recently, Gerald Bray laments,

If the history of Christian theology had ended in the third century, there would be no doubt that the person and work of the Father would be regarded as its most fundamental feature. . . .

Yet from the standpoint of the modern world, and indeed for many centuries now, the picture looks very different. Books on the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit are easy to find, but who has written anything on the work of the Father, considered as one of the Trinity and not just as a personification of the divine?²

Question: Who do the words “God” (θεός) and Lord (κύριος) refer to?
Father, Son, Spirit, Trinity?

- **Rom 6:8–13** distinguished from Son (and Spirit v.5)
- **John 1:1** - God for the Father and for Jesus possessing fully the divine nature, but does not mean Trinity.
- Lord for the Father in OT quotes (e.g., **Matt 23:39** “**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord**”

¹Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father: Rediscovering the Heart of the Christian Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 19.

²Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 206.

- OT Titles: “Lord God” or “Lord God Almighty” (Rev 19:6, “Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns”)
- In Paul, with very few exceptions (Rom 9:5; Tit 2:13), God is the Father, and the Lord is the Son.
- Conclusion: the New Testament never uses “God” or “Lord” for Trinity

What about pronouns?

- 1 Cor 15:27–28

Finally, what about the word Father?

To be sure, studies on the Fatherhood of God are necessary and fruitful. Furthermore, God *as* Father reveals the first person of the Trinity, God *the* Father. It is more appropriate to say that because the first person of the Trinity is named “Father,” his character and actions in Scripture reveal him as a Father.

The personal name “Father” is not arbitrary, nor is it temporary. He is the eternal Father of the eternal Son. John argues clearly in his Gospel that the “**Word**” who became flesh is the “**only Son from the Father**” (John 1:14), existing in a Father-Son relationship from the “**beginning**” (John 1:1). The Father is seen to be the leader in their relationship, caring for and nurturing “**the only God** [the Son],” who is in his bosom.

Further, the name Father cannot be understood apart from the Son and Spirit. Paul, in Galatians 4:4 gives Trinitarian shape to the personal names of God. He writes, “**But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’**”

God here is identified in **verse 6** as the Father, the one who has been in an eternal relationship with the Son and Spirit, and in the course of redemptive history, sends the Son and Spirit.

Thomas Smail contends,

The function of the Father is to send the Son and the Spirit, so that he cannot be rightly understood or approached as Creator except through his Son and his Spirit. God the Father out of the context of the coming of Christ quickly ceases to be Father at all. He quickly becomes instead the remote and distant God of the philosophers, the anonymous and abstract ground of our being, who is in everything in general but never does anything in particular.³

“*Taxis*” - Scripture presents the Father as the master designer and architect of the ages. Furthermore, the Father’s work originates from his relationships with the other two members of

³Thomas Allan Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 24.

the Trinity, and in his role within the Godhead. Thus, creation is devised by the Father to be the stage upon which he placards the gospel story of salvation.

I. The Work of the Father

2 Timothy 1:8–10:

God [the person of the Father], who saved us and called us to a holy calling [in the believer's experience], not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace [in eternity past], which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began [in eternity past], and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus [in redemptive history], who abolished death and brought life and immortality [in the eternal state] to light through the gospel.

A. The Father Planned Creation and Salvation in Eternity Past

The plan of salvation played out on the stage of creation is an overflow of the *Father's* eternal love for the Son in the Spirit

Thus, the perfect, eternal love of Father, Son, and Spirit for one another spills over into the Father's designs and purposes to bring a chosen people into this eternal Triune fellowship.

The Father's Purposes are Rooted in His Love

- 1 John 4:8–13 - The Father is love [Trinitarian thinking helps us here to see that this love has been manifested in the immanent Trinity from all eternity, and thus is a part of the Triune God's nature as well as an action between Father, Spirit, and Son] He demonstrates it by sending his Son. He makes it real through the Spirit's indwelling.

The Father's Purposes bring Him Good Pleasure

- Eph 1:3–14 - “according to the purpose of his will” (v.5) [εὐδοκία is translated “purpose” in the ESV is used in connection with the Father's will and “refers to the pleasure and delight in one's heart that forms the basis for decision making and action.”]

Because of his profound and infinite love for the Son and the Spirit, the Father not only plans all that will come to pass (as we examined in the last chapter), but also sets the stage for the display of the Triune Godhead's coequal glory and majesty through the creation of the heavens and the earth.

We find in Scripture that it is *always* the Father who creates through the Son and the Spirit, and the *taxis* is preserved (e.g., John 1:1; 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:1–2).

The goal and purpose of creation and providence is for the Triune God's glory to be exhibited in a Christocentric Trinitarian manner

B. The Father Provided Salvation in Redemptive History through the Sending of His Son

In the Gospel, the Father Promises a Messiah

- Rom 1:1–3

The Father Fulfills His Promise by Sending His Son to be the Christ

- Gal 4:4

In the incarnation, the Father reveals himself through his unique Son.

- John 1:14, 18
- John 3:16–17 - The Father's love gone public

In the life and ministry of Jesus, the Father pours out his Spirit on the Son, so that the Son can perform the Father's works and speak the Father's words in order to glorify God the Father and be glorified by him.

- Acts 10:38

In the crucifixion of Jesus, the Father gives the Son to be the Savior of the world by making him to be a substitutionary, propitiatory sacrifice for his elect.

- 2 Cor 5:19–21

In the resurrection and exaltation, the Father raised the Son up from the dead, exalting the Son to his throne and granting the Son the authority to rule over all nations.

- Phil 2:9–11
- Rev 1:13–18

C. The Father Produces Salvation in His Elect through the Pouring out of the Spirit

The Father Calls His Elect

- Rom 8:30
- John 6:37, 44, 65

Through the Spirit, the Father Unites the Believer with Christ

- John 17:21–26
- 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 1:21–22

The Father Relates to Believers as His Children

- John 1:12–13; 1 John 3:1 “new status, new nature”

D. The Father Will Perfect Creation and Salvation in the Consummation of His Kingdom for His Own Glory and for the Believer's Joy

The Father Sends His Son a Second Time

- **Mark 13:32–33** - Only the Father knows the day or hour

The Father Judges Righteously through the Son

- **Acts 17:30–31** - “by a man”
- **Acts 10:42** - Jesus is appointed judge

The Father Gives the Kingdom to His Children

- The creation is transformed into the new heavens and earth (**Rev 21:1**) and the garden is transformed into the New Jerusalem (**Rev 21:2, 10–11; 22:1–5**). There will no longer be the need for a temple, because the new creation becomes the temple (**Rev 21:22**). The identity of the one who does this is in **Rev 21:5**: “**And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’**” God the Father, once again through the agency of his Son (**John 14:2**), is the creator of the new heavens and new earth, and he makes it a place fit for his presence (**Rev 21:3; cf. Rev 7:14–17**), and there his children will see his face (**Rev 22:4**).
- **1 Cor 15:27–28** - Even the Son will be subject to the Father (though not inferior), so that the Father will be sovereign over all. (cf. *kratos* 1 Pet 5:10–11; 1 Tim 6:15–16; Jude 24–25).

II. Our Response to God the Father

A. Believe the Gospel

- **2 Cor 5:20** - be reconciled to the Father
- **John 6:29** - This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent

B. Know the Father/Have Communion with Him

- **John 17:3** - Eternal life is knowing the Father through the Son
- **Rom 5:5; 8:14–16** - The Spirit makes known the Father

C. Live for the Father/Present Yourself to the Father

- **Rom 6:11** - consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to the Father
- **Rom 6:13** - place yourselves at the Father’s disposal
- **Rom 6:16** - result of “slavery” (**Rom 6:22**) is righteousness in our character.
- **Rom 12:1** - present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God [the Father], which is your spiritual worship.

D. Pray to the Father

- **Matthew 6:9–13**

E. Mission for the Father

- 2 Cor 5:18–20 - All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

F. Worship the Father

To the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit (Eph 2:18)

- “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (Rom 11:33), and then three verses later, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom 11:36).
- “To the only wise God [the Father] be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ” (Rom 16:27)
- 1 Peter 2:4-5 - “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Basil the Great, in *On the Holy Spirit*, describes his Trinitarian devotion with two phrases: “Glory to the Father through [διὰ] the Son in [ἐν] the Holy Spirit,” (worship of God as revealed in Creation) and “Glory to the Father with [μετά] the Son together with [σύν] the Holy Spirit” (worship of God in Godself—*en se*). Both are necessary in order to balance the equality of the divine persons while still worshiping each in their proper order.⁴

Tom Smail again:

It [the gospel] is not first a Jesuology (a doctrine about Jesus) or a pneumatology (a doctrine about the Spirit) but it is a theology or even a patrology – a doctrine about God the Father. It starts not with the cross of Jesus or with the gift of the Spirit, but with the Father who so loved the world that he gave his Son in his Spirit. And it achieves its purpose, not when the body of Christ is gloriously renewed in every part without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5.27), not even when the enthroned Christ has subdued all his enemies and brought every knee to bow before him (Philippians 2.11), but rather when that same Christ “hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power” (I Corinthians 15.24). “When he has done this, then the Son will himself

⁴See Wainwright’s discussion in Geoffrey Wainwright, “Trinitarian Worship,” in *Speaking the Christian God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 209–21. In it, Wainwright writes, “Christian worship, like the salvation it celebrates and advances, is summed up in the movement “from the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father [*a Patre, per Christum, in Spiritu Sancto, ad Patrem*].” Wainwright, 211. See also, Robin A. Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 83.

be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all” (I Corinthians 15.28).⁵

⁵Tom Smail, *The Forgotten Father: Rediscovering the Heart of the Christian Gospel* (London: Paternoster Press, 1996), 20. Christ-centeredness has become a *shibboleth* among certain evangelical circles and has, sadly, become Christomonism apart from the Father or Spirit. It is often measured by how often Jesus Christ is mentioned rather than in the context of the Father’s desire to make the Son the direct object of the church’s worship and to sum up all things in him as his Messiah, and therefore the Father sent the Spirit to bear witness to this reality.

Conclusion

In our Paterology, we must never lose sight of the fact that the doctrine of the person and work of the Father is not so much an intellectual exercise as an exposition of the character of a person. Our theology ought to be put into practice, and be done for the benefit of the church. This means for those of us who are Christ-centered in our preaching and practice, we must be careful not to become Christomonistic. The Father's desire is to make the Son the direct object of the church's worship and to sum up all things in him as his Messiah, and therefore the Father sent the Spirit to bear witness to this reality through the church.

In our Paterology, we must also take care to correct the view of God that Father as distant and wrathful, and so implacable toward his elect that none would dare to draw near to him. It is misunderstanding of the Father that makes any run from him, for when a sinner understands the Gospel rightly, they see that the Father so loved this fallen world, he sent his Son. For the believer, then, communion with God the Father is one of the greatest privileges and realities that should cause them to approach the Father's throne of grace with confidence. The Father has planned it, he has sent his Son to procure it, and he has poured out his Spirit as the pledge and seal that he will make all things new.

John Owen

Wherefore, as a Father is he the ultimate object of all evangelical worship, of all our prayers. So is it expressed in that holy and divine description of it given by the apostle, Eph. 2:18. "Through Christ we have access by one Spirit unto the Father." No tongue can express, no mind can reach, the heavenly placidness and soul-satisfying delight which are intimated in these words. To come to God as a Father, through Christ, by the help and assistance of the Holy Spirit, revealing him as a Father unto us, and enabling us to go to him as a Father, how full of sweetness and satisfaction is it!