

Spiritual Fathers

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John W. Kleinig

In a world full of people hungry for a father's love, pastors have a powerful role to play.

We are experiencing an epidemic of father hunger in our societies. Psychologists define father hunger as craving for approval and love from an absent father. People who suffer from father hunger seek attention and affirmation from a surrogate father. They want a father figure who can discipline and encourage them, assess and bless them. They feel the lack of a father who is able to give them a sure sense of themselves as women and men.

When fathers fail or are absent from their children's lives, it leaves a deep wound. Both the lack of a father's approval and rejection by him can have a devastating impact on a person's soul. This often results in uncertain sense of identity and an obsession with gaining and retaining approval. It leads to obsessive, compulsive behaviour. It contributes to eating disorders and emotional disorder, personal uncertainty and sexual confusion, substance abuse and other forms of addiction. It fuels rage against authority as well as a fascination with powerful personalities. It results in a sense of dislocation and disconnection.

Spiritual father hunger is much more common than this. Though seldom recognized, it is in fact universal. We all suffer from a kind of spiritual father hunger that even the best human father cannot satisfy. We all need someone bigger than we are to test us and to approve of us, someone to judge us and to justify us, someone to assess our unruly selves and to bless us, someone to affirm us and encourage us. We all need someone to father us spiritually.

And that is just what God the Father does for us physically and spiritually. He does it in two ways: through Jesus His incarnate Son and through the men that he has appointed as our pastors.

God the Father has sent His Son Jesus as a man with a human body to show Himself to us physically and spiritually. So his Son does not do his own work but the work of the Father who sent him. He does not speak his own words but the words of his gracious Father. Anyone who hears what Jesus says hears the voice of God the Father. Anyone who sees the Son sees the Father also, because the Son is the visible image of the Father. He is the mirror of the Father's heart. Through Jesus we see what God is like as our Father. We see how He regards us. This was not true only during Jesus' earthly life; it is still true for us even now in the divine service where Jesus represents the Father to us.

God also fathers us through the pastors that He gives to us. In the divine service every pastor represents represents Christ to us, and through Him, God the Father. He speaks the word of the Father and does the Father's work. Those who listen to a pastor as their teacher hear the voice of God the Son (Luke 10:16) speaking on behalf of the Father. Those who receive a pastor as God's spokesman receive both the Son and his divine Father (Matt 10:40; John 13:20). Those who reject the Word of God spoken by

the pastor as God's spokesman, reject both the Son and his heavenly Father (Luke 10:16).

A pastor therefore does not just speak Christ's word to his people, but, like the Son, also represents the Father to them. As he exercises his ministry, he speaks the Father's pardon, welcome, acceptance, approval, love, and blessing to His faithful children. And all this is done in a physical and spiritual way. He does these things with his human body as he is commissioned by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Thus God the Father fathers us spiritually through the men that serve with Christ in the ministry of the gospel.

Luther teaches this in his explanation of the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism where he says: "Thus we have three kinds of fathers presented to us in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of the household, and fathers of the nation. Besides these, there are also our spiritual fathers...For the name spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the word of God." He bases this on Paul's claim in 1 Cor 4:14-15 that he had fathered the congregation in Corinth.

Like Christ and his apostles, pastors are called to be spiritual fathers to their people. They represent God the Father, who exercises his fatherhood by justifying sinners, adopting them as His beloved children, and making them His honoured heirs. Through their ministry, pastors help to rectify the damage done to people by the failure of their biological fathers and nurture them as they seek to fulfil their spiritual vocations.

That is why Christ chose men to be his apostles and why He appoints men, rather than women, as pastors to father God's children. Their character as adult men and, even more so, as human fathers and husbands corresponds with this responsibility.

Dr. John Kleinig is a retired pastor and former seminary professor in the Lutheran Church of Australia.