

OUR COVENANT GOD: FRIEND, HUSBAND AND FATHER (4)

Matt Kortus¹

God as Our Father

Having developed the points of emphasis highlighted by friendship and marriage as symbols of God's covenant, this last section will explore the aspects of the covenant underscored by the relationship between fathers and children. This section will demonstrate that Scripture emphasizes instruction and discipline from fathers, and honour and obedience from children. In addition, Scripture describes the care and protection that fathers provide for their children. However, before each one of these aspects can be developed, it must be shown from Scripture that the father-child relationship is an accurate symbol of the covenant of grace.

God's covenant people can call upon Him as Father because He has adopted them as His own children. In proving that God is indeed the Father of His covenant people, the basis for this relationship must be established. Adoption is the foundation for the Father-child relationship between God and His covenant people. Scripture teaches that God adopts His elect as children and gives them the Spirit of Christ, so that they call upon Him as their Father:

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father (Rom. 8:14-15).

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore

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thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ (Gal. 4:4-7).

Both of these passages teach that God adopts His people as His own spiritual children. As such, they receive the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, through whom they call upon God as their own Father. Through adoption, then, God's covenant people become the children of God their Father. Through adoption, God proclaims to His people, "[I] will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (II Cor. 6:18).

The Old Testament Scriptures confirm that the father-child relationship serves as an accurate symbol of the bond between God and His elect children. For example, God regarded the nation of Israel, when viewed organically, as His son. Thus, through Moses, He commanded Pharaoh to release His son from Egypt:

And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, *Israel is my son, even my firstborn*: And I say unto thee, *Let my son go*, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn (Ex. 4:22-23).

God viewed the nation of Israel, His covenant people, as His own son, even His firstborn. Hosea 11:1 confirms this truth: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt." Moses instructed the people to view Jehovah as their Father, as an incentive for obedience (Deut. 14:1-2; 32:5-6). In addition, when Israel walked in ways of disobedience, God viewed them as rebellious children (Isa. 1:2).

This act of adoption emphasizes the undeserved favour of God in establishing His covenant. While every child is the object of undeserved favour, this holds especially true for those who are adopted. So too, God's adoption of the elect underscores His love and mercy. Scripture testifies of this truth in I John 3:1: "*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God*: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not." In adopting His people as His own children, God chooses miserable sinners who not only do not deserve His favour but who actually deserve the opposite.

God reveals His undeserved favour towards His people not only by adopting

Our Covenant God

them but also by conforming His children to His image. When earthly parents adopt a child, they can do nothing to make that child physically resemble them. However, when God adopts His elect, He restores them to the likeness of His own image: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, *we shall be like him*; for we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2). All men lost the image of God in the fall of Adam. However, through adoption that image is restored so that God’s children bear resemblance to Him.

The accuracy of the father-child relationship as a symbol of the covenant comes from the covenantal nature of the Trinity. One might object that while Scripture clearly teaches that God is the Father of His spiritual sons and daughters, this has no bearing on the covenant of grace. However, this objection fails to understand the connection between the covenant of grace and God’s own covenantal life within the Trinity. The life of the Trinity is covenantal.² In addition, God has determined to reveal that covenant life within Himself by establishing His covenant with His people. Thus the covenant of grace is a reflection of the covenant life within the Triune God. Importantly, being a Father is a part of who God is. The First and Second Persons of the Holy Trinity are the Father and the Son. Thus, when God Triune instructs His people to call upon Him as Father, He does so from the viewpoint of His covenant. Membership in the covenant of grace is synonymous with spiritual sonship.

Having established the father-child relationship as a symbol of the covenant, it is necessary to define the truths that this symbol underscores regarding the covenant. Once again, the main themes of Scripture concerning earthly fathers and sons will be determined and then applied to God’s covenant with His people. The focus will be on those aspects uniquely underscored by the father-child dynamic. Thus, although love represents the overarching aspect of this relationship, it will not be developed separately. In addition, this section will not provide a comprehensive treatment of all that it means for God to be the Father of His children. However, this section will show that Scripture requires fathers to instruct and discipline their children, children to honour and submit to their fathers, and fathers to care for and protect their children.

² Cf. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grandville, MI: RFPFA, 2004), pp. 455-458.

Requires Fathers to Instruct

Scripture exhorts fathers to instruct and discipline their children. These two related elements both have the intended purpose of producing love for and obedience to God in the lives of their children. These two callings are related in that discipline enforces the instruction that a father gives. However, despite the connection between these two elements, they will be treated separately.

Scripture calls fathers to instruct their children in the fear and knowledge of God's name. This calling stands as an overarching theme throughout the book of Proverbs, in which Solomon commands his son to heed his wise instruction. For example, in the opening preamble he writes,

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. *My son, hear the instruction of thy father*, and forsake not the law of thy mother: For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck (Prov. 1:7-9).

This theme continues throughout the book of Proverbs. The Lord, through Solomon, commands fathers: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). With this command, God gives the promise that He will use the father's instruction to produce spiritual fruit within the heart of the (elect) child. Nevertheless, at the foreground is the biblical command to earthly fathers: instruct your children.

God's Word calls fathers to teach their children the works of God. While indeed fathers must instruct their sons in many different areas of life, Scripture's injunction calls fathers especially to teach their children who God is and what God has done. For example, throughout the Old Testament, God commanded His people to build memorials that would serve as opportunities for parents to recount the significance of each memorial to their children:

And that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son's son, what things I have wrought in Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them; that ye may know how that I am the LORD (Ex. 10:2).

In addition to instructing their children about the works of God, earthly fathers are called to tell their sons and daughters who God is. In other words,

Our Covenant God

fathers must declare and teach the praises of God's being to their children:

We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children (Ps. 78:4-6).

In both of these examples, teaching who God is and what He has done, fathers do not merely teach their children about God. Rather, they teach their children to know and to love God. That is, they guide their sons and daughters so that they develop their own personal relationships with their God.

The purpose of all this instruction from fathers is to produce love for God in the lives of the children, specifically, love that results in obedience to Him. For example, God, through Moses, calls parents to teach their children the words of the law:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up (Deut. 6:6-7).

Importantly, this injunction follows directly after the summary of the law given in the preceding verse: "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5). Therefore, it is evident that fathers are to teach their children to love God. Such a love for God results in obedience. God commanded Abraham, before he even had children, because He knew Abraham would command his children to keep the way of the Lord:

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him (Gen. 18:19).

In Moses' final address to the Israelites, he exhorts them to teach their children in order that they might observe all the words of the law (Deut. 32:46). The words of the law include love for God and obedience to Him. While more evidence of this calling to fathers could be provided, it is not necessary. It is clear that Scripture calls fathers to instruct their children so that they might love and serve God.

Just as earthly fathers instruct their children, so too, God as Father within the covenant of grace instructs His children, the members of the covenant. God teaches His people about Himself: both who He is and what He has done. Specifically, He reveals His loving character toward them, as well as His wonderwork of accomplishing their salvation through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. In addition, God instructs His covenantal children with the purpose that they might love Him and serve Him through obedience. God as Father reveals His love and salvation to His people in order that they might be filled with loving gratitude and serve Him out of thankfulness.

God accomplishes all this through the preaching of the gospel and by His own Holy Spirit to them. This stands in close connection to the communication aspect of the covenant highlighted by the earthly analogy of friendship. In both instances, the medium God employs is the same: His revelation, whether in His word or in His creation, but primarily through the preaching. However, with respect to friendship, the emphasis falls more on the *activity* of communication as an act of fellowship. In contrast, the father-child relationship emphasizes the *substance* of that communication. As Father, God aims to instruct His children regarding Himself and to cultivate love within His children.

Importantly, all of this must be regarded as an element of the covenant of grace, for no biblically-grounded Christian would deny that God reveals Himself to His people. However, this revelation, along with its intended purpose, must be viewed as a covenantal activity. Scripture must be viewed as a letter written from the Father to His spiritual sons and daughters. Through the Scriptures, God reveals Himself so that His children might not merely know *about* Him, but they might actually know and love Him.

Mandates Children to Love, Honour and Obey

Scripture commands children to honour their father and mother (Ex.

O u r C o v e n a n t G o d

20:12), an important aspect of which is loving obedience. This harmonizes with the purpose of parental instruction, namely, that parents teach their children to love God and obey His commandments. However, the injunction for children to honour parents demands more than mere obedience. Honour also includes “all due reverence in heart, word, and behaviour” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, A. 127). Scripture explicitly joins both of these elements in Ephesians 6:1-3:

Children, *obey* your parents in the Lord: for this is right. *Honour* thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.

This must be the response of children to the instruction they receive from their parents. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* states, every believer is to “submit [himself] to their good instruction and correction with due obedience” (A. 104). Obedience to this command is crucial, for in the way of honouring and obeying earthly parents, children honour and obey their heavenly Father. Importantly, both honour and obedience flow out of love for God and love for one’s parents.

The calling of children to honour and obey their parents is found throughout Scripture. In the Pentateuch, children who did not honour or obey their parents were commanded to be put to death (Ex. 21:17; Deut. 21:18-21). Jesus Christ Himself repeated this law to show the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who defied the commandment to honour their father and mother (Matt. 15:4). The practical wisdom of Proverbs urges children to hear the instruction of a father and to keep his commandments (e.g., Prov. 4:1-4; 13:1). So also, the Apostle Paul in his epistles urged children to obey and honour their parents (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20). Scripture everywhere presents this command to children.

God, as covenant Father, commands the children of His covenant to honour and obey Him. This point of emphasis within the covenant of grace comes out in the Old Testament manifestation of the covenant with Moses. In addition, the earthly symbol of marriage implies this same aspect of the covenant, in that marriage involves submission. Namely, the church as the bride must submit to her head, Jesus Christ. Thus love for God and obedience to His law and commandments represent crucial components of God’s covenant of grace.

The command from God to keep His covenant represents a call for obedience within the covenant. In the Old Testament, God regularly commanded Israelites to *keep* His covenant. In such passages, the Hebrew word translated “to keep” may also mean to observe and, in the context of the covenant, carries the idea of obligations.³ Thus keeping God’s covenant often stands parallel to obeying God’s law. For example, Jehovah promises everlasting mercy “to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them” (Ps. 103:18). As is common throughout the Psalms, this passage contains two parallel statements, so that keeping the covenant is synonymous with remembering God’s commandments. Elsewhere, this same connection is made: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine” (Ex. 19:5).

In many instances, the command to keep God’s covenant is contained within a conditional sentence. Deuteronomy 28-33 serves as the outstanding example of conditional language connected to the covenant. In this passage, Jehovah God reaffirms the covenant and promises to bless Israel, if they keep His covenant, or to curse Israel, if they violate His covenant. However, this passage and the other similar passages do not teach that the actual maintenance of the covenant depends on merit. Rather, enjoyment of God’s temporal blessings and the experience of His favour require obedience, for God will not show favour to those who openly transgress His covenant (Ps. 78:6-11, 34-37). Thus, while the covenant does not depend on the fulfilment of conditions, nevertheless, obedience is required.

While the passages containing conditional language must be guarded from a false interpretation by those who would teach a conditional covenant, nevertheless, the required obedience must remain prominent. Calvin took note of this when commenting on Psalm 132:11-12:

The LORD hath sworn in truth unto David; he will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne. If thy children will keep my covenant and my testimony that I

³ F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, repr. 2010), p. 1036.

Our Covenant God

shall teach them, their children shall also sit upon thy throne for evermore (Ps. 132:11-12).

After explaining why the continuance of the throne of David, and by implication the coming of Christ, does not rest on good conduct or human merit, Calvin writes,

This may serve to show in what sense the covenant was not conditional; but as there were other things which were accessories to the covenant, a condition was appended, to the effect that God would bless them if they obeyed his commandments.⁴

Reformed liturgy also notes the need for obedience within the covenant of grace. For example, the “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” in recognizing baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, states,

Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience, namely, that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that we trust in Him, and love Him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.⁵

In addition, contemporary writers have drawn from Scripture the importance of obedience to the commands of God within the covenant.

We might note how often in Scripture God commands His people to keep the covenant that He has made with them, by their obedience to His commandments. Thus we read in Deuteronomy 29:9, when the covenant with Israel is renewed in Moab: ‘So keep the words of this covenant and do them’ (NASB). The essential place of obedience is made clear in, for example, Deuteronomy 7:9, with its reference to the ‘faithful

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1993), 5:155.

⁵ “Form for the Administration of Baptism” in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: PRCA, 2005), p. 258.

God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands'. The absolute sovereignty of God in no way destroys human responsibility. Obedience is the pathway to covenant blessings (Lev. 26:1-13), whilst disobedience brings down covenant curses (Lev. 26:14-39).⁶

By recognizing the place of instruction and the required obedience within the father-child relationship, this aspect of the covenant of grace comes out clearly. This point of emphasis in no way mitigates or dampens the truth of an unconditional covenant. Rather, noting the required obedience does justice to the language of Scripture and positively incorporates it into Reformed covenant theology without turning the covenant into a mere contract. For when a father requires obedience from his son, he does not make continuation in his family conditional on the son's obedience. Neither does a father lay down rules in a business-like manner. Rather, earthly fathers set commands before their children out of love for them. So too, Jehovah God, the Father of the covenant, requires loving obedience from His covenant children.

Calls Fathers to Discipline

Due to the emphasis on instruction and obedience within the father-child relationship, discipline serves as an important aspect of this relationship. In addition to instructing their children, earthly fathers must also discipline them. As already noted, these two aspects of fatherhood are connected: discipline serves to enforce instruction. When children fail to obey, discipline becomes necessary to prevent a child from continuing in the way of disobedience. Scripture calls attention to both the necessity and purpose of discipline.

The need for fathers to discipline their children is a recurring theme throughout the book of Proverbs. For example, "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (Prov. 23:13-14). In addition to indicating the purpose of discipline, this verse also provides the

⁶ David McKay, *The Bond of Love: God's Covenantal Relationship With His Church* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), p. 13.

Our Covenant God

manner. Specifically, discipline involves the administration of pain to the child, in order to show him the consequences of disobedience. Despite this method, the motive of discipline is always love: “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” (Prov. 13:24). However, although administered in love, this is a difficult calling, which must be carried out in spite of the tears of the child (Prov. 19:18) because a failure to exercise discipline will only bring parents shame (Prov. 29:15-17).

God disciplines His children with the same loving correction that He commands earthly fathers to exercise. God chastens the members of His covenant by inflicting pain in their hearts and lives. This pain can take on many different forms. Nonetheless, regardless of the form it takes, such discipline always flows from God’s love for His children and therefore has the same purpose of preventing continued disobedience:

Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee. Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him (Deut. 8:5-6).

This verse, along with others (e.g., Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-8), demonstrates all the same elements of discipline that have been noted. The purpose, the manner and the motive required of earthly fathers find their perfection in God, the heavenly Father.

God disciplines His children for violations against the covenant of grace for, as already noted, He does not show favour to those who violate His covenant.

Thus discipline must be understood as an aspect of the covenant. Again, this comes by learning from the earthly analogy of the father-son relationship and the implications that God is the Father of the covenant. Noting this element does justice to the language of Scripture (Deut. 31:16-18; Jer. 11:3-4; Heb. 8:9).

Members of the covenant of grace must recognize discipline as an aspect of the covenant and see God’s loving purpose in it. For example, Proverbs 3:11-12 commands children to receive chastisement by knowing the motive behind it: “My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.” A similar injunction can be found in Hebrews 12:5-8. Thus,

children must take comfort knowing that God chastens only those whom He loves. This serves as comfort during the pain that comes upon them as objects of God's discipline. This truth is magnified when placed in the covenant, for nearly all biblical Christians would confess that God disciplines those whom He loves. However, this must be viewed as a covenantal exercise. In this way, the loving purpose of God, the Father of the elect, comes to the foreground.

Requires Fathers to Provide and Children to Trust

In addition to instructing and disciplining their children, earthly fathers are called to provide for and protect their children. Both of these tasks demonstrate a father's underserved favour toward his children whom he cares for and watches over. Scripture calls earthly fathers to provide for their families (I Tim. 5:8). Furthermore, along with exhortations, fathers provide comfort to their children (I Thess. 2:11). In addition, parents must lay up all the necessary earthly provisions for their children (II Cor. 12:14). Thus fathers show love by providing for their children, protecting their children and performing all the other tasks required of them.

The heavenly Father of the elect demonstrates His grace by exercising care over His covenant people. Just as earthly fathers take pity upon their children, "so the LORD pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Earthly fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, including bread, eggs and fish (Luke 11:11-12). God, the heavenly Father, dispenses all His gifts to His children with perfect wisdom (Luke 11:13). In addition, God protects His children by never giving them anything that would harm them. Instead,

God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for His children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing, and avert all evil or turn it to our profit.⁷

As the adopted children of God, members of the covenant of grace have the assurance that God will care for them. Indeed, God's compassion is so great that Scripture references the care provided by earthly mothers to emphasize

⁷ "Form for the Administration of Baptism," in *Confessions and Church Order*, p. 258.

O u r C o v e n a n t G o d

this truth: “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee” (Isa. 49:15). This same comparison is made elsewhere, emphasizing the comfort God provides for His children. “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Isa. 66:13). In all things, God bears His spiritual sons as an earthly father carries his own son (Deut. 1:31).

Those who belong to the covenant of grace have the calling then to trust their heavenly Father. Once more, the need to trust God is questioned by no one. We address God as “Our Father” in order to excite within ourselves “a childlike reverence for and confidence in God” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 120). However, the calling for believers to trust must be linked to their membership in the covenant. By drawing from the father-child relationship as a symbol of the covenant, trusting in God becomes an aspect of the covenant. In other words, depending on God for all things and looking to Him for protection are covenantal activities.

Conclusion: God as Friend, Husband and Father

God has given His people at least three earthly symbols of the covenant that enable them to understand the essence of covenant life with Him. This work has attempted to draw out what each of these symbols uniquely contributes to a proper conception of the covenant. The picture of friendship emphasizes the need for similitude within the covenant, the importance of communication between God and His people, and the element of spiritual encouragement that God provides to His people. The picture of marriage reveals the need for faithfulness in the covenant, the roles of Christ as Head and the church as the submissive bride, the place of intimacy and the unbreakable character of the covenant. Finally, the father-child relationship demonstrates that God instructs, disciplines, cares for and protects His covenant people who in turn must honour, trust and obey Him. Overarching all of this is the central place of love within the covenant.

It is worth restating that all three symbols of the covenant are necessary for God’s people to grasp more fully the reality of covenant life. No single anal-

ogy can convey the depth and the meaning of this glorious bond of love and communion. If God is not viewed as Friend, Husband and Father, the church is left with an incomplete picture of covenant life with God.

Maintaining this view of God as Friend, Husband and Father within the covenant brings glory to God and comfort to His people. God is glorified when His people know and understand the full reality of His love. Understanding what each earthly symbol of the covenant underscores enables God's people better to grasp the glorious reality of the covenant and thus to praise God accordingly. Furthermore, this understanding comforts God's people. When faced with any trial or temptation, Christians seek out godly friends, spouses or parents for comfort. This demonstrates the important place that each of these relationships has for the believer. However, when God is viewed as the perfection of each one of these relationships, believers more readily turn to Him for comfort.

Although this work attempts to provide a fuller understanding of the covenant, a proper understanding of these three symbols still does not adequately capture the reality. Each symbol gives insights into the reality but even the combination cannot fully express the reality. This holds true because no man can fully comprehend the reality of what it means that Jehovah God of heaven declares, "I will be your God and you will be my people." To understand that reality would be to understand heaven itself. This is life everlasting, that God will be with His people and they shall be with Him forever (Rev. 21:3). Praise be to God for giving us these three earthly symbols that enable us to have an experiential foretaste of the heavenly fulfilment by living in these relationships.