

## What Jesus Taught

Almost anyone who has read or heard the Gospels knows that Jesus made the statement, "...call no man father..." (*Matthew 23:9*). And even though the Church has addressed its clergy as "father" for nearly 2000 years, no one ever worried about it until relatively recent times - the last 300 or 400 years. Even many of the protestant reformers continued to call their clergy, "Father."

Clearly the matter of interpretation of Scripture is involved here - the understanding of just what it was that Jesus meant (and did **not**) mean, when He made that statement recounted in the Gospel.

Taken at face value, Christ's statement would mean that His followers must never call anyone "father" except the One Father in heaven. That would mean that we are wrong to speak of fathers, grandfathers, founding fathers, even city fathers. If that is the case, then several other passages in the Scriptures are in serious trouble.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth, "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me" (*I Cor. 4:15-16*). Obviously the Apostle Paul considered himself to be the spiritual father of the Corinthian Christians and taught them to follow him.

Likewise, if Jesus was speaking literally, the Apostle Paul directly contradicted and disobeyed Him when he wrote to the Colossians, "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged" (*Col. 3:21*). But he has never been accused of that and he clearly did not consider Jesus' statement to be a

literal command not to call anyone father in any sense.

Jesus Himself, when he taught about the rich man and Lazarus described how the rich man, seeing Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, addressed Abraham, saying, "Father Abraham." Abraham's response was not to correct the rich man and admonish him that he should not be called "father." Rather, he answered, "Son..." (*Luke 16:20-31*).

## Other Forbidden Titles?

In the same discourse in which He spoke of the word, "father," Jesus also spoke of other titles. He said, "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren..." The word "Rabbi" means "teacher." Yet the Book of Acts speaks of "...teachers and prophets..." in the Church (*Acts 13:1*).

## What Does It Mean?

Just how are we to understand Christ's admonition, and how has the Church of Christ understood it for over 2000 years? The context of the statements by Jesus make it clear exactly what He meant.

Jesus was criticizing the teachers (Rabbis) who had departed from the true tradition of Moses' Law. They were adding their teaching to that of Moses and clouding it thereby. Likewise, Jesus was criticizing the Pharisees, who also departed from the Mosaic Tradition, teaching and laying burdens on the people while they, themselves, did not believe nor practice what they taught and required of others. They were hypocrites who scandalized God's people.

What Jesus was doing was teaching His disciples not to be what the Rabbis had

become—false teachers. He was showing them the dangers of using their position as teachers and fathers to build disciples around their own private opinions.

Jesus was not forbidding the use of the titles—any of them: father, rabbi, master...He was teaching His disciples to see what was wrong with the fathers, rabbis, and masters of Israel.

## The History of the Church

From the earliest days of the Church manifested in the Old Testament, those anointed by God for His service were identified by certain names: prophet, father, rabbi, and teacher. In the same spirit, throughout the Christian world other titles have emerged: pastor, reverend, professor, brother, father, and others. These designations hold warmth and dignity.

Just as in our family there is one who with love is called, "father," so in the family of the Church, God's household, we have and will continue to honor those who have brought us to the new birth through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus warned us against calling unworthy men "father" or "teacher" in order that the leadership of His holy Nation - the Church - would remain pure. Whether they are bishop, father, teacher, deacon, or pastor, they must remain true to His true teaching and demonstrate a personal character and life that leads one to the love and God and one's neighbor.

Every Orthodox Priest addresses every other Orthodox Priest as "father," as does even his own and every other Bishop. It is a reminder to the clergy, also, of the special *office* they hold (not that they are special

*persons*). They are called by Christ through His Church to love, to care for, to teach, and to lead, and the People of God respond to them with love - not giving them any honor due to God alone, but reminding themselves and the clergy, also, of whom they are: not just speakers, administrators, or managers, but the spiritual fathers in Christ of those in the Church.

CALL

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