

THE FATHER-HEART OF GOD

Nick Holt

NICK HOLT ENCOURAGES US TO KNOW GOD INTIMATELY AS 'FATHER,' SO THAT ORPHAN-HEARTS ARE HEALED AND TRANSFORMED AND WE MAY LIVE OUR LIVES ABUNDANTLY FROM A CENTRE OF LOVE.

'I have been seized by the power of a great affection!' With this arresting phrase the Catholic writer Brennan Manning ('The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up and Burnt Out,' 2005), succinctly places in print something of the nature of the 'Father-heart of God.' He stands with writers such as Jack Winter, Jack Frost, Ed Piorek, James Jordan and Trevor Galpin in setting out eternal truths rooted in the Christian Gospel.

The 'Father-heart of God' seeks to address absolute questions of 'identity' – and does so brilliantly. Over the past twenty-five years (especially this century), a growing number of writers address the arena of the sons / daughters of ABBA-Father. Jesus says that he is the Way to the Father; he is the Truth about the Father; and he lives the Life of the Father (John 14:6). My wife, Linda, and I have had the privilege of journeying into this spiritual understanding, where the hearts of humanity are embraced and healed; transformed from the 'orphan-heart' – which is the essence of the 'human condition' – into the liberation of sons / daughters.

SONSHIP

There has been a proliferation this century of the theme of 'discipleship;' towards the 'techniques' of outworking discipleship in everyday life. Sonship is different; its landscape and texture arise from the nature of 'being' (rather than 'doing'). Discipleship may arise from sonship, but it is submitted that it cannot be the reverse. 'Sonship' is a deeper understanding.

Paul mentions the word 'hiothesia' five times in New Testament, to outline the revelation of sonship – a revelation he says comes from Jesus directly (Galatians 1:11-12; also see Galatians 4:5, Romans 8:15 & 23, Romans 9:4 and Ephesians 1:5). Right back to John Wycliffe's first English translation, this word is translated as 'adoption,' since it was taken from the Latin Vulgate version. English, French and Spanish Bibles are translated this way; Scandinavian ones aren't. Their Greek-based translation relates to 'positioning as sons'. God sends Jesus into the world to reveal that he always has been – and always will be – 'Father'. Through faith in Christ and his redeeming work, we are brought home and actualise our status as sons.

This is not simply information for the mind; it relates primarily as revelation to the heart. Ephesians 1:18 encourages that the eyes of the heart be enlightened. Why is this important today?

THE ORPHAN-HEART

After thirty plus years of pastoral ministry, it is glaringly evident that when Jesus says God is 'Father,' it simply does not connect with many modern people – including many in the church. One commentator describes a 'pandemic of fatherlessness;' this is due to human fathers who are:

- Angry, volatile, stern, unpredictable;

- Not to be trusted, since they 'abandon' family;
- Aloof, apart, emotionally absent;
- Abusive (in differing ways);
- Mean and tight-fisted, etc.

'Father-wounds' cause us to project our memories of being poorly fathered onto God himself. Instead of living from a centre of love, too often life is lived from a centre of fear – from 'the shadows' – so different from what Jesus says about 'abundant life' (John 10:10).

Aspects of the 'orphan-heart' may be encountered every day. Think of those you may meet where you perceive:

- Fear of trusting others;
- Fear of opening the heart and receiving love;
- Fear of rejection and abandonment;
- Chasing after counterfeit affections;
- Not being able to operate from 'a place of rest'.

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In John 16 and 17 we see a 'high-water mark' in Christian understanding, as Jesus prays to the Father. In John 17:3 we read, 'This is eternal Life – that they may know you' (not 'know about'). John 17:21 says that the disciples (and all future ones) would be 'one' with the Father in exactly the same way that Jesus is one with the Father. The relationship is to be 'vertical' and not 'horizontal' (which has implications for 'church togetherness' understandings).

The 'orphan-heart' outworks by feeling like a 'servant' in relation to God – rather than a 'son / daughter'. Aged thirty-five we know that John Wesley exchanged the faith of a servant for that of a son – but one might ask, 'did he ever really experience the affectionate daily embrace from the caressing arms of a devoted Father-God?'

This is the very essence of the Father-heart of God, (let alone his 'mother-heart' – of which much more can be said). What does a revelation of his 'father-heart' entail?

- Rest – operating our hearts from non-striving, even when we may be busy. His love is THE affirmation – not what we 'do';
- Adventure – he encourages us to follow him into LIFE – and sets us free from religious boxes;
- Joy – an intimate download in everyday life which is our strength in all circumstances;
- A relationship of profound intimacy. Perhaps there should be a 5th 'ALL': 'All may know that they are loved.'

In all this – and much else besides – we ourselves may also know that God is 'Father'. May I be permitted to ask a straight question? 'Is he a Father to you?' Is it clear, or is the response somewhat hesitant?

As James Jordan writes, 'He loves to come to be a Father to us in all the stuff of our lives – but what he is really after is us becoming sons / daughters to him in all the stuff of his life... in his world... in his perspective of living' ('Sonship,' 2012). This is the clue to our identity – in him; it is from his heart – in his world – according to his script.

Nick Holt was a Town Planner for twelve years. In 1983 he entered training for Methodist Ministry (Bristol) and has been involved in five Circuits since 1986. Nick is a Trustee / Partner of 'InterPrayer'. He is husband to Linda, with two married sons and two grandchildren. Nick will 'retire' this year and new horizons of 'ministry' are opening up for Linda and Nick around the 'Father (and 'Mother')-heart of God.' Nick and Linda will be leading the MET Prayer Conference on, 'The Father Heart of God'. To book, please visit methodistevangelicals.org.uk/tpc

3. GOD IS MY FATHER? – Nick and Linda Holt

Icebreaker

Do you find it easy to say “God is my Father?”
What might make it difficult?

Discussion

1. In what ways might knowing God as our Father help with the biggest issues we face in life?
2. You may know God is 'A Father', but is he Father to you?
3. In your heart of hearts (be honest!) do you long for a 'download' God the Father's embrace of divine love into your life?