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The Logic of Love

Chapter 27: Three Crucial Connotations

You only get out of it what you put into it.

We Are Children Of God

By choosing a name for God that identifies us as children of God, the fundamental relationships of spiritual life are reflected back through the archetypal relationships of family life. Choosing a name with the connotation that we are children of God serves two purposes. First, it glorifies the parent-child relationship as a supreme expression of love. And second, it implies the siblinghood of humanity.

In general and ideally, the greatest expressions of love are found in the parent-child relationship. The family always has been and continues to be an institution where extraordinary levels of care and concern are exhibited over an entire lifetime. A word for God that carries a parental connotation can tap into our idealization of what it means to be a human parent. Using a parental word for God conjures up images of care and concern that inspire and challenge us in our efforts to express and receive parental love.

Generosity and mercy are the archetypal forms of parental love. These expressions of love are appropriate because of the hierarchical relationship between parents and children. The parent-child relationship gives rise to the sibling relationship. Fairness and justice are the archetypal forms of fraternal love. These expressions of love are appropriate because of the equality of status between siblings. On a broader social level this translates into an appreciation for democratic values. Thus, taking the family as a model provides a foundation for approaching relationships of equality and hierarchy with love. Fairness, justice, generosity, and mercy become glorified as the primary colors of love's refraction through the prism of personal relationships.

There are various words that can be used for God that have a parental connotation. For instance, Parent, Father, Mother, and Father-Mother all carry a parental connotation. The next step is to narrow this down by looking at the second key connotation.

We Are Persons With God

Every human being is created through the union of two specific persons. Of the several names for God with a parental meaning, there are only two that also connote a specific person: Mother and Father.

Mother and Father are *personal* names because they carry a personal connotation. All the other words with a parental connotation are conceptual in nature. This category will be referred to as *concept* names. Only the personal names clearly signify that God is a *who*, not an *it*. Concept names are inferior to personal names in the same way that the love of concepts is subordinated to the love of persons. This is what validates rebelling against a democracy that votes in slavery—love for democracy is not an excuse for the inhumane treatment of others.

Of course, painful past experiences with parents to some degree impedes everyone's ability to allow the personal names to engender feelings of intimacy. By refusing to allow such experiences to influence our decision about naming God, we take ourselves a step closer to leaving our family baggage behind.

It's good to nurture the worthwhile experiences that a life of faith can provide. Feeling the loving presence of God is somewhere at the top of the list of worthwhile experiences. The lure of such a wonderful feeling can be a stumbling blocks when it comes to considering faith because it is a selfish motivation, but once the decision is made, these same feelings nurture and nourish faith. *By all means*, let's nurture and nourish faith in every way consistent with love and wisdom. There is no point in opening the door to experiencing the love of God, if we're not going to walk in.

Faith is not merely a willingness to believe a good idea. More importantly it is the willingness to love God. Before faith is chosen, God is only a concept. We distance ourselves from feelings when making a reasoned decision about faith, so that wisdom is not clouded by emotion. But once the faith journey has begun, we should make every effort to be consistent with what we have chosen by *celebrating the joys of the decision*.

The wide variety of ways in which the word *love* is used is unfortunate. We love ice cream. We love our dogs. We love a good argument or good joke, and we love it when our team wins. This word must also find a place in the expression of our highest values and most cherished relationships. The chameleon quality of the word *love* makes choosing a word for God that has a personal connotation all the more important. By doing so, we glorify the personal quality of our relationship with God.

By applying the value of a personal relationship, the variety of words with a parental connotation was narrowed to two choices—Mother and Father. Fortunately, there is a third core quality to consider in choosing a name for God. Incorporating this quality can narrow the field to one option.

We Have Freewill

Love is predicated upon freewill. Belief in freewill makes love possible. Asserting that we have freewill is our best answer to how a self can be selfless. The desire to glorify the belief that we share freewill with God is what narrows the choice down to *Father*.

Even though men and women share equally the quality of freewill on a spiritual level, men and women are not free to make the same kinds of choices on a physical level. Fathers choose to be fathers in ways that mothers do not choose to be mothers. Simply put, a father can be a father and not know it. By having intercourse and then not sticking around to see if a child is born, a man can choose to remain ignorant about becoming a father. It is in this sense that the experience of fatherhood is a matter of freewill choice. Biology eliminates a mother's option for knowing whether she has become a parent. Just as only women exercise maternal choices, men uniquely enjoy a freewill option about experiencing the fact of their fatherhood.

Complementing this freewill choice available to fathers in their relationship to their children is the fact that children must exercise freewill in order to *experience* their father *as* their father. Even though we can teach children to say "daddy" at a very young age, an understanding of the father's role as a creator is beyond their comprehension. Years after they learn to address their fathers with an appropriate name, children develop the level of sophistication necessary to appreciate the role that fathers play in procreation. Then, based upon the *willingness to believe*, they are able to appreciate their fathers as co-creators of their existence. Thus, it is through freewill choice that children begin to relate to their fathers as co-creators.

In contrast, all children experience their mothers as creators, even if they are not developed enough to express this experience or appreciate it with any degree of sophistication. The development of the brain during pregnancy provides children with awareness of their mothers. A lack of sophistication and being in utero form an enormous barrier to a developing child's ability to articulate this experience, but the *experience* of who one's mother is on a cognitive level is nonetheless real. By giving birth and nursing their children, mothers continue to provide children with experiences of the parent-child relationship. The physical nature of this relationship provides an experiential basis of awareness of mother as creator and sustainer of life. But nature does not provide children with a cognitive experiential basis for knowledge of their father. Belief is the only foundation on which to build a cognitive awareness of a father's creator quality.

Comparing our relationship with our biological father with our spiritual father is a natural choice if the goal is to glorify freewill. It is only through their willingness to believe that children have a cognitive experience of their biological father. This is true on the spiritual level as well. Our willingness to believe is the crucial factor. Additionally, biological fathers must exercise their

freewill in order to experience themselves as fathers. Therefore, using the word *Father* for God can also carry the connotation that God chooses to be part of our lives.

By redefining *Father* in this way—as a glorification of freewill—we can liberate the word from the critique that its use is sexist, arbitrary, or traditional. Liberation of the word *Father* from its masculine connotations is not only in harmony with, but also is encouraged by, the feminist critique of language. Because freewill is no more a masculine quality than a feminine quality, using *Father* to connote freewill does not need to carry the baggage of masculine attributes. In similar ways, we recognize qualities of motherhood that are not necessarily feminine. For instance, if a father raises a child alone, he is not necessarily considered effeminate for assuming roles more commonly associated with motherhood. Understandably, masculine connotations will to a certain degree leach onto the word *Father* simply because men are fathers and there is not much history of redefining the term in this way (yet). But, by refusing to allow these unintended and unnecessary connotations to trump the use of it, we exemplify commitment to the value of being nonsexist.

When it comes to choosing a word to refer to God, if we have a desire to glorify parental, personal, and freewill attributes, logic leads to the conclusion that the word *Father* is the best expression. Who would have ever guessed?

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