

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.41 No.30

The Third Sunday after Trinity

06/20/10

FATHERHOOD AND SONSHIP (I)

Conventional wisdom holds that the language of God as Lord, and as the Father and the Son – and the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son – is hopelessly patriarchal. It is thought to symbolize and reinforce an obsolete and oppressive social structure, one run by privileged males for the benefit of privileged males, in which women, children, and low-status males were exploited, victimized, enslaved, and abused. In order for us to overcome these structural injustices, it is thought necessary for the Church to move “beyond God the Father” (to quote the title of an influential book), and change its language for God – either by eliminating masculine language for God altogether in favour of “gender-neutral” terms (“God” and “Godself”), or by “balancing” it with other language (often feminine). Both strategies are found in a supplement to the 1979 Prayer Book, entitled “Enriching our Worship”. In my experience, texts from it are used widely, if not universally, in combination with somewhat more “traditional” texts from the 1979 Prayer Book. Similar language is also used in preaching.

The difficulties with this conventional wisdom are manifold. Not only does it alienate modern Christians from the witness of the Christian past, now tainted for us by its supposedly “sexist” language, but it alienates Christians from the language of Scripture itself. For even the ultra-skeptical “Jesus Seminar” acknowledged that the language of God as Father was distinctive to the teaching of Jesus. To deny this teaching is to say that Jesus did not know what he was talking about, and that his word, and the word of apostolic witness to him, is not to be trusted. But this raises enormous problems for a religion of divine revelation. It tacitly admits that the Christian religion is not based upon divine revelation – God’s self-disclosure in the language of mankind – but is a merely human construct that can convey only vague and general aspirations and intuitions about the divine.

More recently, a number of scholars have questioned the sociological benefits of moving “beyond God the Father”. In a fine study, *Calling God “Father”: essays on the Bible, Fatherhood, and Culture* (1999), John Miller makes the argument that the Biblical language of “Lord” and “Father”, far from reinforcing oppressive patriarchy, in fact undermines it and restructures it in terms of responsible, involved, and compassionate fatherhood. To say that God is Father is to announce that he is no distant, uninvolved, tyrant, but the very opposite – a god who holds the guilty to account, yet is “merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6,

7). It is to announce the Gospel. "God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6).

Moreover, the Biblical teaching of divine fatherhood provides a model for human fatherhood. The predatory, abusive, and irresponsible male inseminator is replaced by the committed, providing, and self-sacrificing father. For observers of the breakdown of the American family, and the disastrous disappearance of the "father-involved" family in wide swathes of American society, this argument must count for much. Far from liberating women and children, the attack on God the Father reinforces the disappearance of the committed responsible father in many families and his replacement by the abusive and predatory male inseminator.

As with the divine Fatherhood, so with the divine and incarnate Son-ship, with manifold consequences. Notably, the Son's "obedience unto death, even the death of the cross" becomes unintelligible. In a sympathetic reading, it is an act of divine solidarity with victims of abuse and oppression. But as an atoning sacrifice, much less a propitiation, which liberates man from his alienation and restores him to fellowship with God, it is impossible. Thus the Biblical and historic doctrine is interpreted as a kind of divine child abuse.

The move "beyond God the Father" impairs the language of Christian prayer and proclamation. It also affects the Church's understanding of ministry. The historic understanding of the ordained ministry as representative of Christ to his Church (that is, as determined by the structure of revelation) gives way to the understanding of the ordained ministry as representative of the Church in its diversity. The former understanding made use of the Biblical distinction and complementarity of sex already appropriated to the language of revelation, by reserving the ordained ministry to men: for the latter, it becomes necessary to open the ministry to women, and in fact to every and any "diversity", for a failure to represent the diversity impairs the ministry itself. Yet an argument similar to Miller's may be mounted in defense of the male priesthood: far from oppressing women and children, it required that men model their exercise of authority in the Church on that of Christ, the priest who offers himself in sacrifice for the flock, the shepherd who cares for the sheep with compassionate strength.

(To be continued).

GGD

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

send this

bookmark

print

close

Report Errors | Comments

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.