

**“THE PECULIAR BUSINESS OF AN APOSTLE”  
The ‘Great Commission’ and  
the Tendency of Wesley’s Speech about God the Father**

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In focusing the general call concerning papers for this working group, Craig Keen and Sarah Lancaster began by instructing us to

attend to the ecclesiological significance and broader theological ramifications of the calling and mission of the church, which the Creed of Nicea describes not only as ‘one, holy, [and]catholic,’ but also as ‘apostolic.’ We ask in particular that members of this working group consider the Great Commission that closes the Gospel of Matthew.

In sum, our conveners have asked us to concentrate our work on the character of the Christian community as ‘apostolic,’ i.e., as defined by the mission of word and deed that Christ has bequeathed to his disciples. Following those instructions, let me introduce my topic with the familiar words of the Great Commission to which they refer, and of the pericope that gives it context.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt 28:16-20)

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The aspect of that commission to which I would draw your attention in this paper is the reference to God as ‘Father.’ The Great Commission calls the gathered disciples of Jesus Christ to go forth and make disciples of the nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Setting aside the titles of ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ for the moment, I want to concentrate on the question of what we are doing when we baptize “in the name of the Father...?” What does that title mean, I want us to ask, and how does that shape our understanding and pursuit of the mission with which we are charged? Specifically, I want to ask what form of life we are enacting, what form of life are we proclaiming, indeed, into what form of life are we inducting those of the nations whom we baptize in that name? This is one form of a question that has, of course, become profoundly important in Methodist and indeed in Christian theology as a whole in the last two generations: the question of the fatherhood of God. In the following I will first delineate the question by describing the traditional practice and the protest that it has engendered. Secondly I will suggest that recent biblical studies in both the Old and the New Testament might very well enable us to answer this question in a more helpful and faithful way than the options currently dominating our theological discussion and pastoral practice. Finally I will point you to John Wesley’s comment concerning “the peculiar business of an apostle to witness” to God the Father and I will argue that if we will appropriate what Randy Maddox and others have identified as the tendency of Wesley’s speech about the fatherhood of God in our own thought and practice today—a ‘tendency’ supported and developed by the recent biblical studies I have just mentioned, we heirs of Wesley might very well learn to address in a new way one of the most difficult of the theological and pastoral issues

with which we are currently struggling, the question that we meet in the Great Commission itself, the question of God the Father. In this paper, therefore, I want to speak to what Lancaster and Keene term the “broader theological ramifications” of the apostolic mission of the Christian community.

### **The Tradition and the Protest**

When seen against the background of the western theological tradition, one of the most striking characteristics of contemporary theology is the challenge that has arisen concerning Christian discourse about God the Father. Talk about divine fatherhood certainly encountered no significant challenge during the long age of Christendom, when Christianity was accorded a privileged role in western civilization and itself accorded the intellectual and social traditions of the west in turn a privileged place in its discourse. For better than one and a half millennia Christians of virtually every persuasion routinely spoke of the fatherhood of God not only in public and private prayer, but in witness to the world, in our liturgy before God, as well as in our creedal and confessional traditions. The opening words of the creed, “I believe in God the Father,” were common ground among us, and common ground too with the culture in which we lived. While there were always those who like the fourth century theologian Gregory Nazianzen expressed contempt for anyone who would attribute gender to God—saying that when used of God, the Greek word for ‘father’ (ὁ πατήρ), a masculine noun, is no more to be thought of as male than the feminine noun ‘deity’ (ἡ θεότης) implies that God is female, others among us blithely took for granted that God was indeed gendered, and ‘his’ gender was male.<sup>1</sup> After all,

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<sup>1</sup> See Gregory Nazianzen’s “Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit,” VII.

they reasoned (to the degree that it was a matter of conscious reasoning at all, rather than simply an assumption we absorbed from and shared with our social world), doesn’t the Old Testament call God ‘father’ and usually refer to God using masculine language; and didn’t even Jesus himself, reflecting that usage, teach us to pray to God as “our Father?” Doesn’t that imply that God is masculine, just like all the earthly ‘fathers’ with whom we are familiar? Isn’t God to be understood, therefore, in analogy to those fathers? Doesn’t God as Father create the world and administer his cosmic household according to his will, just as the human father in traditional society was to procreate and rule his house? Presuming that the answer to each of these questions was yes, the theological tradition went on to identify God the Father ontologically as the originating principle not only in the existence and order of the cosmos but in the triune being of God: i.e., both as the Creator of “the heavens and the earth” in the beginning as well as the patriarchal source of divinity itself—in the language of the fourth century creed, the one by whom the Son is eternally “begotten” and from whom the Spirit eternally “proceeds.” There can be no doubt that these assumptions about divine fatherhood exercised a profound influence on the theological, ecclesiastical and social traditions of Christendom, and were never seriously questioned until recently.

Not even the transformation of Christian discourse precipitated by the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity, the ‘turn to the subject’ that was the turn from the metaphysical to the human in history, called these assumptions about the fatherhood of God into question. Indeed, in many ways it only reinforced them. Writing at the start of the twentieth century, Adolf Harnack, one of the doyens of modern Protestant Liberal theology, famously defined the essence of

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Christianity in precisely those same terms: “To our modern way of thinking and feeling, Christ’s message appears in the clearest and most direct light when grasped in connection with the idea of God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul.”<sup>2</sup> For Harnack, as for much of the enlightened Protestantism of the age, the language of the fatherhood of God represented the language of the human consciousness (“our modern way of thinking and feeling”) of the universal, benevolent relationship of the Creator to all human beings, who—sharing a common relation with their Father/Creator—stood therefore in a fraternal relationship to one another that called for benevolence in turn. Christ had come, these theologians maintained, not to condemn but to bless, unite, and fulfill creaturely existence by directing all humanity, God’s children all, toward the ethical ideal of the kingdom of God. And that meant, concretely, that Jesus had come to direct humanity toward the realization of that innate consciousness of God found in the soul (of “infinite value”) that is the supposed foundation of all religious striving: the consciousness of the universal fatherhood of God our Creator to be realized in human history. All human beings were thus to be conscious of one another as brothers precisely because they were conscious of God as Father.

Recent Catholic theology has been anxious not to be left behind in this regard. At the end of the twentieth century one modern Catholic theologian (and he is by no means alone) has taken up and affirmed the popular summary of Harnack’s claim—albeit with what we might assume is a somewhat different set of operative assumptions. Under the imprimatur of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the second edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, R. L. Richard comments on

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<sup>2</sup> Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, T. B. Saunders (trans.), (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 63.

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...the strange fact that Roman Catholics often take the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man to be a Protestant rather than a Catholic point of doctrine. Fortunately, however, and with profound ecumenical consequences, this naive attitude is in the process of being corrected in the wake of the Roman Catholic, as well as the Protestant, Biblical revival.<sup>3</sup>

As a term thought to have universal as well as ecumenical reference, indeed, as a term connected with the ‘Biblical revival’ no less, the fatherhood of God has come to be emphasized in modern Catholic theologies as well. But even here the underlying assumptions ultimately remain ontological in all of its teaching, whether scholarly or popular. “God the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all; this is the first and foremost article of our faith,” declared Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century, reflecting and modifying Classical assumptions about divinity.<sup>4</sup> And *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* reiterates in its very first chapter precisely this same ontological point concerning the Father as the beginning of all talk about both God and creation at the end of the twentieth century.

Our profession of faith begins with *God*, for God is the first and the last, the beginning and the end of everything. The Credo begins with God the *Father*, for the Father is the first divine person of the Most Holy Trinity; our Creed begins with the creation of heaven and earth, for creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God’s works.”<sup>5</sup>

The catechism then goes on to specify exactly what it means by such language: “By calling God ‘Father,’ the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything

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<sup>3</sup> R. L. Richard, art. “God”, in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Detroit: Thompson/Gale, and Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003), vol. 6, 292.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 1.1, 6; cited according to the translation found in St. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, J. P. Smith, trans., (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (St. Paul, Minn.: Wanderer Press, 1994), par. 198, p. 54.

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and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children.”<sup>6</sup>

Even the theological protest against this sort of modern theologizing with all its talk about the idea of the fatherhood of God rooted in our created nature and historical consciousness has emphasized God the Father and spoken of that fatherhood in foundational terms. Karl Barth is the theologian who more than any other made his own the task of repudiating what he called modern ‘Neo-Protestant’ theology (as well as the sort of Catholic theology that he saw as its true counterpart) and of offering a distinctly modern alternative: a theology that answered to modernity’s privileging of the epistemological question, and that did so by recasting all Christian discourse in terms of divine self-revelation. Theology, on this account, is not the work of investigating innate human consciousness of God—whether as ‘Father’ or not, but rather of explicating God’s revelation of godself through the Word, the true measure of all the church’s discourse. Thus Barth declared that: “God’s Word is God Himself in His revelation. For God reveals Himself as the Lord and according to Scripture this signifies for the concept of revelation that God Himself in unimpaired unity yet also in unimpaired distinction is Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness.”<sup>7</sup> His theology therefore took a consistently Trinitarian form, transmuting the traditional ontological categories of speech about God into modern epistemological—and in this case, emphatically revelational—categories. The God who is three in one and one in three is so precisely in self-revelation: the Father, as the source or origin of revelation, is the ‘Revealer’; the Son, as the one through whom divine revelation occurs in all its objectivity in the world, is the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., par. 239, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1975—German original 1936), 295.

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‘Revelation’; and the Holy Spirit, as the one in and by whom that objective revelation is made subjective in the actuality of a human life, is the ‘Revealedness’ of God.

Note carefully the role that the Father plays in this Trinitarian conception of God’s revelation of ‘himself’ as humanity’s Lord, the one to whom all worship and honor and obedience is due:

But the inner truth of the lordship of God as the one supreme and true lordship revealed and operative in His proclamation and action—the inner truth and therefore also the inner strength of His self-demonstration as the Lord, as this Lord, consists in the fact that He is in Himself from eternity to eternity the triune God, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The fact that, according to that self-demonstration, man is indebted to Him for everything and owes Him everything is grounded in God’s own eternal Fatherhood, of which any other fatherhood can be only an image and likeness, however much we may owe to it, however much we may be indebted to it. And that self-demonstration constrains us to gratitude and indebtedness and therefore to the knowledge of God the Father as our Lord, because in eternity God is the Father of His own eternal Son and with Him the source of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Because the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and with the Son “the source of the Holy Spirit” in the Triune life of God, we are “indebted” to God for everything and “owe” God everything. That stands in starkest contrast to the way Barth continues this exposition of God’s Trinitarian Lordship. The knowledge gained through God’s self-revelation, i.e., that in the Son, God—to whom we owe everything as Father—has nevertheless done everything on our behalf, “constrains us to adoration of His faithfulness and grace,” while such knowledge of the Holy Spirit “constrains us to hope.”<sup>9</sup> It is the priority and preeminence of the Father over the Son and the Spirit as well as in relationship with humanity that is—granting all the qualifications about the

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1957—German original, ???), 47f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

‘eternal equality’ of the three modes of the divine life—made evident here. Knowledge of God the Father leads to the realization that we are debtors, for we owe all that we are and have to the Lord; knowledge of God the Son, on the other hand, leads to worship, and of God the Holy Spirit to expectation. Why? Because for Barth the Trinity is an event whose “being is in becoming”<sup>10</sup>; and the eternal, originating source in that event—both in God’s own self and in relation to God’s world—is God the Father. In Barth’s words: “The one God reveals Himself according to Scripture as the Creator, that is, as the Lord of our existence. As such He is God our Father because He is so antecedently in Himself as the Father of the Son.”<sup>11</sup>

Talk of ‘God the Father’ therefore has been pervasive, even foundational, and generally unquestioned in both the faith and practice of the Christian tradition, and thus in the theologies of Christendom as well as in the dominant theologies of the modern period. It has represented that which referred to the originating and thereby defining source in the life of God, in the life of the world with its created order, of human consciousness of the divine, and of divine self-revelation. Such talk therefore has been widely taken to be determinative in the west for our most basic conception of the relation of God and world: a divinely ordained hierarchical order beginning with God at the apex and descending through the orders of cosmos, society, church, and family. To call God ‘Father’ was traditionally to speak of the source and the principle of order in the divine life, in the life of the cosmos, and in human life as well. Little wonder that Adam Smith,

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<sup>10</sup> See Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth, Eine Paraphrase*, 4. Aufl., (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck)1986).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1975—German original 1936), 384.

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the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, remarked early in the modern period that “the very suspicion of a fatherless world...[is] the most melancholy of all reflections.”<sup>12</sup>

But that suspicion has not been ‘melancholy’ for all. For feminism and the theology it has engendered has arisen precisely as a protest against all that: against a traditional hierarchical cosmos, against a traditional hierarchical culture, against a traditional hierarchical church, against a traditional hierarchical family—and therefore against the conception of God as the divine patriarch, the divine origin and source and determiner and orderer that was employed as the ultimate justification for all such hierarchies. It has done so in the name of humanity, above all, the humanity of women. As a movement feminism has now become broad and diverse, and feminist theory even full of inner conflict and self-contradiction, but the genealogy and the historical character of its social protest remains clear. While its roots reach back deep into the developments of the Enlightenment, it is in many ways the final flower of the modern impulse, indeed, modernity in microcosm.<sup>13</sup> For if the Enlightenment and the modernity it gave rise to represent an on-going revolution in the history of the human race—its own self-understanding—, then feminism is, as Juliet Mitchell declared early on, “the longest revolution” in that unfolding event.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael & A. L. MacFie, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 235.

<sup>13</sup> At this point the literature on Feminism, its history and the development of its ideology is vast. To begin, you might see Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981); further, see the fine collection of primary literature collected by Alice S. Rossi, *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988). For the relation of feminism and Enlightenment, cf. *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds.), (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966).

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Feminist theology emerged into the light of day as a distinct movement in the middle of the twentieth century and has leveled an evolving critique at western society and the theological traditions and ecclesiastical practices of Christendom. At the center of their criticism of both is the notion of God as male. “If God is male, then the male is God,” declared Mary Daly in her ground-breaking book *Beyond God the Father*; and if God and God’s image is male, then the female is not.<sup>15</sup> And, she continued in another publication, “as long as God is imaged exclusively as male, then the male can feel justified in playing God.”<sup>16</sup> It is against this idolatrous association of the male and God—with its identification of the masculine with hierarchy, dominance and power—that the Feminist movement protests, because it sees in that association and identification a profoundly skewed understanding of God and humanity that serves as the foundation of the traditional patriarchal society of the west and its marginalization of women—among others. Daly, of course, proposed a program of women’s liberation consisting of a process of liberation-castration-exorcism, with the first candidate to be God the father. Other Feminists have turned from masculine to pursue feminine images of God in the Bible and in the history of Christianity, some have foresworn *theology* in the name of *thealogy*, many have claimed women’s experience of the divine as the normative principle in all feminist talk about God, still others have recast the language of Jesus Christ as Christa or the divine Spirit as Sophia, while some others see inclusive language in liturgy and literature as the key, and yet others have sought the feminine in the divine: “I desire her with my whole heart,” enthuses Janet Morley.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Daly, “The Women’s Movement,” 332.

<sup>17</sup> Janet Morley, “I Desire Her with my Whole Heart,” *The Month* 21 (1988), 541-544.

In the course of this, a long and vociferous debate concerning talk about God as Father has arisen, with the parties separating along the typically modern divide between those who would repudiate the traditional theology and practice associated with that term and those who would defend it. For speaking of God the Father represents for feminist theology the essence of everything against which it protests, because it is speech about what it understands to be the patriarch that is the source of patriarchy itself, the one in whose name all the violence and injustice and inequality it abhors has been justified. Consequently feminism has engaged in a long struggle to ‘move beyond God the Father’ in a search of alternative forms of speech about God, metaphors that seem more suited to our time and understanding.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Sally McFague writes, in her book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*:

The question, then, is this: In what metaphors and models should we conceive of God as Thou who is related to the world in a unified and interdependent way? To understand God as Thou, it seems to me, is basic for our relating to all reality in the mode of mutuality, respect, care, and responsibility...The primary metaphors in the tradition are hierarchical, imperialistic, and dualistic stressing the distance between God and the world and the total reliance of the world on God. Thus, the metaphors of God as king, ruler, lord, master, and governor, and the concepts that accompany them of God as absolute, complete, transcendent, and omnipotent permit no sense of mutuality, shared responsibility, reciprocity, and love (except in the sense of gratitude). Even the primary metaphor for God that would allow for a more unified, interdependent view, that of father, has been so qualified by being associated with the metaphors of king and lord (as, for instance, in the phrase, “almighty Father”) that its potential as an expression of a unified, interdependent view of God and the world is undercut.<sup>19</sup>

And this ‘struggle to move beyond God the Father’ has not remained locked up in the world of scholarship, although it has come to permeate that world. It is seen most graphically Sunday by

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<sup>18</sup> Mary C. Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 9ff.

<sup>19</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 19.

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Sunday in many Methodist churches, especially in my own United Methodist Church which has been influenced by feminist theology so strongly for two generations now. There one constantly observes the pastor and the congregation struggle to find circumlocutions designed to avoid the word ‘father’ with reference to God in liturgy and sermon, intoning triadic formulas like God the ‘Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,’ or ‘Source, Word, and Spirit,’ or ‘Lover, Beloved, and Love;’<sup>20</sup> and McFague’s own proposed triad of “Mother, Lover, and Friend.”<sup>21</sup> In the ‘Service of Christian Marriage I,’ found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, I even came across the unhappy suggestion of “almighty God” as a substitute for the creedal “Father Almighty,” when I recently performed a wedding ceremony.<sup>22</sup> Traditionalists like Roland Mushat Frye, on the other hand, will have none of that. He attacks any deviation from the practice old, contending that,

For the church to adopt inclusive feminist language for the deity would disrupt and destroy the careful, nuanced, and balanced formulations that for centuries have made it possible to proclaim the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whom Christians encounter as divine, within a single and undivided godhead.<sup>23</sup>

But more recent developments in Feminist theology could lead to a more constructive theological engagement with the question of God the Father. Feminists like Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Janet Martin Soskice, among many others, have in different ways and to different degrees eaten of the fruit of the ‘linguistic turn’ in the philosophy of the last century and have become reluctant critics of the modern naivete of the earlier forms of Feminism in which they were nurtured. Fulkerson has subjected the notion of ‘women’s experience’ to a thorough

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula*, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 145ff.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 124.

<sup>23</sup> Roland Mushat Frye, “Language for God and Feminist Language: A Literary and Rhetorical Analysis,” *Interpretation* 43 (Jan 1989) 56.

critique, demonstrating how the concept absolutizes and universalizes the interpreted experience of an elite few, resulting in the suppression of difference in the many who are other, whether female or male. The concept is thus itself oppressive of the other. She seeks, therefore, to ‘Change the Subject’ of Feminist theology: to reposition Feminist inquiry away from a concentration on a supposedly common ‘women’s experience’ that was shared by all women to attend to a multitude of particular female communities of discourse.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting an elementary principle of contemporary linguistics, she is concerned to examine how these particular communities actually ‘perform’ scripture. For the words that make up the language of the Bible—like any words whatsoever—are not to be thought of as abstract, universal, invariant ideas, but rather as signs that gain their meaning in their concrete usage in a particular context of practice. She begins with an examination of the discourses of certain communities of Presbyterian and Pentecostal women and demonstrates, among other things, that the language of the fatherhood of God can and does lead to liberation, not oppression, in some communities of women.<sup>25</sup>

Soskice has another agenda, one that can be seen as the struggle to fully realize feminist theology by moving beyond simply protesting against a constructive restating of the tradition. Some time ago Judith Plaskow noted that “...feminist theology still remains curiously bound to what it rejects. It can claim few works within its growing corpus which do not define themselves in contrast to the traditions they oppose and thus in some sense depend on them.”<sup>26</sup> Soskice is one of those theologians who would move beyond that state of affairs. She surveys many of the

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<sup>24</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg/Fortress, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 296-298, 384.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Plaskow, “The Feminist Transformation of Theology,” in *Beyond Androcentrism. New Essays on Women and Religion*, (ed.) Rita M. Gross, (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977) 23-33, 23.

methodological avenues in dealing with the language of God the Father mentioned in the previous paragraphs—plus a few more—and dismisses them as inadequate. Instead, she faces what many now see as the central constructive issue facing Feminism in regard to the question of the fatherhood of God, and she charts a different course:

...it could be argued that any of these strategies, if employed not to complement but to actually replace the language of “God as father,” would result in the institution of a new religion, that the language of “fatherhood” is too deeply rooted in the Christian texts and the religion itself too intimately tied to those texts. Accordingly, the best course for the feminist who could not accept the language of “divine fatherhood” would be not to tinker with models of God but to abandon Christianity, a step from which post-Christian feminists have not shrunk. And as for feminists who find that they cannot abandon Christianity? Must we accept all the apparatus of patriarchal religion if we accept the language of God’s fatherhood? Is there not another way, a way by which the language of divine fatherhood may be detached from the male idol of patriarchal religion? This is what I would like now to explore.<sup>27</sup>

That is the question I would like to explore in the following as well. It is the question of how we get beyond the either/or represented by those traditionalists who defend without question the traditional talk of God the Father and those protesters who would—also without question—simply repudiate it. It is the question that we find laying in wait for us in the proto-Trinitarian formula in the ‘Great Commission’ itself, the focus of this study group’s work. What are we doing when we baptize “in the name of the Father...?” What does that title mean, and how does that shape our understanding and pursuit of the mission with which we are charged? Specifically, what form of life we are enacting, what form of life are we proclaiming, into what form of life are we inducting those of the nations whom we baptize in that name? When we speak of God the Father are we really pursuing a mission that seeks to subjugate men and women

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<sup>27</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, “Can a Feminist Call God ‘Father’?,” in Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God*, 81-94, 87.

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to a divinely ordained hierarchical order expressed in cosmos and state and church and family? And is the only alternative to that the abandonment of such language?

In this paper I will argue that those are not the only alternatives. I will seek to offer an alternative to the either/or of the modern debate between a patriarchal tradition verses a fatherless deity, and thus a way beyond the contemporary impasse in our talk about the fatherhood of God. In the following I want to explore the notion that when scripture uses the metaphor of God the father, it is not speaking *protologically* but rather *eschatologically*. In the biblical narrative, that is to say, God becomes ‘father’ of a ‘son’ through an act of re-creative redemption, not originating creation, and that ‘fatherhood’ is to be finally and fully realized only at the end with the redemptive new creation of all things. This hope is expressed in the Old Testament appeal of the prophet to the God of the covenant as Israel languished in exile (Isa 63:16): “For you are our father,...our Redeemer of old is your name.” This is also, I contend, the presupposition of the New Testament’s witness to the God who becomes Father to Jesus Christ the Son by the Spirit—finally in the resurrection. In scriptural usage the metaphor of the fatherhood of God is thus thoroughly soteriological—and therefore thoroughly eschatological. This stands in stark contradiction to the traditional claim that divine fatherhood has to do with God as Creator of the world and ‘font of divinity,’ and is thus protological. I suggest, therefore, that it is now incumbent upon Christian theology to begin to think anew about how we speak of God the father in the context of the (proto-)Trinitarian discourse to which the Great Commission calls us--and thus to explore how we might seek to heal the disease in our traditional talk about God.

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### The Emergence of the Metaphor of God the Father in the Old Testament

God is spoken of as ‘father’ in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, its use is comparatively rare: although the Hebrew word אב occurs almost 1200 times, it is predicated of God on only some 15 occasions.<sup>28</sup> In the New Testament, on the other hand, the situation is markedly different: the Greek term for father is πατήρ, and of the 414 instances of the word’s use, it is applied to God 250 times.<sup>29</sup> Despite this striking statistical disparity, it is the Old Testament’s spare use of the term that establishes a semantic field that informs its much fuller usage in the New Testament, where talk of God as father becomes a central theological concern. For while this metaphor represents an emergent but significant strand of Old Testament theology, it had a profound impact on the New Testament’s depiction not only of God, but also on the related notions of the divine sonship of Jesus Christ and the adoptive ‘sonship’ that the New Testament pictures as the redemptive new creation of all who are Christ’s disciples, which is itself the first intimation of the new creation of all things.

Gottlob Schrenk has remarked that: “Invocation of deity under the name of father is one of the basic phenomena of religious history.”<sup>30</sup> Whatever the truth of that in general may be, it is

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<sup>28</sup> In the following I draw on the article by Helmut Ringgren, art. “אב,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), vol. I, 1-19; on Ernst Jenni, art. “אב,” in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1978), vol. 1, 1-17; and further, on Annette Böckler, *Gott as Vater im Alten Testament: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Entwicklung eines Gottesbildes*, (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), 48.

<sup>29</sup> I will also draw on Gottlob Schrenk and Gottfried Quell, art. “πατήρ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) vol. 5, 945-1014; O. Hofius, art. “πατήρ,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, C. Brown (ed.), (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), vol. 1, 614-621; Otto Michel, “πατήρ,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, H. Balz & G. Schneider (eds.), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), vol. 3, 53-57; and further, on Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); and Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Schrenk, “πατήρ,” 951.

certainly an accurate description of the cultural and religious world in which both ancient Israel and early Christianity emerged, and the Old as well as the New Testaments were written. For divinity was spoken of as father extensively in the Ancient Near East, where such speech served as the foundation and justification for the organization of patriarchal societies. Father referred first in an ordinary sense to the head of a household who exercised a very broad authority over its members. The term was then applied in an extended usage to kings and rulers. Moreover, many of the gods were explicitly conceived of as male, and were spoken of as father in a literal, sexually procreative sense, both in the genealogies of the gods, as well as in the genealogies of humanity in general and kings in particular. Thus, in ancient Ugarit the god El is called the “father of mankind,” the moon-god of Babylon is praised as the “father and begetter of gods and men,” the Pharaoh of Egypt is declared to be begotten by the god Amun through sexual relations with a human female, and an ancient Sumerian wisdom text depicts the sage as addressing a prayer to “My God, you who are my father who begot me.” Reflecting on this phenomena, Helmut Ringgren remarks: “Here it is clear that the word ‘father’ is synonymous with creator or originator, and also an expression for power and authority.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet despite that rampant practice in the Ancient Near East, the larger cultural world in which ancient Israel lived, the metaphor of father is rarely employed in the Old Testament with reference to God. The reserve in the word’s use may well be due to the danger represented by the fertility cults of the peoples living around and among the tribes of Israel (see Jer 2:27). But be that as it may, from the beginning of its use of the metaphor, father in Hebrew scripture stood

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<sup>31</sup> Ringgren, “אב,” 5.

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not for hierarchical power and dominance, but for the “forgiving faithfulness of God,” as Annette Böckler emphasizes;<sup>32</sup> and was associated with the LORD’s election of, covenant with, and promise of salvation for Israel, rather than the creation of the cosmos.<sup>33</sup> In general, therefore, the metaphor bespeaks steadfast mercy and resolute provision as belonging to the character of God in relation to the people of promise. Thus the Psalmist can declare of the God of the covenant, “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him” (103:13), and can depict Yahweh in the terms that represent the righteous ideal in Israel: “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (68:5); while Proverbs exhorts: “My child, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (3:11-12). As such, the metaphor of God as father in the Old Testament describes the role played by the covenant God, Yahweh, as Israel’s redeemer, whose redemption creates anew.

This is graphically depicted in the root narrative of the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah. Its portrayal of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt begins with an image of God instructing Moses to proclaim to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son;” and then, in the face of the king’s recalcitrance, to repeat in the LORD’s name, “Let my son go that he may worship me;” and when all else had failed, finally to declare God’s judgement upon him: “But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son” (Ex 4:22-23; cp Hos 11:1,3). Thus the language of ‘son’ and ‘father’ emerges in this story in the context of God’s redemptive activity. Israel as

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<sup>32</sup> Böckler, *Gott als Vater im Alten Testament*, 377. Here she speaks specifically of II Sam. 2:7, that she contends embodies the earliest form of the tradition of speaking of God as father now found in the canonical Old Testament. But as her presentation makes clear, the point is valid for the development of the metaphor in general; see p. 381 et al.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Jenni, “אב,” 15.

God’s ‘son’ is to be delivered so that they might worship the God who is their savior, their ‘father.’ That fatherhood is anticipatory, predicated in the first instance on the basis of God’s promises to the ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—invoked by name repeatedly in this narrative—, and then to be actualized in the course of the redemptive events that follow. Therefore, the story of the exodus of Israel from Egypt, as B. S. Childs points out, is cast in the form of a conflict “over paternal power,” for “in the claim of the first-born, the God of Israel and the king of Egypt have clashed in a head on encounter.”<sup>34</sup> Now Pharaoh as a “paternal power” is of course well known—the biological son of the god Amun, his own person and fatherhood were defined in terms of the divine patriarchal authority of the Ancient Near East. But the nature of the “paternal power” that the LORD exercises in this narrative will only be clarified in the story of the exodus itself.

Paul Ricoeur, in his well known and frequently cited essay, “Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol,” analyses the way the Torah’s narrative shapes its depiction of God as father and the paternal power associated with the metaphor.<sup>35</sup> He notes, first, that God is portrayed as the ‘God of the fathers’ before ever being spoken of as ‘father.’ In other words, God first appears in this narrative within the categories of Israel’s own patriarchal self-definition, as descendants of the ‘fathers’: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Secondly, Ricoeur points out that in this story ‘father,’ when applied to God, functions as a *description*; and he contrasts that with the *naming* of God that occurs when God meets Moses in the desert, before God sends him to Pharaoh. “I Am Who

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<sup>34</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 102.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1974), 468-497; see esp. pp. 481ff.

I Am” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be” (Ex 3:14), is the name that the ‘God of the fathers’ reveals to Moses, a ‘name’ that designates yet refuses to disclose its bearer to its hearer and so surrender its bearer to the other. “It is crucial that Yahweh be designated by a name before being designated as father,” Ricoeur argues, for “it is essential for the faith of Israel that the revelation of Yahweh be raised to that terrible level where the name is a connotation without denotation, not even that of father.”<sup>36</sup> The word ‘father’ will function in this narrative, therefore, not as the covenant God’s name, but as a descriptor of God’s agency. He then concludes this point by noting that “this revelation of the name is central, for the revelation of the name is the dissolution of all anthropomorphisms, of all figures and figurations, including that of father. The name against the idol.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, Ricoeur makes a third point that elaborates the second. Central to the whole narrative of the Torah is the covenant at Sinai; and at the center of the covenant stands the giving of the law. If the first commandment begins with God’s declaration, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” and proceeds thus to command: You shall have no other gods before me,” (Ex 20:2-3), then the second command expands the first: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Ex 20:4). No image, no idol, no figure on or beneath or under the earth—not even that of ‘father,’ so prevalent in the Ancient Near East –will be permitted this people who bear God’s promise. When Israel tells its story, therefore, its use of the metaphor to describe God as ‘father’ is not to be understood as the creating of an idol—because this is explicitly excluded by the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 485.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 486.

narrative itself. For the same reason, the ‘paternal power’ that Yahweh exercises in the course of this unfolding act of redemption is not that of the patriarchal deities and the social hierarchies—idols indeed—of the world of the Ancient Near East that serves as the backdrop for this narrative.

It is only at the end of the narrative that what the metaphor of the fatherhood of God does mean is made explicit. The Torah concludes with the ‘Song of Moses’ in Deuteronomy 32, where Moses is portrayed, just before his death, as speaking to the covenant people of the vicissitudes of the relationship between Israel the son and the LORD their father. Moses begins with a denunciation of Israel’s faithlessness to the LORD; they are, he says, “degenerate children [who] have dealt falsely with him.” And he then poses the rhetorical question that rings through the whole of the song: “Do you thus repay the LORD, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” (vv 5- 6) From there Moses goes on to describe Israel’s creation. He exhorts Israel to “remember the days of old, consider the years long past,” and recounts again in searing imagery God the father’s deliverance of Israel the son, the covenant at Sinai, and the journey through the wilderness. God sustained and shielded Israel in a desert land, “guarded him as the apple of his eye,” hovered over him like the eagle hovers over its young. “The LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him,” he reminds them; rather, it was the God of the covenant who fed Israel with honey from the rock, nursed them with milk from the flock, and provided them with fine wine from the blood of grapes (vv 10-14). But the LORD’s first-born ate his fill, grew fat, and “abandoned God who made him.” Thus, Moses concludes, “you forgot the God who gave you birth.” Therefore, “the

LORD saw it, and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters” (vv 11-19).

Note carefully how God is depicted as Israel’s father here. The Song of Moses speaks of God as one who has become the father of this people through an act of re-creative redemption—and not by means of primordial sexual procreation, as was typical of such language in the Ancient Near East. For the beginning of Israel that is spoken of here is neither that of ancient mythology nor biblical protology. It is not that which occurred according to Genesis 1:1 “in the beginning,” but is rather a beginning that occurred in the middle of the Torah’s story of God and world, a beginning that bespeaks a new beginning of the creation of “the heavens and the earth.” For God became Israel’s father through an act of re-creative redemption, through delivering the people of promise from Egypt and initiating them into a new covenanted form of life on the way to leading them to the land of promise. “In that deliverance God created his people,” A. D. H. Mayes comments.<sup>38</sup> And the place where “God created Israel,” as Annette Böckler emphasizes, was “in the wilderness.”<sup>39</sup> The fatherhood of God speaks of a ‘new beginning,’ therefore, not an ‘absolute beginning’ of God’s creative activity. Thus, this fatherhood is not a function of a paternal hierarchy—of power and authority mediated down a chain of masculine principles of origin. It is, rather, a function of a divine servanthood that enters into a history and redeems a people from the destruction of creation, that judges the kind of patriarchy represented by Pharaoh, and that issues in an authority rooted in creaturely thanksgiving and gratitude for the new and redeeming rather than in duty to the order of what always already was and forever must

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<sup>38</sup> A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, (London: Oliphants, 1979), 384.

<sup>39</sup> Böckler, *Gott als Vater im Alten Testament*, 298.

be. Thus it is that, when the Song of Moses speaks of God as father, it reminds Israel of the God who has ‘created’ them in the wilderness, who ‘gave them birth’ (a striking image indeed to be attached to a masculine metaphor!) by delivering them from servitude and making them God’s own.

If the Torah depicts God as the father of Israel the son by virtue of Yahweh’s past redemption of that people from servitude in Egypt, then the narrative of the Former Prophets and the very different kind of discourse we find in the books of the Latter Prophets employ this metaphor to speak of God’s future salvation. In II Samuel 7:14, for example (cp Ps 2:7; 89:27f; I Chron 17:13; 22:10; 28:6), the image of God as father is found in Nathan’s response to David’s declaration that he intends to ‘build a house’ in which God could dwell, an abode to replace the tent in which Yahweh had sojourned heretofore. The prophet repudiates the king’s plan in the name of the LORD, and says that God will instead make a house for David. After David’s death, the LORD proclaims: “I will raise up your offspring after you, who will come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (vv 12b-13). “I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me” (v 14), the LORD continues, and on this basis to promise that, unlike what became of Saul’s dynasty, “I will not take my steadfast love from him” (v 15a), but will chastise that king when he sins. Thus, the promise concludes, “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever,” (v 16a). Here in this unconditional promise—in contrast to the conditional promise of the covenant at Sinai—it is the davidic king, not Israel *per se*, that will play the role of son to God’s father. But note that once again the metaphor of the fatherhood of God is an expression of

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divine faithfulness and is predicated on an act of salvation that encompasses not just the king but his kingdom too, for ‘making sure’ the one “forever” insures the other for all time as well. And now this faithful, salvific act lies in the future rather than the past.

This promised act of salvation is in fact future in a dual sense. While it may well be that the original intention of this passage had reference to Solomon and the immediate future of David’s line,<sup>40</sup> in the narrative of the Former Prophets it is clear that this promise plays a second and larger role. In the exilic and postexilic periods, Israel looked to this promise and asked would or even could God still be faithful to the people of the covenant despite the faithlessness of both the kings and the people? Would God yet remember the wayward people of Israel? Could God yet be a father to the davidic king? Would God indeed make the king and the kingdom sure forever? It is no accident that this narrative, which tells the story of Israel from their entry into to their exile from the land, has as its center of gravity this promise of God to David.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, it is not happenstance that the interpretive community that formed the final shape of the canonical text ended the narrative by noting that even in exile in Babylon, king Jehoiachin, the descendant of David and last king to rule in Jerusalem, was freed by the Babylonian ruler and given “a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon” (II Kings 25:28). “There can be no doubt,” von Rad writes, “that we can attribute a special theological significance to [these] final sentences” of the narrative.<sup>42</sup> For all who will

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<sup>40</sup> See Böckler, *Gott als Vater im Alten Testament*, 185ff, 211ff, and 251 for the history of interpretation.

<sup>41</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 138f, where he treats the role of II Sam 2:7, beginning with the words: “It is impossible to overstate the importance of this divine commitment...,” and goes on to contrast it with the conditionality of the covenant at Sinai depicted in the Torah.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1953), 90.

hear, they declare: The house of David still stands! The line is unbroken! A divine possibility yet remains!<sup>43</sup> For the metaphor of God the father in this narrative speaks ultimately of the hope that God’s promise of salvation is yet trustworthy; that the LORD’s love is still true despite the fact that the kings—as well as the people—have proven false; that the father, while chastising “the one in whom he delights” (Prov 3:12), remains faithful even though the son has not.

Isaiah 63:16 takes this theme a step farther, to what is perhaps the ultimate development in the Old Testament’s use of this metaphor. For here the fatherhood of God established through the LORD’s liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt is taken as a warrant for an appeal to the God of the covenant to deliver the people of promise yet again, to be for Israel what that father has been and only that father can be again: their redeemer. This text is part of a ‘Psalm of Intercession’ (63:7-64:12) that consists of two parts. The first evokes memories of the exodus as it recounts the LORD’s “steadfast love” that was seen in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and in the leading of those sons and daughters on their journey through the wilderness, where the LORD chastised and restored them when they “rebelled against his Spirit” (63:7-14). The second part then pleads with God to be that for and to do that with Israel yet again, as that people finds itself, due to their sin, in a state where “Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation,” (63:15-64:12). And why should the LORD “look down from heaven and see” the plight of Israel? Why should God be “zealous” and “mighty” for them once again, and so restore them in the midst of their present wilderness? (63:15) Verse 16 supplies the answer: “For you are our father,

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<sup>43</sup> Again, see Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 247f, 157.

though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name.”

Here for the first time in the canon of scripture the LORD is directly addressed as “our father,” with the possessive pronoun referring to the people of Israel as a whole. And it is precisely this address that represents the hope of the prophet.<sup>44</sup> Just as is implied in the book of Exodus, so here, it is not Israel’s relation to the patriarchs—*Abraham does not know us and Israel (i.e., Jacob) does not acknowledge us*—that will provide them with a source of help in their hour of need. For those revered ancestors are dead and gone. They can neither help themselves nor those who have come after. But Israel’s hope was always the ‘God of the fathers’ who made promises to those ancestors, never the fathers themselves. They only received the promises in trust for the generations who would come afterwards. Israel’s hope in their exile in Babylon, Isaiah declares, is the same as it was in their slavery in Egypt: the God who like a father made of Israel something like a son and thus delivered his own new creation from destruction. He appeals, therefore, to the God of the covenant—*you, O LORD, are our father*—and then goes on to define what that metaphor means by summarizing the words that begin the first commandment (cp Ex 20:2): *our Redeemer from of old is your name*. Thus, in this text we see the metaphor of father used once again to describe the LORD’s relation to Israel as redeemer: both in the past, and it is hoped, in the future. Moreover, we now see made explicit what was implicit in the narrative of the Torah: God the father alone, not the patriarchs, is Israel’s redeemer and Israel’s hope. If the patriarchal power and authority of the gods and kings of the Ancient Near

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<sup>44</sup> See Böckler, *Gott als Vater im Alten Testament*, 281f, 286f.

East was the foil for the story of God the father’s deliverance of Israel in the Torah, then here Israel’s own ‘fathers,’ their own patriarchy, is called into question in the light of the fatherhood of God. Note carefully: not just Ricoeur’s “name against the idol” of ancient patriarchy, but ‘God as father’ against the idol of the Israelite’s own fathers of old. Quite rightly, Gottfried Quell has commented that the prophet here “is conscious of the full greatness of the divine fatherhood. The fathers after the flesh, Abraham and Israel, are not redeemers who bring saving help.” Father in this sense is, as he notes, a term which in truth belongs “to God alone.”<sup>45</sup>

In the particularity of the witness of the Torah and the Prophets, therefore, Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel goes from being described as the ‘God of the fathers’ to being described by Israel as ‘our father.’ The metaphor of fatherhood is defined in both narrative and oracle as having to do not with proctology but with eschatology, and thus not with creation that is the beginning but with the redemption that is the end; the one in remembrance, the other in hope. In so doing, the Old Testament redefines the word father in terms of the LORD who had made covenant with Israel, who made that people like a son to the God who like a father delivered and in that sense ‘created’ them or ‘begot them’ or ‘gave them birth.’ Created patriarchy is thereby dismissed in the name of redemptive paternity. The metaphor refers, therefore, to God’s redemption, and in that sense, to God’s new creation of creation—never in the Old Testament to the creation of the ‘heavens and the earth in the beginning.’ The almost total absence of the language of God as father in Israel’s creation traditions is thus crucial for understanding how this

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<sup>45</sup> Quell, “πατήρ,” 973.

metaphor functions in this literature.<sup>46</sup> In the words of the ancient prophet (Isa 63:16): “For you are our father,...our Redeemer of old is your name.” The people of Israel often forgot this account of divine fatherhood, as the witness of their own scripture declares, just as they so often forgot who was their true God and redeemer; and their literary traditions still bear the trace—indeed, more than a trace—of the ancient patriarchies of family and society and nature.<sup>47</sup> But be that as it may, the Old Testament is unambiguous in its use of the metaphor of father in relation to God, and it establishes the horizon of meaning of the term as it was taken over into the New Testament. This trope functions as a description of the faithful God of the covenant who through an act of redemption begets a people, i.e., becomes like a father to a son. Marianne Meye Thompson summarizes this as follows:

In its presentation of God as Father, then, the Old Testament regularly interprets the act of ‘begetting’ in terms of redemption or calling out a people, rather than as an act of creation. To be sure, a people is ‘created’ or constituted by God’s act of calling or begetting, but God’s Fatherhood is not construed in terms of bestowing physical life....[I]t is interpreted by locating the act of ‘begetting’ in redemption rather than creation, by limiting the ‘begetting’ to a particular people, Israel. Thus a construal of God as Father already carries with it from the Old Testament into the New Testament the *particularity* of God’s Fatherhood. The view that the Bible teaches the universal Fatherhood of God would find no foothold here.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that there is one OT passage in which an indirect reference to a ‘father’ (and a ‘mother’) is made in the context of speaking of God’s relation to all the world, Isa. 45:9-13. Rex Mason, *Old Testament Pictures of God*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 57f, writes that this is “the nearest approach” in the OT to using the term ‘father’ “to speak of God’s relationship to all peoples as universal creator,” and goes on to examine the other linguistic peculiarities of the passage. He concludes by emphasizing the point made by Meye Thompson below.

<sup>47</sup> In this brief paper, I can of course touch on only a very narrow part of this topic. On the issue of God and gender in the Old Testament in general, see the excellent account by Walter Brueggemann, “Israel’s Social Criticism and Yahweh’s Sexuality,” in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel’s Communal Life*, Patrick D. Miller (ed.), (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 149-173, esp. 168ff.

<sup>48</sup> Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, 43.

**God the Father in Matthew**

The centuries leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ, the emergence of Christianity and the documents that would become the New Testament were a time of profound political and social change for the Jewish people. With the spread of Alexander’s empire throughout the eastern Mediterranean and beyond in the late fourth century B.C., the Jews came under the cultural influence of Hellenism and its tradition of speaking of divinity as father. From Homer on the Greeks had lauded Zeus as the “father of humanity and the deities.” Plato, in *Timaeus* 28c, 41a et al., famously appropriated this patriarchal image in his cosmology, referring to the divine as the “maker and father” or “framer and father” of the universe, and as such the ‘universal father’ of all. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus taught that the divine’s paternal authority pervades the entire universe, for he is the “creator, father, and sustainer” of all human beings (*Diss.*, 1,9,7). This universalistic terminology was then widely employed in both the many mystery cults of the Roman period as well as in Gnosticism. Moreover, while Palestinian Judaism remained reserved in their usage of the metaphor, continuing to speak of God as father in relation to the particularity of the covenant and Israel—if at times in individualistic terms, the Hellenistic practice was absorbed by important elements of the Greek-speaking Diaspora Judaism. The Septuagint bears a trace of this in its translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, as well as in its apocryphal and deuterocanonical books.<sup>49</sup> And in the first century A.D., both Philo of Alexandria and Josephus regularly interpreted the covenant God of Hebrew scripture in terms of the patriarchal divinity of the Greek philosophers: the one calling God—

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<sup>49</sup> For these developments, see—in addition to the bibliography cited above in footnotes 28 and 29—Angelika Strotmann, *Mein Vater Bist Du (Sir 51,10): Zur Bedeutung der Vaterschaft Gottes in kanonischen und nichtkanonischen frühjüdischen Schriften*, (Frankfurt a. M: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1991).

commenting repeatedly on Genesis—the “father and creator of all,” (*Op.* 89; *Decal.* 64; *Spec. Leg.* i, 96; ii, 6 *Ebr.* 81), and the other—elaborating on David’s words in II Samuel 7—the “father and source of the universe,” (*Ant.* vii, 380).

Christianity and its use of the metaphor of the fatherhood of God emerged in the same era as Philo and Josephus lived and wrote. But arising in Galilee and Judea among those Jews whose native tongue was Aramaic and whose worship was still guided by the Hebrew text, earliest Christianity was largely immune to the Hellenistic understanding of divine fatherhood.<sup>50</sup> Their talk of God as father was informed, rather, by the practices of Hebrew scripture. As we noted earlier, although it was but rarely used in the Old Testament, the metaphor of divine fatherhood becomes a central element in the New Testament’s depiction of God. The reason for this marked change in relative importance is at the same time the explanation for most of the other alterations that the use of this trope underwent in the transition from the Old to the New Testament—and that is the fact that in the New Testament the focus of this metaphor becomes Jesus of Nazareth. In the Old Testament God is depicted in a comparatively straightforward manner as the metaphorical ‘father’ of Israel, God’s ‘firstborn son.’ But in the New Testament the metaphor of father is used of God in a more complicated fashion. Here the trope is focused first and foremost on Jesus, depicted in this literature as God’s “firstborn” (Rom 8:29; Heb 1:6)

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<sup>50</sup> But NB Hofius, “πατήρ,” 621, who points to three cases that may be exceptions: “In Eph. 3:14f. God in his capacity as creator of the world is called ‘the Father...(of) every family (patria) in heaven and earth.’ In Heb. 12:9 I in his capacity as the creator of men’s souls he is called ‘Father of spirits.’ In Jas. 1:17 as creator of the stars, he is called ‘Father of lights’ (cf. *Apc. Mos.* 36:3). It is possible that in these passages we see a trace of the Gk. Concept of the universal fatherhood of God.” But cp. Michel, “πατήρ,” 55, who disagrees; he points out that this is typical Jewish liturgical language—using the language of the covenant God who became Israel’s father through an act of redemption to emphasize that this same God is the Creator—and contends that these statements presuppose “a Palestinian not a Greek cosmos.” Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, 119, seems to follow Michel.

or “only Son” (John 1:18). The metaphor is then employed, secondly, in relation to Jesus’ disciples, who—male and female—are themselves referred to as the ‘children’ or the ‘sons and daughters’ or simply the ‘son’s of God,’ i.e., those who have themselves come to share in the relationship between the ‘Son’ and the ‘Father.’ This latter usage in regard to the disciples, it must be emphasized, is always dependent on the former. Finally, it is this same focus of the metaphor on Jesus that leads to the ultimate complication in its usage. For as the New Testament moves along that trajectory toward depicting Jesus as himself being somehow divine, the metaphor of God as father itself begins to become a description of an internal relation of self-differentiation in the life of God in the world. But even at its most complicated, it remains the case that whenever this literature speaks of God as father, it is trading on the Old Testament stories of God becoming father to Israel the son by an act of redemptive new creation. This deity, therefore, is not Plato’s Demiurge, the “maker and father” of the universe. Rather, the metaphor of God the father in the New Testament is informed by the Old Testament’s description of the covenant God as the deliverer or ‘begetter’ or creator of Israel in the wilderness, the one to whom the prophet of exiled Israel appealed for redemption and new creation: “For you are our father,...our Redeemer from of old is your name.”

Now having made the point that early Christianity and its literature followed the linguistic practices of the Hebrew scripture in regard to divine fatherhood, rather than those of Hellenism, we must immediately add a note of clarification. The New Testament ultimately retains that Old Testament understanding of the metaphor neither as an expression of cultural inertia nor conservatism, but because early Christianity construed itself and its world in terms of

the narrative of Hebrew scripture. Thus it told the story of Jesus in the categories of the Old Testament’s stories of the exodus of Israel and their prophetic hope—while at the same time reinterpreting those ancient stories in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That God raised Jesus from the dead and has thus begun the eschatological new creation of all things is the universal conviction of the early Christian communities; indeed, it was precisely what divided the church from the synagogue. As N. T. Wright observes:

What the early church is saying, when telling the story of Jesus’ resurrection and announcing it to the world as the summons to obedient faith, is that the history of, and promises to, Israel had come true in Jesus, that in his death he has taken the exile as far as it could go, and that in his resurrection he had inaugurated the real return from that real exile.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the early Christians told the story of the resurrected one in terms that were already familiar to them: they told “Israel’s story in the form of Jesus’ story.”<sup>52</sup> The language and themes that informed that story were most probably present to some degree in the practice and preaching of the ‘historical Jesus’ himself, even though we will without doubt never be able to demonstrate to everyone’s satisfaction to what degree that was the case. But what is indubitable is that earliest Christianity told the story of Jesus just as Israel had told its own story of exodus and exiled hope: as the story of God becoming ‘father’ to a ‘son’ through an act of redemption.

The defining act of redemption in the witness of the New Testament, therefore, is now neither exodus from bondage nor return from exile, but the eschatological resurrection of Jesus Christ, the final exodus and the ultimate return. In the New Testament God raises Jesus from the dead, thus becoming—reiterating the Old Testament pattern—‘father’ to that ‘son’; and

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<sup>51</sup> N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1: The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 400.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

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furthermore, through that ‘son,’ ‘father’ to a host of others. While in the story of the Torah Israel was depicted as God’s “firstborn son,” now in the New Testament Jesus the Son is called the “firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5). It is, therefore, as the one who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and through Christ promises to raise the faithful as well, that God becomes ‘father’ in the witness of the New Testament. Thus Paul, for instance, opens his letter to the Galatians with an invocation of “God the Father, who raised [Jesus] from the dead” (1:1). Indeed, all the New Testament is written from this perspective of the resurrection of Jesus and of the God who thereby becomes father to that Son and those who are his disciples.

The Gospel according to Matthew lends itself to be read from precisely that perspective, and it is that perspective that shapes its talk about God as father. Ulrich Luz notes that, “the most important designation of God in the Gospel of Matthew is “Father.”<sup>53</sup> In their early work on this Gospel, feminist commentators like Elaine Mary Wainwright and Amy-Jill Levine had little to say on that topic.<sup>54</sup> Their concern was to argue that Matthew was a text whose symbolic view of reality was androcentric and patriarchal. Their task as they saw it, therefore, was to unmask that strategy and attend to the stories of the women in the narrative with the seriousness that they deserved, but had not received. In so doing, they sought to lay the foundation for the community’s remembrance of a forgotten story that has to do with both women and men. But more recently, in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne

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<sup>53</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 371. For a thorough account of how the metaphor of father is used in each of the four separate canonical Gospels, see Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, chps. 4 and 6.

<sup>54</sup> Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991); and her commentary in *Searching the Scriptures: a Feminist Commentary*, 2 vols., (ed.) E. Schüssler Fiorenza, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 2: 635-677; see Levine’s “Matthew,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, (ed.) C. Newsom and S. H. Ringe, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

Blickenstaff, an article has appeared that, like Soskice, points in a constructive direction. In “The Father in the Gospel of Matthew,” Julian Sheffield states the results of his research in the opening paragraph:

The term *πατήρ*, father, is used generally in the New Testament to refer to God, to human fathers and ancestors, and to revered elders (spiritual fathers). Matthew’s use of *πατήρ*, however, is carefully shaped both to emphasize the fatherhood of God and to displace the earthly father in favor of the father in heaven. This displacement of the human father in favor of God-as-father serves in turn to relativize patriarchy with respect to the relations of disciples one to another as well as to justify the replacement of the family of origin with a new kinship group.<sup>55</sup>

In the following I want examine the role that the language of God as father plays in Matthew’s narrative; and as I do, I will seek to unpack some of the elements of Sheffield’s conclusion.

The depiction of God as ‘father’ in Matthew is, as Sheffield noted, closely connected to the many references found in the Gospel to human fathers and to Jesus as ‘son,’ but perhaps in ways that the reader would not normally expect. This is illustrated in the very first verse, which is at one and the same time the general title of the work and the introduction to the first pericope, the genealogy of Jesus, 1:2-17. The first words of 1:1 are *Βίβλος γενέσεως*, which immediately evoke the title of the book of Genesis (*ΓΕΝΕΣΙΣ*) and its account of creation “in the beginning,” (Gen 1:1) and relate this present account of “Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham” to that earlier account as the announcement of its eschatological end. Thus the commentary on

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<sup>55</sup> Julian Sheffield, “The Father in the Gospel of Matthew,” *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, (eds.) Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 52-69, 52.

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Matthew by Davies and Allison translates 1:1 as “Book of the New Genesis wrought by Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”<sup>56</sup>

But what is new here is not simply “wrought” by Jesus Christ, it is also Jesus Christ himself and the manner in which he is himself ‘wrought,’ as the subsequent genealogy begins to make clear. While Jesus is defined as the ‘son of David’ and ‘son of Abraham’ in 1:1, both references alluding to the promises given by God to the ancestors but now realized in this ‘son,’ the emphasis in 1:2-16a shifts to the traditional concern of genealogies in the ancient world, the question of who has ‘fathered’ whom—and yet it does so with a difference. The first difference is seen in the fact that worked into the very fabric of that traditional story of paternity, other threads are woven, threads that change the very color and texture of the whole. Four women are referred to, all of whose stories are full of the unexpected and unforeseen (among other things, they are evidently all non-Jewish, i.e., from the ‘nations’), and are thus ‘irregular’ and ‘disturbing’ of traditional expectations in one form or another—as are those of the men with whom they are associated.<sup>57</sup> A genealogy in the ancient world was a way to quickly provide an introduction to an individual, and it was always intended to evoke the stories connected with the names enumerated. But with these additions, this genealogy begins to become something more than simply the legal claim of an unbroken lineage and social legitimacy: it begins to become a theological statement. Thus this genealogy becomes so much more than merely an account of paternity, it becomes a story of faith and faithfulness, both human and divine, a story of the sin

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<sup>56</sup> Davies/Allison, *Matthew*, ICC, I:153.

<sup>57</sup> As my concern here is the language of God as ‘father,’ I cannot pursue these stories at this time. See the commentaries by Elaine Wainwright and Amy-Jill Levine on Matthew that deal with these women and their stories at great length.

and suffering of women and men as well as their common and uncommon righteousness, a story of God’s blessing of God’s creation working not only through the repeated and expected public routine, but also through the obscure and the irregular and the disturbing to preserve a people and a lineage and a promise. It is a story in which even those who are not in the beginning a part of that people of promise become so in the end in surprising and unforeseen ways. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus the Christ will bring all of that to its ultimate realization; and his story will be the expression of all that—and more.

The second difference between Matthew’s genealogy and traditional genealogies in the ancient world, strictly concerned as they were with the question of who had ‘fathered’ whom and thus who is entitled to what, is found in 1:16b. Up to this point, aside from the references to the women, this genealogy was structured and unfolded in an utterly traditional manner, tracing the line of fathers through the generations one by one. But now we come upon a sudden and dramatic break in the pattern. Joseph—who is said to have been fathered by Jacob in 1:16a—is now identified not as the one who fathers or “begets” the next in the line of progeny, but rather as the *husband* of “Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.” The patriarchal prototype of the generations is interrupted, and with it something more has been interrupted as well. “The break in Matthew’s pattern thus reflects a break in the course of history.” Davies and Allison comment, “God is about to do something new.”<sup>58</sup> While the language of sonship is repeatedly applied to the relationship of Jesus to Abraham and David in this genealogy, both the terms ‘father’ and ‘son’ are studiously avoided in the Joseph/Jesus relationship here and in all the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 184.

stories that follow. From this point on in the infancy narratives reference will be made to the “child and his mother” (2:13, 20, 21). Joseph is the husband who is no father; Mary the mother who—as the reader will soon learn—is not yet truly a wife. They become, therefore, the last in a long series of irregular and disturbing moments in the stories evoked by this genealogy.

Thus Matthew introduces the theme of the interruption, the breaking, the—to use Sheffield’s term—‘displacing’ of the patriarchal pattern of the ages in the very first pericope in the narrative. This will not be a story about the continuation of what has gone before; it is not about the perpetuation of the authority and legitimacy of the line of the fathers—not even of the fathers of Israel, the people of promise; it will not confirm the sufficiency of that which was first. It is rather about something new, about something last, indeed, about the first being taken up and transformed in the final. What constitutes that new and final begins to be identified in this first pericope as well, and it is then elaborated upon in the stories of the infancy narrative that come after. The ‘divine passive,’ “of whom Jesus was born,” in 1:16b alludes to the work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of this ‘son,’ as the following pericope makes explicit (1:18, 20). This child is God’s child. This child, we are told, “will save his people from their sins,” (1:21). For this child is nothing less than “‘Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God with us,’” (1:23). This child will now be the realization of all the stories about God and the children of Israel. God’s attending to this child; God’s protection, provision, guidance, and care of this child are then characterized in a citation taken from Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” (2:15). For Hosea that ‘son’ was Israel, begotten in the wilderness as that people was delivered by God from servitude of old. But for Matthew this son is now Jesus Christ; God’s own Son, of whom

God will in the course of this story become Father. And in that event, the new exodus, the final exodus has begun.

The issue that Matthew has introduced in the infancy stories is then carried through in the main body of the Gospel. Fundamental to this narrative is the controversy that turns around the question of who is the true ‘son,’ those who can trace the line of their fathers back to Abraham, or Jesus, the son born to the woman whose husband was no father? Thus the corollary to that question about the ‘son’ is the question about ‘fathers,’ and thus this controversy is ultimately the question of the sufficiency of Israel’s patriarchs as ‘father’ verses that of God as father. Matthew sets up this dispute in the stories that begin the ministry of Jesus: the proclamation of John the Baptist (3:1-12), the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17), Jesus’ testing in the wilderness (4:1-11) and then the start of Jesus’ public preaching and works of wonder (4:12-25).

As in all the Gospels, in Matthew the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is tied up with the story of John. The Baptist appears in the wilderness, where Israel faltered; in appearance and message he is the epitome of the prophets of old, and his words echo theirs (cf Isa 55:6-9). He proclaims that God’s kingdom draws near and calls for the people to repent and be baptized. Repentance was a central concern of first century Judaism, but more than a few contemporary Jews dismissed such a call. Davies and Allison summarize their position as, “To be born a Jew of a Jewish mother was to be born a member of the covenant community, and for many that was enough: Abrahamic descent was not only a necessary condition for salvation but a sufficient condition.”<sup>59</sup> Thus when the Pharisees and Sadducees approach John—those who represent that

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<sup>59</sup> Davies and Allison, *ibid.*, 307.

dismissal for Matthew, he launches into a heated diatribe against them, characterizing them as the “offspring,” or the “begotten” (γέννημα) of “vipers,” demanding that they produce “fruit worthy of repentance,” and placing in their mouths the claim that will serve as the foil in Matthew’s depiction of Jesus and his sonship: “We have Abraham as our πατέρα” (3:9). But not only does Matthew have John articulate the claim against which Jesus’ sonship will be played off, this Gospel also has the Baptist state the theme that the story of Jesus, the Son of God, will exemplify: “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (3:9).

In the stories that immediately follow, Matthew makes the identity of Jesus in this narrative emphatically clear. God declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17), as Jesus emerges from the waters of the baptism to which he had submitted “to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). When Jesus is tested in the wilderness, he proves himself the faithful Son whose life is that “fruit worthy of repentance” that was absent from the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew then also makes clear the relation between this Jesus the Son of God and those who look to the patriarchs. As Jesus begins his own ministry after the arrest of John the Baptist, he calls the first of those who will become his disciples, the fishermen Peter and Andrew, and then James and John. “Immediately they left the boat *and their father,*” Matthew adds, “and followed him,” (4:22). In following after Jesus, disciples will ‘leave their father’ and the claims that appeal to the ‘fathers’ represent in all the rest of Matthew’s Gospel.

Why? Because no father, no appeal to what has gone before, no patriarchy, no authority hallowed by time and custom and the claim of a divinely ordained cosmic or social or familial order can accomplish what Jesus has come to do. He “will save his people from their sins”

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(1:21), and he will do so not by standing at the top of the mount and thundering down to the creatures below but as one who emerges from and in the midst of the people God has called and made a nation for the sake of the blessing of “all the nations on the face of the earth” (Gen 12:1-3). Yet in emerging from and in the midst of that people who tell their stories of God’s promises to the fathers, and see themselves as thereby set apart and entitled and empowered by their descent from those fathers, Jesus breaks, ‘displaces,’ the patriarchal pattern of the ages. Jesus, the one who will save his people, is the son of the woman whose husband was no father. His birth interrupts the unbroken line of the fathers. His birth brings something new in the midst of the old, something the old cannot produce or beget of its own. Not even ‘righteous Joseph’ (1:19), who Matthew depicts as consistently acting in mercy and obedience before he disappears from the narrative, is or can be ‘father’ to this child, let alone ‘righteous Abraham’ (Gen 15:6) whose own story is so much more ambiguous. In terms of what is necessary, both are every bit as barren as Sarai was said to be at the very beginning of the story of the people of promise (Gen 11:26ff).

This was the hard lesson that the Hebrew scriptures offer as ‘instruction’ in the Torah. God’s deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, God’s giving of the Law at Sinai, did not lead to the formation of a free and obedient people who could and would faithfully journey to and enter into and dwell within the land of promise. Rather, exodus and Sinai led Israel to the confession of its sin, its faithlessness, its idolatry—at the bottom of the mount as Moses received the law at its top, in the wilderness as it waywardly wandered toward God’s good end, in the land itself where they disobeyed God, murdered one another, fought with one

another and with their neighbors until finally they were defeated and carried away into exile. In the Torah, Israel’s representatives do the virtually unthinkable: they depict themselves not as the heroes of their own story but as their own nemesis who inexplicably brings about their own destruction, despite God’s warning and command. That’s why when Torah prefaces the story of Israel with the story of all creation (Gen 1-11), it tells the story of the ‘heavens and the earth’ as one of inexplicable faithlessness and exile and chaos. In attempting to control and bring a livable order to that chaos, humanity is depicted as placing its trust in a violence that will itself become humanity’s enslaver and enslavement, becoming the currency of social worlds that for whatever beauty they manage to construe, deny God’s humanity in the world and debase God’s creation of the world. That’s why Torah ends with Israel, the representative people of promise for all creation, outside the land, on the east side of the river Jordan, looking across, looking in, looking on. Moses cannot lead them through these waters. Their own strength of heart and mind and spirit are not sufficient. God has acted as their father and delivered them from slavery, begetting them in the wilderness and making them the heirs of a promise of a place in God’s good creation for themselves and a blessing for all the nations. But that act of calling was not enough, because Israel was not enough, just as creation was itself not enough. While the creation is “good, indeed, very good,” and Israel could be faithful for a generation, neither that generation nor that creation can sustain itself. Another must do what it cannot.

This is why the prophets speak not just of judgment upon Israel for faithlessness past and present and future, but also of the coming day of salvation when God will bring all God’s promises to their proper realization. And when the prophets speak of that day, they do so in the

language of Israel’s traditions about exodus and wandering and the creation of all things. Thus that day will be nothing less than a ‘new exodus’ in which God will part the waters again and all the scattered people of Israel will be brought back to the land of promise—and the nations will be drawn to witness and worship the faithful God who has not forgotten the people of promise. It will be a day on which God will impart a new heart and will to that people, so that those who were faithless will become a faithful people. It will be a day in which God’s breath will be breathed anew into a people represented by a vision of a valley of dry bones, and so new life will be given to the dead. It will be a day in which the very face of the earth will be transformed and nature will give way to a second nature of new creation of the old.

Thus, this is why Matthew’s Jesus speaks of God the Father, and contradicts all other talk about fathers and the patriarchal claims they represent. When Jesus calls women and men as disciples, they are to ‘leave their boats and their fathers.’ When any of them ask, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father,” Jesus’ answer is, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead,” (8:21f). Jesus certainly taught those who would hear to “honor your father and your mother,” (15:4), he did not endorse misandry any more than misogyny. Nevertheless, he declared that he had come “to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law,” and that whoever “loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,” (10:35, 37). In the midst of a world that asserts that reality is already given, that an unchanging order has been ordained by God that privileges one at the expense of another, that renders some inviolate and others violable, that affirms the humanity of these individuals while denying the humanity of those, Jesus calls men and women to himself

and promises that, “Every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life,” (19:29). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has come to free women and men from the slavery to this ‘world of the fathers’ that is represented by the fate of the scribes and the Pharisees who would boast of their lineage reaching back to father Abraham, yet deny any relationship to the horrors perpetuated by the intervening generations:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers...” (23:29ff).

For in that ‘world of the fathers’ the children are themselves trapped in the ambiguity of the ‘given’ ecological, social, ecclesiastical, and familial structures that are both mediators of their every notion and experience of the good and yet are rife with the violence and injustice that they cannot escape and too often only continue to beget in the generations that come after. Sheffield points out that with the crowd that urges Pilate to sentence Jesus to death, “the Pharisees affiliate their own children with the very sin for which they have disowned their fathers: ‘His blood be upon us and upon our children,’” (27:25).<sup>60</sup>

Over and against that world of the fathers, Jesus points to God whose act of redemption constitutes an act of new creation whereby God becomes Father anew. That fatherhood begins with Jesus himself, the new creation of humanity as God’s faithful son and the heir of creation. Thus, while Matthew depicts Jesus as sharing with his disciples something of the relationship he

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 59.

enjoys with God the Father, the priority and uniqueness of Jesus’ own sonship is maintained, and even emphasized.<sup>61</sup> Jesus prays to God as “my Father” (26:39,42) and responds to Peter’s confession with “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven,” (16:17). And in response to their request, he instructs his disciples in prayer, telling them to collectively address their prayer to ‘our father,’ but he then goes on to teach them that their prayers will be answered by “my Father in heaven,” (18:19). The Gospel never depicts Jesus as including others with himself in the formulation ‘our Father’; for Jesus is seen as standing in a unique relationship to God the father. In Matthew that is explicitly summed up in Jesus’ instruction to his disciples: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him,” (11:27, par).

But while the unique relationship of Jesus the Son to God his father is maintained in this Gospel and in the New Testament as a whole, the point to be made is that the redemption that Jesus Christ extends to his disciples is bound up with Jesus’ own identity as Son and the eschatological fatherhood of God. When Matthew portrays Jesus teaching his disciples, for instance, language of fatherhood plays a prominent role. Indeed, the mark of the disciples of Jesus Christ, those who belong to the new community of God’s redemption, is that they have God as, in Jesus’ words, “your father.” For the end of the age has dawned, Jesus the son of God has appeared, and those who hail and follow after that son are given to share in something of the relationship that the Son enjoys with the Father. This is why in Matthew Jesus’ disciples are

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<sup>61</sup> See Meye Thompson, 65f.

regularly designated as “sons of God” (5:9 et al.). For they are related to God in and through the unique sonship of Jesus; indeed, their redeemed relation to God is now an extension of Jesus’ own. The resultant narrowing of the terminology in the New Testament concerning those whom God has redeemed, therefore, is a function of soteriology, not patriarchy. Here at the beginning of the end God has done a new thing: God has become ‘father’ to the ‘son.’ The fatherhood of God here is an eschatological, not a protological conception. It speaks not of divinely ordained *patriarchy* as the creation of cosmic order but rather of redemption as divinely wrought *paternity* in which God adopts and makes the sinful and estranged human creature to be God’s own son, God’s own daughter, God’s children in the Son Jesus Christ. God enters thereby into a new kind of relationship with what God has made. Through an act of new creation the creature of the sixth day of God’s ‘creation of the heavens and the earth’ is no longer simply a thing made, that creature has been taken into a familial relationship with the Creator. The fatherhood of God speaks thus of the new creation of our humanity in relation to one another and in relation to God, and not simply of the creation of objects or things and the connections between them. And the language of ‘sonship’ is now the language speaking of those who stand in that relationship with God in and through and with Jesus Christ the Son.

As those who are being taken into God’s eschatological redemption in the Son, the disciples are called to be defined by that new relationship realized by that Son. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the interruption, the ‘displacement’ of protological patriarchy and its replacement through the creation of a new relation between God and God’s creation. God has now become Father. Thus when Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are coming to

speak to him as he was in the midst of his ministry, he replied: “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother,’” (12:48-50). Jesus’ eschatological family is not his biological mother or brothers, it is now established in relation to God as Father and encompasses “whosoever does the will of my Father in heaven.” This is a family that is neither patriarchal nor hierarchical. It is a community of sisters and brothers in which no one is ‘father’ but God. And these daughters and sons of God on earth are to reflect the life of Jesus the Son and the one he called ‘my Father in heaven.’ Thus, in contrast to the example of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees—and of the Gentiles as well—Jesus commands his disciples, in accordance with his own example (26:28, “...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”), to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...,” and goes on to sharpen the command even further: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” (5:43-48). This eschatological people of God is to remember that God has become their Father through an act of re-creative redemption in the wilderness—and thus they are to be faithful in word and deed.

Fundamental to Matthew’s narrative, therefore, is the issue of the sonship of Jesus Christ, and in him the sonship of the disciples, and the fatherhood of God. Matthew consistently connects the ‘sonship’ of the disciples to Jesus Christ the Son, and just as consistently contrasts the fatherhood of God with human fathers. Yet Jesus’ teaching of his disciples concerning the contrast between “your father” or “your heavenly father” and ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ fathers

goes even further than contrast. For it takes up the theme that we noted in the Old Testament narratives’ use of the metaphor: the language of God the father becomes a repudiation of every received patriarchy. In Matthew Jesus commands his disciples to “call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven,” (23:9). This community of new creation ‘in the wilderness’ is to look to no patriarchal progenitor as ‘father,’ nor are they to boast of themselves as exercising patriarchal authority over one another. For in this dawning of eschatological redemption, the fatherhood of God is an expression of something very different indeed. Once again—just as in the exodus and in the cry of the prophet in exile—the character of God the redeemer is described as that of a ‘father’ who creates and begets anew; and that redemptive fatherhood sets any other understanding of fatherhood at naught.<sup>62</sup>

That brings us finally, to the very end of Matthew’s Gospel which also speaks of the eschatological fatherhood of God, but now in an explicitly new way.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt 28:16-20)

From the very beginning of this Gospel, Jesus has been depicted as something other than just another link in the generations of humanity. He is the interruption of the patriarchal order, to be sure, but he is that because he is more, something ‘greater,’ as well. That is signaled right away in this narrative when the reader is told that the conception of the child is in fulfillment of the

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<sup>62</sup> See Alan J. Torrance, “‘Call No Man Father!’: The Trinity, Patriarchy, and God Talk,” in Campbell, *Gospel and Gender*, 179-197.

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prophet’s word that a virgin would bear a son and he would be named Emmanuel “which means God with us,” (1:23). In the very next periscope the Magi from the east come seeking the newborn child, and when they found him, “they fell down and worshipped him,” (2:11). John the Baptist, of whom it is said that “among those born of women no one has arisen greater” (11:11), declares concerning Jesus that “I am not worthy to carry his sandals,” (3:11). He is the one about whom the disciples are driven to ask (8:27): “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?” He is the one greater than the temple (12:6), greater than Jonah (12:41), greater than wise Solomon (12:42). He is the “son of David” whom David “by the Spirit...calls Lord,” (22:43). He is the greatest, because he is the servant; he is exalted, because he has humbled himself (23:11f). This is a theme that runs all the way through the Gospel; a theme that comes to its ultimate expression in this account of the resurrected Jesus receiving the worship of his disciples and charging them with the ‘Great Commission.’ There his title, Son, is part of the very naming of God itself.

That commission does two things at once. On the one hand it explicates how the reader is to understand the whole narrative that has gone before. This is the story of God becoming Father to the Son in the Spirit, and of humanity becoming by the Spirit the ‘son’ in the Son of the Father. It is the story of God taking up the estranged creature of the sixth day of creation into the very life of God in the world. No longer are we far off, no longer are we estranged, no longer are we ‘other’ than God and God’s creatures and God’s creation: we are become ‘another’ with one another in the event of God’s life in the act of God’s creating of ‘the heavens and the earth.’ That is what this story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is all

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about. “God with us” indeed! Through that event, Jesus Christ has brought to realization what our humanity is all about as well. He who is ‘more’ and ‘greater’ has received not only ‘all authority in heaven,’ but ‘all authority on earth’ too. He has become the heir of all creation, the Son of the Father, what God intended for the creature from the beginning, that the created might be the ‘image and likeness’ of God in the world who would bear and express the authority of a servant that is the authority of God.

On the other hand, this final pericope in Matthew’s Gospel is the final contrast between the patriarchal claims of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father. The Pharisees and Sadducees understood their claim to be sons of the fathers as that which set them apart, that which set them above the rest of humanity. It was a claim of exclusivity and privilege. But from the beginning the sonship of Jesus and the fatherhood of God of which he spoke was something very different. God’s becoming Father to the Son was from the beginning an inclusive act, an act whereby others are brought into relation to the Father and to the Son as sons and daughters, as sisters and brothers of one another. For Jesus to be Son was for him to become servant of all, to extend sonship to others, to share the relationship in and with God as Father in the Spirit with any and everyone who would receive. That is the sonship that Jesus communicates to his disciples; that is the fatherhood of which he spoke—and speaks still. The community of daughters and sons in the Son is an expression of the life of the Son in the world. And that means it is a community that shares the Good News that it has itself received, the announcement of the beginning of God’s new creation of all things, of

God’s becoming Father to the Son in the Spirit. Thus the ‘Great Commission’ that comes at the end of this Gospel is in fact the expression of its message from the very beginning.

**Appropriating the Tendency of Wesley’s Speech about God the Father Today**

Now, at last, we can return to the question I posed at the beginning of this paper: what we are doing when we baptize “in the name of the Father...?” What does that title mean and how does it shape our understanding and pursuit of the mission with which we are charged? Specifically, what form of life are we enacting, what form of life are we proclaiming, indeed, into what form of life are we inducting those of the nations whom we baptize in that name?

In answering that question, I want to point you to John Wesley’s commentary on Galatians 1:1, where he noted that “it was the peculiar business of an apostle to bear witness”—in the words of the Pauline phrase to which he was referring—to “God the Father, who raised [Jesus Christ] from the dead.” While the words on which Wesley is commenting are Paul’s the sentiment is true of Matthew as well: it is in raising Jesus Christ from the dead that God ultimately becomes Father to the Son in the Spirit. There is a clear tendency in Wesley, as Randy Maddox and others have demonstrated, to move beyond the traditional way of speaking of God as Father, i.e., as protological Creator of the heavens and the earth ‘in the beginning,’ toward references that associate the Father with eschatological redemption.<sup>63</sup> I am not claiming that Wesley is unique in this, nor that he is completely unambiguous in his practice; merely that it is an important tendency in his thought, and one that we would do well to consider today.

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<sup>63</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 63f.

What makes this significant is, as was demonstrated above, that it corresponds to a growing realization among Biblical scholars that talk about God as father in the narratives of scripture does not refer to God as Creator and orderer of the cosmos—thus the head of a cosmic hierarchy that is then reflected in a hierarchical society, church, and family—, but is rather a metaphor that speaks of God the redeemer, and that redemptive fatherhood in both the witness of the Old Testament and in the New Testament is depicted as explicitly contradicting the idolatrous patriarchal claims made in the name of earthly ‘fathers.’ The fatherhood of God in the biblical witness is an eschatological, not a protological conception. It speaks not of divinely ordained *patriarchy* as the creation of cosmic order but rather of redemption as divinely wrought *paternity* in which God adopts and makes the sinful and estranged human creature to be God’s own son, God’s own daughter, God’s own children in the Son Jesus Christ. God enters thereby into a new kind of relationship with what God has made. The fatherhood of God speaks thus of the new creation of our humanity in relation to one another and in relation to God, and not simply of the creation of objects or things and the connections between them. That understanding of the fatherhood of God is precisely what the ‘tendency’ of Wesley’s speech about God the Father is all about. And that tendency is something to which we should attend today.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we find ourselves—like Wesley did in the eighteenth century—living at the end of one age and the start of another. For Wesley, it was the medieval world that was passing away and the modern world that was aborning. Absolute monarchy was giving way to limited monarchy, and the emergence of a popular democracy had

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begun; the old hierarchical social world was giving way and a new middle class was appearing; the old land economy was giving way to the industrial revolution and to the money economy of capitalism that facilitated and profited from it; the traditional account of the human as an eternal soul momentarily inhabiting a temporal body was being called into question by the philosophies of Hobbes and Locke and Hume; and Christianity was in a state of confusion, floundering in the face of these changes as a late-medieval ‘king’s church’ was being subverted by both a newly-emerging secularism as well as by the evangelical revival. For us in what used to be called ‘the West’ it is modernity that is slipping away and we-know-not-what that is drawing near. For us the nation-state is being challenged by globalism, all our accounts of macro-economics have become bankrupt, the notions of popular democracy and thus of human rationality and autonomy as the cure of what ails us, of history as the story of human progress, indeed, of a universal rationality expressed in a science that constitutes and insures our knowledge of reality, and of a technology that will provide for and protect us—all are in shambles about us. The contradictions that were implicit in modernity from the beginning have caught up with us, and now we live in the ruins of what was to be the modern monument to our humanity. Modern optimism and its wonderfully naive confidence that all will turn out well has given way to suspicion and cynicism and irony and despair.

Contemporary Christianity in the world I am most familiar with, North America, is once again in a state of confusion and chaos—I won’t presume to speak of the state of things in the other parts of the world represented by participants in this institute (but I do have suspicions in that regard too!). We knew how to be Christian as a somewhat-modernized form of

traditionalism that assumed and facilitated the social and political status quo and concentrated on the individual soul; and we learned how to be Christian as an expression of the modern rational individual’s self-realization in time and as the modern call for social reform, and when that didn’t work to our satisfaction, as the radicalized call for revolution. But what does it mean to be Christian now? In a world in which Christianity no longer plays a privileged role in western society? In a world in which the intellectual traditions upon which our theologies have long traded are discredited, including the fundamental conceptuality of theism, of the human, and of the relationship between them? In a world, therefore, in which both the traditional and the protest against the traditional are becoming moot. For the tradition and the social world it was a part of is disappearing and the protest is now serving only to perpetuate its forms and its memory, unable to this point to contribute to that which will surpass or replace it. Like the conflicting social ideologies represented on the one hand by the Cuban community that fled the revolution and came to the United States, and on the other by the socialist state that Cuba has become: their rhetoric generates great heat still, but little light in our present darkness. What does it mean to be Christian in such a world?

This question of the fatherhood of God that I have drawn your attention to in this paper is a way into that question about what it means to be Christian today. Christianity in North America can be seen as largely divided now between those traditionalists who see ‘the Church’ and its tradition as the foundation of society and this world as an ordered, rational, divinely ordained hierarchy in which human life is to be lived out accordingly, and on the other hand, those who protest against that way of conceiving of God, of world, and of human life. That

protest has come to what may be one of its final and most pointed expressions in the feminist theology that has had such an impact on that most modern of churches: Methodism. Yet even here traditionalism—albeit in a very modern form—is to be found. My point is that this traditional account of God and world is now incoherent and passing away, both its rational and its biblical justification is gone and the social world it presupposed and facilitated is going. Protest Christianity is not faring much better, because to this point they have been unable to offer a genuine alternative. Notice that the circumlocutions for the Trinity that feminist theology has inspired in our church—the formulas I mentioned above—God the ‘Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer’; ‘Source, Word, and Spirit’; ‘Lover, Beloved, and Love; and McFague’s own proposed triad of “Mother, Lover, and Friend”—all simply replicate the model of God as the protological source and beginning of all else. The irony here is that these metaphors that were supposed to repudiate the old idolatry and be more appropriate to human flourishing, in fact simply continue the pattern that the old assumed. The protest simply articulates the same fallacious understanding of the Trinitarian God and God’s relation to the world that the tradition does! The tragedy here is that in reproducing the structure of the traditional conceptuality of God and world, despite all their rhetoric to the contrary, feminist theology has simply reproduced another discourse of priority and privilege and power.

Do not misunderstand me. I neither dismiss the tradition nor the protest. With regard to the latter, I hold that feminist theology may very well be the most important voice that has been raised in the recent theological debates, because perhaps more than any other voice it has clearly posed the questions of God, of world, and of human being and becoming that are precisely the

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issues that we must face today. The protest of which feminism is a part has provided an invaluable service to Christianity—which is my understanding of what Christian theology is to do—as it has exposed the injustices and unrighteousness and idolatry that found harbor in the theology and practice of Christianity in the long age of Christendom—and in addition it has brought a whole new generation of women theologians into the discourse. But the time has come to move beyond the protest, just as surely as the time has come to move beyond the traditional.

Wesley spoke of the “peculiar business of an apostle.” What makes this business of an apostle ‘peculiar’ is that it has to do neither with the affirmation of the status quo and the initiation of converts into that state of affairs, nor with the dissatisfied protest against the status quo, because it fails to accord all a proper place in its order. Instead the apostolic vocation, as seen in the great commission, has to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, with the new creation of creation, and with the initiation of men and women into the life of that new creation of the old. For that old creation cannot sustain itself in its estrangement from its Creator, it is ever and again slipping away into death and destruction. Our faith and hope, therefore, is that God will take up that old in the new; and it is that proclamation, that form of a life in God’s love, that is the ‘peculiar business of an apostle.’ We who live at this moment in the history of our culture should understand something of what it means to experience a world that is slipping away into death. We live in a world ‘post-Christendom,’ and in that social world we have to learn again how to live and tell that particular story that is ours; the universalistic pretensions of both the traditionalist and the protest must now be surrendered. We must now

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learn anew and aright to speak of the emergence of the fatherhood of God in the world; for if we cannot speak of the Father aright, we cannot tell the story anew. In doing so, we will live out and proclaim what Don Juell noted in his comments on the Lord’s Prayer:

We do not pray to God as “Male”; we do not speak of God as “Father” because of some natural necessity—e.g., a “natural law” according to which the cosmos is ordered according to gender distinctions. The God to whom we are invited to pray is known only in the particular—as the God whom Jesus Addressed as “Father” and who vindicated the crucified Jesus as Christ, Son of God, by raising him from the dead....The words must be heard in their Gospel setting. The particularity of that setting (e.g., that Jesus actually called God “Father” and taught his followers to pray to God as “[our] Father”) is the only promise of deliverance from ideologies of any sort that oppress and enslave and finally undermine the possibility of addressing God as one who cares and can be trusted to listen.<sup>64</sup>

It is time for the Wesleyan tradition to take up the ‘peculiar business’ of the apostolic witness and, following the tendency of Wesley’s speech, to learn to speak of God the Father as the boon, not the bane of our life together, not as the horror but rather as the hope of our humanity.

Some feminist theologians have begun to do just that. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, whose work I referred to above, relates the story of Cady Johnson who was married to an abusive husband, and believed herself called into the ministry in the face of a Christian church that cited biblical texts to the effect that women could not become ministers.<sup>65</sup>

She writes that:

“Reliance on the Holy Spirit’s leading, and her complete trust in the Father, however, are the discourses of her escape, and cannot be neatly separated out as the oppressive patriarchal discourse that kept her submissive....“The testimony of empowerment is one in which her conviction is that certain promises of this Father God are more powerful than anything 1Timothy or Ephesians says about

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<sup>64</sup> Donald Juel, “The Lord’s Prayer in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,” in *The Lord’s Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 63.

<sup>65</sup> Pp. 13f. See McClintock Fulkerson, 296ff.

submission....In response to the biblical passages that preachers use to silence women, she insists that she fears God, not men. And if that God called her to preach, nothing would stop her....It is God the Father upon whom she totally depends, whatever the situation, not men. It is this God who concurs with her own self-preservation.”<sup>66</sup>

We must learn again that this is what it means to speak of God the Father, and to witness of Jesus Christ the Son. We must learn that this is what we are doing when we baptize in the name of the Father....

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples and commissioned them to proclaim the Gospel, we are told that there were some who doubted (28:10). There are some who doubt yet. But the mission with which we are charged goes on even in the presence of that doubt, even in the presence of the doubts that bedevil those who do worship the resurrected one. We are called to make disciples of the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father—and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What are we doing when we do so? We are not proclaiming a divinely ordained order of creation, hierarchical and fraught with divinely-sanctioned injustice and violence; we are initiating women and men into God’s new creation of a creation that has become violent and unjust, a creation that will finally crucify its own creator. We are proclaiming God’s salvation from such horror that calls into question all human hope. We are repudiating the idols of both those among the traditionalists and those among the protesters who will not hear the Gospel of God as good news for all: the story of God’s redemption, God’s new creation of God’s creation through the initiation of God’s creatures into a new relationship with the one who has made them, the new relation of a daughter or a son to a parent, the thing made

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 297.

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become the child begotten in and through the only-begotten by the one who begets anew in the wilderness. For the Gospel is the story of how God becomes Father to the Son in the Spirit, and how through that event all creation is brought into that relationship for the very first time.