On Being Called “Father”



A Brief Exposition

of

the use of the term “Father”

for

the Christian Pastor

Zion has a tradition of several decades, longer than many Lutheran congregations have been in existence, of using the term “father” for her Pastor. I am frequently asked about this, more often than not by Lutherans or Protestants who are unaccustomed to, or even squeamish, about this Biblical and Lutheran practice.

With the moderns quite comfortable calling their Pastors by their first names, respect for the Pastoral Office is diminished, and the traditional practice of calling the Pastor “father” is on the wane. This should not surprise us. Modern evangelicalism, in its rush to make the unconverted comfortable, has deteriorated respect for the things of the church, and so for the things of God. This is especially clear in the diminished respect, and even in the disdain of the modern “evangelical” for the historic traditions and rites of the church. Take, for example, the Scriptural and Apostolic practice of closed Communion, rejected by many, indeed by many that use the name Lutheran.

But back to the question of calling the Pastor “father”. Since it is at its heart a doctrinal question, that is to say it is a question of the Apostolic teaching of the Church, we should approach this as we approach all doctrinal questions – first from Holy Scripture, then from the Lutheran Confessions, and finally from the tradition of our church.

In Holy Scripture, St. Paul regularly refers to those he has Pastored as his “children” in the faith. As their Pastor, St. Paul counted himself their “father”, their “teacher”, because he taught them Christ. Consider the Apostle’s own words:

*“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.”*

*1 Corinthians 4:14-16*

So Paul was quite comfortable as their “father” in the faith. How much more, then, with St. Timothy. To him St. Paul writes:

*“To Timothy, a true son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.” 1 Timothy 1:2*

If Timothy was his “son in the faith”, how could St. Paul not have been his “father”? Again St. Paul writes:

*This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare…”* *1 Timothy 1:18*

And again:

*“To Timothy, a beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”* *2 Timothy 1:2*

St. Timothy, and all those to whom St. Paul wrote, were comfortable being called “son” and “children” by their father in the faith, St. Paul. They would have been quite comfortable calling him their “father.”

The repeated uses of the word “children” also by St. John testify to his paternal relationship to the members of the Apostolic Church.

Now consider the following quotes from the Lutheran Confessions, which all true Lutherans confess as a proper exposition of the Holy Scriptures. In the Large Catechism, in Luther’s exposition of the Fourth Commandment, he writes:

*“Hence also they are all called fathers in the Scriptures, as those who in their government perform the functions of a father, and should have a paternal heart toward their subordinates.”*

Again Luther:

*“Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the country. Besides these there are yet spiritual fathers; not like those in the Papacy, who have indeed had themselves called thus, but have performed no function of the paternal office. For those only are called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God; as St. Paul boasts his fatherhood 1 Cor. 4, 15, where he says: In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel. Now, since they are fathers they are entitled to their honor, even above all others. But here it is bestowed least…” Large Catechism, Fourth Commandment. Concordia Triglotta, pg. 621-627, §141-161.*

So Luther clearly teaches, and so we confess, that we have civil “fathers” – those who govern us. And we have “fathers” in the faith – those from whom we receive Christian instruction and preaching, those “fathers” from whom we as “children” learn and grow in the Christian faith. This Office of Preaching, that of the Pastor, Luther calls the “paternal office.”

The Fourth Commandment is “Honor thy father and thy mother.” Can we “honor” our “fathers” in the faith if we will not call them such?

Outside of the Lutheran Confessions, in the many writings of Luther, he frequently calls the Pastor “father.” Consider Luther’s rite of Confession and Absolution, the very rite we use at Zion, which employs the term “father” for the ordained man hearing the confession:

*“Thus you shall say to the father confessor: Reverend and dear sir, I beseech you to hear my confession…” Luther’s Works, the American Edition, vol. 53, pg. 120.*

So the use of the term “father” for ordained men has solid support from Scripture and from the Lutheran Confessions, as well as a long tradition in our congregation.

When you were young you probably learned a Christian children’s song that went something like this: “Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham, and I am one of them, and so are you…” Since we are the sons of Abraham by virtue of our faith (see Romans 4:12, 16; which teaches us what God speaks of to Abraham in Genesis 17:5), is not Abraham rightly called our “father”? When you sang this song, did you sin? Is it wrong for you to call Abraham “father”? Do we not receive preaching and instruction in the same faith from our Pastor?

Frequently those unaccustomed to the use of the term “father” for a Pastor, and especially those inimical to it, cite Matthew 23:9. For purposes of understanding the pericope in its context, let us read Matthew 23:2-12:

*"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues,greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men,`Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called`Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

With these Words, our Lord first teaches his Disciples and the crowds that they are to respect the office held by the Pharisees. “Moses’ seat” was established by God. But the Lord then warns them not to “do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.” That is to say that the Pharisees were hypocrites. They bound men to the crushing code of the Law, without the preaching of the Gospel. And they sinfully used that Law and their office to pridefully demand honor for themselves – to exalt themselves. They demanded respect not only for their office, which the Lord tells his disciples to respect, but for themselves personally.

Our Lord further provides examples of their prideful arrogance. These examples include compelling others to call them “Rabbi.” It is in this context, hypocritical, sinful use of a God-given office to demand personal respect, that our Lord says to his disciples “…*do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ.*”

St. Paul was not ignorant of these Words of Christ. Yet he was quite comfortable, as we have seen above, calling himself “father” and “teacher” of those he Pastored. Did he violate the Words of our Lord? Was this sin on St. Paul’s part? Of course not. When you were a student did you not call those who taught you by the name “teacher”? Of course you did. Do you not still refer to them as your “teachers”? Of course you do. All of us do. Have you not referred to your earthly father as “father”? Of course you have. And it was not then, nor is it now, wrong to do so. It is an office instituted by God. And as St. Paul teaches, the Fourth Commandment is the first Commandment with a promise (*see Ephesians 6:2*).

So using “father” or “teacher” in these ways does not violate the Word of our Lord. If you are willing to call someone “teacher”, then it is not wrong to call someone “father”. In fact, it would be disrespectful to refuse to acknowledge your father as “father”. That would be a breaking the Fourth Commandment. How can you honor someone whose vocation you refuse to name?

St. Paul, in calling himself the “father” of those he Pastored, was not doing what our Lord taught against. For St. Paul could also write to St. Timothy: “*This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*” *1 Timothy 1:15*

These are not the words of an hypocritical or a prideful man. They are the words of a man painfully aware of his own sinfulness, a man that wanted only the best for those he instructed – their salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ alone. He was rightly their “father”. He did not bind them with the unbearable burden of the Law, and then leave them to fend for themselves. For the same St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth “*For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”1 Corinthians 2:2-5*

It is in this spirit, painfully aware of my own sinfulness and humbled by the boundless grace of God in Christ Jesus, that as Pastor of Zion I am called “father.” For a member of Zion, out of love and respect and thankfulness, to use the term “father” or “teacher” for his Pastor, is quite a different matter than a hypocritical demanding of the use of the term. What the Pharisees taught was contrary to the Gospel. Paul preached the Gospel. He was rightly “father” and “teacher” to those who received his words and instruction. So also those in any Christian congregation where the Word is taught in its purity, and the Sacraments rightly administered, ought be free to call their Pastor “father”.

But no one should be commanded to do so. That would be wrong. I compel no one to call me “father”, but those who are accustomed to doing so are welcome to. Others call me Pastor, and I am very comfortable with that. By God’s grace and His Divine Call, that is what I am.

In light of significant and strong testimony from Holy Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, Luther himself, and the tradition of our congregation, it is clear that the use of the term “father” for an ordained man is completely appropriate, reverent, and Lutheran.

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