

The Lord's Prayer: 2

Brothers & sisters, we've made it all the way to the second word of the LP, the word Father. If we're going to get hung up on the word "Father," we're not going to make it all the way through the LP in only 3 ½ hours! But we can't skip over it; for in all of Christianity's language for God, "Father" is religiously the distinctive & culturally the most difficult title. Some other religions, esp. Judaism, use this domestic metaphor for God; but our religion is unique in making "Father" the control-title for the deity, (in compterese) the default position in theology proper. Because our Lord Jesus taught us to, "Father" is the God-title we should most use in prayer & meditation & most fight for. Yet we must face the painful fact that some Christians, in opposition to Jesus, fight **against** giving priority to "Father" as God-title, & some even avoid its use.

Thirty years ago as a seminary dean I was rewriting commencement hymns to exclude generic nouns (e.g., "man" to include females) & pronouns (e.g., "he" to include "she"). On the interhuman horizontal, Letty Russell (who cotaught a doctoral seminar with me) & I had no difference; but disastrously, she thought that the Bible uses generic language on the vertical, i.e. in God-language, & her resultant speech-code is now style-book (required) by all the mainline church presses. Against Letty, here are the facts: (1) The Bible's all-masculine (in personal titles & pronouns) language for God is ANTIgeneric, not including but excluding the goddess; (2) If the Bible's deity were male (as Canaan's "Baal" was), he'd have a goddess-consort (as Lord Baal had Lady "Asherah"): God transcends, producing offspring not as Father Heaven impregnating Mother Earth but (as it were) by closing "in his image" (of which, on the evidence, sexual dimorphism is not an aspect); (3) The biblical God is not Father Heaven (with Mother Earth) but, as in the LP, the transcendent heaven Father (my shortening of "Father in heaven"), in contrast to the earth fathers (who, as unable to conceive/gestate/lactate [& are therefore at a greater distance from the children], represent the divine transcendence, as all the mothering processes represent the divine immanence; & who, with 50% more muscle-mass than mothers, represent the divine authority based on power).

In short, it's a category error of apples/oranges to use the anti-generic conviction (a cultural-linguistic, horizontal concern) on the vertical (as though the Bible's exclusion of feminine titles/pronouns were only a matter of Feuerbachian transcendent-alized bedroom politics).

The father-image? Earth damages all images of heaven, & heaven heals the images. Many years ago in Europe I happened upon a shepherd having anal intercourse with one of his sheep. It really damaged my "shepherd"-image until Ps.23 & Jn.10 healed it. Also long ago, a parishioner of mine confessed to me that her father raped her when she was nine. It really wrecked her "father"-image until she studied, through her concordance, Jesus' references to the heaven Father. Heaven heals earth's hurts. The feministic pollution of the heaven Father by the imperfections of earth fathers is both perverse & blasphemous, the reverse direction.

Further, note that in God-images, the LP subordinates the political (line 3, in an abstract noun, "kingdom") to the domestic-familial (line 1, a personal noun, "Father"). The elevation of the home over the state, of love over power, raises the status of women both in & beyond the home. A paradoxical correlation in our religion: The Christian God-idea & God-language are the world's most masculine, and the Christian gospel is the best news for women. One reason may be that psychosocial gravity works against transcendence, & our religion's all-masculine personal titles & pronouns for God counter this tendency of the transcendent-masculine to collapse into the immanent-feminine (a feminization with many baneful results, one of which is that boys remain boys, & when the girls become women they can't find men to marry--only aging boys). So I conclude that the New Revised Standard Version has it right: inclusive language on the horizontal, no lessening of masculinity on the vertical (language for God).

Now let's put the LP's 1st phrase together: Our Father in heaven. In Christ, Jesus' heaven Father becomes ours--as in Roger Shinn's fine phrase in our UCC Statement of Faith, "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father." I asked him to write the left-hand pages for the Lent '63 "The Fellowship of Prayer," and in its

Forward he put this same dual truth this way: "in praying to his Father, we may share the gifts and responsibilities that God has given the world through Jesus Christ." On p.72 his meditation was on L.15.24 ("This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."). You remember that this was said by the prodigal mother (as prodigal-spendthrift with her love as her son had been with his half of the inheritance). She didn't care what the neighbors thought, her running & gushing all over her wayward turned back home. (That's how we know it wasn't the father: his dignity & patriarchal responsibilities didn't give him the option of not caring what the neighbors thought.) Now, your shock at the way I told the parable reverses the shock of its first hearers. Jesus subverted patriarchy not by changing the language for God but by having that old patriarch behave in an unseemly fashion, like a thoughtless mother pellmell welcoming an unworthy son--Jesus' hypotext being "It's not about respectability or even morality, stupid; it's about love!" One of the quotations I chose for the page facing that page was from Karl Barth, the primary author of the Barmen Declaration: "There is above this warped and weakened will of yours and mine, above this absurd and senseless will of the world, another which is straight and pure, and which, when once it prevails, must have other, wholly other, issues than these we see today. Out of this will, when it is recognized, another life must grow....We have wandered away, but we can return." (That was the 1st Lent that I added a page of quotations appropriate to each succeeding page of text, & this form of the UCC's Lenten manual became very popular, soon selling almost 400,000 copies [though not all my customers were UCC].) Instead of replacing patriarchy with matriarchy or equality, our Lord Jesus transformed patriarchy; & that transformation, which continues to work in theology & in society, I as a Christian take as revelation.

As in collects the prayer's content is anticipated in how the salutation describes the addressee, the deity, so it is with the LP--whose petitions assume, in the deity, the synergy of power & love, the synergy of a good earth father--so the prayer is addressed to the heaven Father. And its 1st petition is hallowed be your name, bring it about that on the earth your name be the most honored ("holy": qadosh/hagios). The petition is participant in its fulfillment. In heliotropism, the flower honors the sun by turning toward it & accepts the sun's assignment (to do the work the sun has for it to do) by remaining at heliocentric attention. Within our prayer (tephillah) is the implicit assignment that we who obediently pray be throughout life--in thought/word/deed--theotropic, unceasingly attending to the Shekinah (Presence of God) with the steady intent of Kiddush Ha-Shem (the sanctification/hallowing of the Name, i.e. God's person with nametag--Judaism's central motivation, observance of which is its highest deed (Mitzvah--so, mitzvot are deeds which you wouldn't do if not done to please God & also to improve God's reputation [kavod/doxa])). (This, the derivative meaning of Mitzvot, viz. creative-obedient response to the 1st meaning, viz. the 613 commandments, which Jesus reduced to 2, which Augustine maximed as "Love God & do as you please [for it will be what pleases him].")

We become what we love, & we become holy to the degree that our souls are theotropic to the Holy One, who says "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev.11.44,45; 19.2; 20.26). The "chasid" (devout companion of God) becomes a "tsadiq" (takes on the "righteous" character of God, becoming "rightified" [Lat.Eng., "justified"]) by "emunah" (humble loyalty, both inceptive ["faith"] & progressive ["faithfulness"]): Paul's "pistis" & Luther's "fides" rightly fought against "works-righteousness" overemphasis on the progressive meaning of "emunah" (in Hab.2.4, in the KJV "The just shall live by his faith"). "Emunah" contains a reciprocity of faith & faithfulness that a maxim of Bonhoeffer states: "We believe because we obey, we obey because we believe." And what are the fruits of this union of word & deed? God's name is honored, hallowed, in our holy prayer (tephillah), praise (tehillah, hallel--giving "glory" [kabod] to God), "deeds of love & mercy" (mitzvot), witness (haggadah--telling the Story/stories), & joy (simcha)....Whole books have been written on the LP's rich first petition, on which the others "hang" (as, Jesus says, the scriptures "hang" on the double commandment of love). To hallow God's name-presence is to make sacred what/who alone is Holy; it is to magnify the truly Great--honor, adore, praise, thank, & glorify the truly Worthy, the Lamb slain & victorious upon the throne. But first, recognition, as the last paragraph of Darwin's first edition (God disappeared in the 2nd printing). Now, our culture is facing the sickness of intentional amnesia of the Biblical God.