

Why are Priests Called Father in Your Church?

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Recently, in a conversation with someone who attends a "non-denominational" church, the question was asked: "Why are priests called 'Father' in your Church? This is not what the Bible teaches! Doesn't Jesus Himself say, 'Call no man on earth your father, for you have one Father who is in heaven.' (Matthew 23:9)."

This is simply another example of what can only be called the "fundamentalist gridlock" of some Christian groups in understanding and interpreting the Scriptures: the taking of this or that biblical passage out of context and applying it to whatever you want. St. Athanasios, the 4th century patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt, was the first person in Christian history to definitively list those 27 books that we today call the New Testament. A pivotal person in the formation of the New Testament canon, St. Athanasios says that when Christians read the Bible, they are not to take passages out of context but rather to keep the "skopos", the scope or "big picture" in mind. Let's examine this question keeping the full scope — or "big picture" — of the Scriptures in mind.

First: the question asked seems to presuppose that this passage of Scripture should be taken literally as an absolute prohibition i.e., that we should call no man father. In other words, if we were to interpret Matthew 23:9 literally, no one could be called father, not even our biological fathers. Christians could not, for example, celebrate Fathers Day. Nor could George Washington be called "the father of our country." Is this what Jesus intended? Of course not! Doesn't Jesus Himself tell the rich young man to "keep the commandments" including the one to "honor your father and mother" (Matthew 19:19)? And when the Jews questioned Jesus about His teaching that He is "the bread of life," doesn't He respond to them by saying: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers (i.e. the ancestors of the Jewish people who took part in the Exodus from Egypt with Moses and are therefore called the "fathers" of Israel) ate the manna in the wilderness and they died" (John 6:48-49)?

Second: What would we do with the apostle Paul? When St. Paul discusses the Exodus, doesn't he — like Christ Himself — refer to the ancestors of the Israel of his day as "our fathers" (1 Corinthians 10:1)? When discussing discipline in the Christian family, doesn't he say "Fathers, do not provoke your children or they may lose heart" (Colossians 3:21).

Furthermore, with regards to spiritual fatherhood in the Christian community, to the Church in Corinth he wrote: "I do not write this to make you ashamed but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have 10,000 guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). And he describes his relationship with the Christians of the Church in Thessalonica as being "like a father with his children" (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Doesn't St. Paul, in the above passages, claim to be the spiritual father of the Corinthian and Thessalonian Churches, their father in the Gospel - Father Paul, if you will?

Third: When interpreting Matthew 23:9, it would be helpful to read the entire 23rd chapter of Matthew in order to get a proper understanding of the context of this passage. This 23rd chapter of Matthew contains the Lord's indictment of the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, their focus on the externals of religion without genuine repentance and a corresponding conversion of heart. So, not only does Jesus condemn the scribes and Pharisees for their use of the address "Father" in a vain and empty way, but in the very next verse says: "Nor are you to be called teachers, for you have one teacher, the Christ" (Matthew 23:10). Yet, many contemporary non-denominational TV preachers describe themselves as

"Bible teachers" and no one has ever argued that the Church should not have Sunday school teachers on the basis of this passage. Indeed, Jesus Himself acknowledged Nicodemus to be a "teacher of Israel" (John 3:10) and in the Book of Acts we read that certain men in Antioch were called "teachers" (Acts 13:1), to give only two examples. Therefore, as can be clearly understood when one reads the 23rd chapter of Matthew in its entirety, Jesus takes issue not with these titles and roles in and of themselves, but rather with their self-aggrandizing abuse by the scribes and Pharisees.

Fourth: The term "father" when used to address a priest is not merely an assertion of his "higher" status in the community of believers; rather, it is a term of endearment, of intimacy and love, as the apostle Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians, already mentioned above. In Greek, a priest in his village is addressed as "Papa" and in Russian as "Batiushka" — both being terms of endearment and intimacy. The spiritual fatherhood of the priest is intended to be a sign of the depth of intimacy and relationship which those in the life of the Church have with their leaders, a relationship based on the priest's role in our second birth, our birth in the Gospel — our baptism. Just as our biological father has an important role in our birth and continuing nurture, so the priest — as the one who baptizes us — has an important role in our second birth, our birth "from above...of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3-5).

Finally: This kind of attempt to interpret the Scriptures literally and then apply a passage taken out of context in a polemical way, usually towards Roman Catholics — but by extension often towards us as Orthodox Christians as well — is, unfortunately, all too typical of much "non-denominational" Christianity. At best, it is a misreading and misunderstanding of the Scriptures; at worst, it can be an expression of religious bigotry. Nonetheless, it remains a simple fact that the overwhelming majority of Christians in the world today (Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, etc.) — and across the 20 centuries of Church history — have addressed and continue to address their clergy as 'Father.'

If anyone wishes to be contentious about this, we have no other practice — nor do the churches of God. — 1 Corinthians 11:16