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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 7 • Number 2 • SPRING 1998

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# REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Published by  
Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc.  
P.O. Box 88216  
Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-0216  
(630) 653-4165

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*Reformation & Revival Journal* (ISSN 1071-7277), (U.S.P.S. 011-791), is published quarterly, for \$24 per year, or \$40 for two years, by Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., 630 Paxton Place, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-9244. Second-class postage has been paid at Carol Stream, Illinois, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Reformation & Revival Journal*, P.O. Box 88216, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-0216.

This Journal is indexed in *Christian Periodical Index*.

*Reformation & Revival Journal* is published four times each year by Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., a not-for-profit teaching ministry organized in the state of Illinois in 1991. The ministry is committed to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the infallible Word of God and is in essential agreement with the confessional statements of historic Reformation theology. The purpose of this ministry is centered in its name:

1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## INFORMATION

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in America, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION REFORMATION AND THE FORGOTTEN FATHER

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*John H. Armstrong*

One of the most emphasized doctrines of the Bible during the first half of the twentieth century was the fatherhood of God. In scores of contexts, both religious and political, the fatherhood of God was both promoted and preached.

Former United States Secretary of Commerce, Henry A. Wallace, once observed, "We cannot understand either this war or the peace to come, unless we have some knowledge of the Bible and the history of the United States. Expressed in the fewest words possible, the meaning of the Bible is: All men are brothers because God is their Father." And the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), during the same era, declared in its General Assembly that "The heart of the gospel is the faith that all men are the sons of God."<sup>1</sup>

When religious leaders promote ideas such as these it is no small wonder that confessional orthodox Christians are put off by talk regarding the fatherhood of God. At the same time the tragic downside was the virtual neglect of the biblical doctrine of God's fatherhood by confessionally orthodox believers. Over the last half century the church has experienced a widescale remembrance of the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the process we have believed and preached a gospel in which the Father has been all but "forgotten."<sup>2</sup>

The Apostles' Creed begins with the significant words, "I believe in God, the Father almighty." What is most sig-

nificant about these historic words is how the two words "Father" and "almighty" are coupled. The early church sought to keep these two concepts together, always held in a kind of biblical tension. In modern theology the fatherhood of God is quite often positioned over against God's might, or divine sovereignty. It was no accident that liberal theology pushed Jesus forward in such a way that the Father was viewed only as the loving head of the family, not as the sovereign ruler over His subjects. Evangelical theologian Carl Henry noted fifty years ago that in this modern theological direction "A proper emphasis on divine fatherhood . . . [always] sends the aspect of divine sovereignty into the background."<sup>3</sup>

The tendency of the human heart is always the same—to move to the extremes, to settle all the tensions which allow mystery for believing minds. Greek and Oriental religions regard personality as incompatible with a God who is almighty. Neither Judaism nor Islam, the two great monotheistic religions besides Christianity, developed a doctrine of divine fatherhood which came even remotely close to the New Testament doctrine. Henry adds, "That is to say, *it is only in trinitarian theism, and not in the philosophic theisms or the religious theisms* which argue for a unipersonal deity, that there has arisen a concept of divine fatherhood which possesses the warmth of the Biblical view" (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

The fact is this—the coming of Jesus revealed the greatness of God's fatherhood so that all of us may more fully grasp this great truth.

H. R. Mackintosh captured this connection well when he wrote about the teaching of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus.

The question whether the Fatherhood of God is taught in the Old Testament is scarcely more than a matter of words. The

best minds certainly had caught a flying glimpse of it, at the least; yet here exaggeration must be avoided, otherwise we shall find it hard to explain to ingenuous minds what difference in this regard, if any, was made by Jesus. Increasing stress was all along being laid on God's relations to individuals; but this had never been wholly ignored, and quite indefensible things have often been said by scholars about the mere submergence of the single life in group or tribe at more primitive levels of worship. If the individual at first counted for next to nothing, it becomes a mystery how the great pioneering figures of Old Testament faith could ever raise their heads or gather disciples. But admitting all that, I can scarcely go whole-heartedly with the writer who declares that "what human language can express concerning the love of God for man we find already uttered in the Old Testament." In one sense, doubtless, this is true; in another sense, it ignores what is the most important fact of all. Thus the 23rd Psalm speaks of God's fatherly care for men in language of the most profound and moving character. . . . Yet nothing is more certain than that the beautiful relationship depicted in the Psalm is felt to be confined to members of the Chosen People. The writer would have denied that his words held true of a Greek or a Persian; such persons were outside the covenant, and God's attitude towards them was at best a matter of grave uncertainty. It is due solely to Jesus that into this Psalm of psalms we can read such infinite meanings that it becomes a sacred vehicle of our hope in God.<sup>5</sup>

To my mind Mackintosh has clearly underscored the emphasis of the New Testament itself. The witness of the apostle John is profoundly clear at this same point when he writes that "No man has seen God [i.e., the Father] at any time; the only begotten God [i.e., the Son, Jesus], who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" ["made Him known"] (John 1:18, RSV). What John says, quite literally, is this—Jesus, who was in the intimate presence of the Father, has brought God out into the open

where He can now be seen and understood. Jesus is the "exegesis" of the Father, He interprets God to us and for us. Thus H. R. Mackintosh is helpful once again when he concludes:

It is a sober truth to say that if we are to teach a distinct and redeeming impression of the Fatherhood of God, it is through Christ alone it can be attained. . . . Obviously enough it was not left to Jesus to manifest God in the character of Creator, or of supreme Moral Authority, or of Sustainer of the world. Long before His time, these ideas had become the possession of many. It was left to Jesus to manifest God in the character of holy and loving fatherhood.<sup>6</sup>

What is needed, more than ever in this century, is nothing less than a new, exegetically based, biblical theism. True reformation calls for a recovery of the doctrine of God, especially God as Father. We must respectfully hear the historic church in this recovery. We must also listen to the insights of classical theism. At the same time we need a generation which will begin to rethink more carefully how God relates to us as both Father and Almighty God. The beginning point for such a theology must be Christ Jesus, the true revealer of God the Father. I agree with theologian Donald G. Bloesch when he writes regarding the doctrine of the Trinity in particular, that

. . . the biblical way is to deal first with the mystery of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and then find in this revelation allusions to the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity did not emerge in the consciousness of the church until the church was able to grasp both the inseparability and necessary distinction between God and Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

We know God uniquely as Father because this is how

Jesus knew Him. In the Old Testament God is called Father only fifteen times. In the New Testament He is referred to as Father 245 times! What made Jesus unique, especially in the Jewish context, was simple: He "called God His own Father making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18, RSV). A central emphasis of John's gospel is to be found here—Jesus, the Son, has a *unique relationship* with God, His Father. To talk about the fatherhood of God is thus to talk about the person and work of Jesus. This brings us to the very center of the Christological debate of our century: Who is Jesus? How does He reveal God to us? Thomas Smail, then, is correct when he questions:

What part does this Father/Son relationship between Jesus and God play in the structure and theology of the New Testament gospel? The Abba utterances may only be three in number, but when we widen our gaze to the Greek *Pater*, we see that the word is nothing less than a quintessential concentration of the central conviction out of which Jesus lived and worked. If we do not know that Jesus related to God as his father, we know nothing about him at all.<sup>8</sup>

I am convinced that serious efforts for modern reformation call for serious new considerations of God as both Father and Almighty. Liberalism wrongly spoke of God's fatherhood. Evangelicalism reacted and nearly lost the doctrine of the fatherhood of God in the process. Charismaticism, which now virtually defines popular evangelicalism, for all practical purposes, hardly knows there is a Father. Modern Reformed movements often stress that God is almighty, or sovereign, to the extent that they too lose this emphasis upon God as Father. But this vital New Testament theme flows right out of a proper biblical emphasis upon the centrality of Jesus Himself. If we would call churches and believers back to a biblical emphasis, and thus to real

reformation, we must regain a biblically based emphasis upon God as our Father, as revealed in and by our glorious Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### *Notes*

1. Lehman Strauss, *The First Person* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux, 1967), 117.
2. Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 186. This excellent book is a needed corrective to the present problem. Smail, an Anglican, suggests that the priority for the Christian life and church renewal must be the rediscovery of the Father and of the believer's relationship to him. Smail writes in the postscript: "I believe that in the Spirit and through Christ we are being called back from all charismatic oneness to the forgotten Father to find something of the wholeness of our life in him."
3. Carl F. H. Henry, *Notes on the Doctrine of God* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1948), 93.
4. *Ibid.*, 94-95.
5. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1929), 104-105.
6. *Ibid.*, 111.
7. Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 14.
8. Smail, 49.