

A Missionary Looks at the Father Heart of God

The task of a Bible teacher or preacher is to communicate God's truths clearly to the minds and hearts of his hearers. The task of a missionary is to communicate God's truths cross-culturally.

All such communication – at home or in another country – involves the process of “translating” or interpreting God's truths so that the hearers truly hear what God is saying. And beyond that is the burden that they listen to God's voice – but that is more the role of the Holy Spirit to implant the truth in the hearts and minds of his hearers.

(Over the past 40 years, we have spent about 30 years living and serving God in other countries and cultures. We've also trained and worked with fellow-missionaries from almost every corner of the globe. The end result has been a deep awareness of the many differences in the ways people around the world think, what different peoples value, what they believe to be life's origins and life's ultimate purpose et al.)

We may be tempted to think that all a preacher or teacher needs to do is to think over some verse or passage of Scripture and then give a few thoughts to his congregation. Almost sounds like something that may take a couple of hours at the most to prepare.

(The missionary task involves working with three different cultures – his own culture, the culture of the biblical writer and the culture of the people to whom he is bringing God's message.)

But whether at home or on the mission field, the task of communicating God's truths to other people – Christian or non-Christian – involves the task of understanding the REAL message of the text and then understanding how to “translate” that message into the language of his hearers. And by “language” I mean of course more than just choosing words. I'm talking about understanding even how certain words are perceived and used both by the authors of Scripture AND also how these words are understood and used by his hearers.

So my task this morning is simply to do that. And the theme is once again the Father-heart of God.

The Fatherhood of God lies right at the very heart of the teaching of Jesus. It is the core revelation of God's character in Jesus' teaching about His Father. We all know the opening word or words in our Lord's prayer: “Father” (Luke) or “our Father” (Matthew). We all know how Jesus often addressed His Father in prayer – “Father”. Then after His resurrection, He told His disciples that He would soon be going to “My Father and your Father”. (Jn.20:17)

It sounds so simple. But is it? Let me ask us all – what picture or image do we have of “Father”? And how does this fit in with Jesus' own understanding of Father?

Throughout our years of training new missionaries in Central Europe, we saw again and again how people's perceptions of the Father-heart of God were muddied by painful experiences in their relationship with their earthly father. Very, very few ever testified to having a good and open relationship with their own father. Many, and I am not exaggerating, spoke about a father who worked hard to provide but who remained aloof and distant. Somehow they knew that their father loved them but he never spoke the words “I love you”.

Tragically not a few spoke of a father who demanded near perfection – who criticised them more than affirmed them. A father who seemed like he could never be satisfied. Who would ask a son or daughter who scored 97% on a test – what was the mistake you made?

A few spoke of fathers who inflicted different forms of abuse on them. One young woman from England shared how at the age of 14 she had been threatened by her father wielding a knife.

Of course, there are many good fathers in the world. But the sad reality is that for many children, “father” conveys a very negative message. One new missionary from Melbourne testified that he hadn’t yet been able to address God in prayer with the words “our Father”.

Perhaps some of us don’t have very many pleasant memories of our relationship with our earthly fathers. But then should this prevent us from knowing God as “Father”? Are we in fact to begin with our own sin-weakened picture of God in our pursuit of knowing God as “Father?” Or, is it not the other way around – that our picture or image of true Fatherhood is to be shaped by looking at our heavenly Father – not at our earthly fathers?

But another factor which could also hinder or weaken our picture of God as “Father” is how we perceive the father role within our own culture. For example, how much does our Aussie egalitarianism impact our understand both of our own fatherhood and also of God’s Fatherhood? If we fail to see potential for negative cultural biases even in this matter, then we will also probably fail to understand in a truly biblical way the Father-heart of God.

Two simple examples must suffice. Two major aspects of our Australian culture in reality run counter to a biblical picture of Fatherhood. I’m thinking of our negative attitudes towards AUTHORITY and authority figures and the central place we give to MATESHIP in our relationships. One only has to live outside of one’s own culture to realise how different we Aussies think and how we relate with one another. It’s not my intention to delve into the backgrounds for the way we think and relate with one another.

But I don’t think we can deny that we have at least in part been subtly influenced by these cultural and worldly ideals in the way we view our own fatherhood. In our democratic society that majors on equal rights for all – including for children – parents especially fathers feel the strong pressure to play down their authority, to think of themselves as the “friend” or mate of their children, rather than a symbol of authority.

And how intense is the struggle in many Christian homes because the whole tenor and ethos of our contemporary society is rebellion against authority. How often have we experienced pain, even rejection, from the words of our own children? Children who have been taught to stand up against their own parents? How many TV programs and soapies have helped to weaken our society’s value of fatherhood? It’s very hard at times to be a father in today’s society.

But in contrast to this darkness stands the awesome light of God’s truth. The truth of God as Father.

Living among other cultures – in East Asia, in Central Europe, and now more recently getting to understand their mindset

The missionary must begin with the task of understanding what God communicated to His ancient people and then to interpret and apply this message in his or her own context. Then he needs to work on making this message clear to the minds of his hearers – in thought forms, in language that fits within the worldview of their particular culture. If any of us imagine that going out as a missionary is just about having good theology plus mastering the language, and that’s where it ends, I trust this brief overview of the missionary task at least broadens and stretches your thinking on the difficulty of the missionary task – so that we pray for our missionaries as they seek to make God’s truth a clear and living word for the minds of their hearers.

But aren’t we all faced with the challenge to understand the message of the Scriptures so that we can apply it in our own lives and also share its truths with people in our own culture? I’m hoping you will say “yes”.

The Father heart of God speaks to me as the father who cares
God as judge and creator AND God as father – father-like characteristics of God – the fatherhood of God – who He is within the Trinity – His role within the Trinity

Father is provider.

Children have an intimate relationship with their father.

Very different kind of intimacy – mainly with small children – later on when the children grow up, as teenagers, they are with their friends.

They listen without question, eg if the father says my son has eaten, the son will say

Father tries to teach the children, even the wrong things – whatever the profession he has, he will teach to his children, eg workers. Special techniques – that fathers teach to their own children

They don't think about God as Father – never thought of God as Father – a new idea that they have to learn – compare with their own father – try to bring it together

We understand God as a Father who is wise – earthly father is not wise enough

Father disciplines – God sees the future but the father doesn't – everything that God does is as a wise Father.

A good relationship with his own father – a family man – as soon as he finished his job, he came home. Not educated to help us in certain areas. Most people in Iran have good relationships with their own father – except if addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Respect and honour is very important. Otherwise his own family will throw him out.

The context for the Bible = the Middle East – not a 21st western century context – vast and significant differences – we will miss some very important truths if we fail to recognise the differences

Our living in Asia and then in Central Europe (quite different culturally to Western Europe) has helped give us an appreciation for certain truths in the Scriptures that we don't always see or even easily understand – will highlight some of these facts/truths.

See the Father-heart of God through the eyes of people who live and lived in the place where God came to earth in the Person of Jesus – share from personal observations and experience with ME people as well as from Michael's insights.

When God revealed Himself as "Father". He didn't do so in a vacuum – in a living, real culture – He came down among men as a Jew – even the Jewish word "Abba" (dear daddy) is the word that Jesus used when addressing His Father in heaven – hence not by accident – how did the Jews of Jesus' day receive and understand this truth of God's Fatherhood?

How does a missionary working among other cultures see and understand the Father-heart of God?

1. The heart of the Father is to protect His children – to guard their going out and coming in – to prevent them if he can from falling into error or evil – to make sure that the children don't fall into the wrong hands – example: daughter of Coptic Orthodox Egyptian family in Vienna
2. The heart of the Father to provide for His children – all they need – later on He will involve them with Him in the process of providing for themselves – a father will teach his sons a trade so that they can later provide for themselves and their families, and be responsible – or make sure that his daughters will be prepared for marriage (he will help look for a suitable husband for his daughters)– the truth Father is strong and knows how to best meet all the needs of all His children (2 Cor.9:8) – but His requirement is to ask and then they will receive

3. The heart of the Father to pass on wisdom to His children so that they will act wisely (OT concept of wisdom is not to be confused with being old or just knowing a lot of practical stuff about life – rather it had to do with living godly, right lives – to teach His children the right way to act/behave – to ensure that his children develop good manners and know how to show respect to others – to have good behaviour so that he will bring honour, not dishonour and disrepute, to the family's name – one of the greatest negatives in the ME culture is shame, to be shamed)
4. The heart of the Father to have many children – proof of his manliness, a sense of his vigour – it is a great shame when he isn't able to have children or doesn't have sons because then the family name will not be passed on – God longs to have many children by adoption – children who love Him and honour Him – children from all over the world – to be honoured and loved by His children – to see His children 'blessed'
5. The heart of the Father to enjoy intimacy with his children – but never the kind of intimacy that degenerates into disrespect or talking back, even disagreeing – 'father is right' – children don't argue with their fathers – closeness that isn't compromised by over-familiarity
6. The heart of the Father to bless His children – to see them truly 'blessed' – to give gifts to His children – the gift of His Spirit, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of eternal life – not a mean father but a generous Father, cf. Titus 3:5-6
7. The heart of the Father is to have His children together with Him – to share His inheritance with them – to have them near to Him – to enjoy them, cf. Michael's father as a family man who enjoyed his children – came home after work to be with his children
8. The heart of the Father as loving and caring – as a father has pity on his children, so the Lord pities us – He loves and accepts His children – hence living with feelings of rejection as if we aren't good enough yet for God, that He accepts us conditionally

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