

Living the Lord's Prayer – Karl Barth, *abba*, and children

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*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*
(Matthew 6:9-13, NIV)

Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against
us.
And lead us not in temptation.
(Luke 11:2-4, NIV)

There are few pieces of Scripture as well-known, oft-recited, or beloved as the Lord's Prayer. It features in varying forms in the liturgies of Eastern, Latin and Protestant traditions alike, and is similarly familiar among non-liturgical Christians. Ascribed by Matthew and Luke to Jesus himself,¹ the prayer carries the gravitas of the Christian faith's own Lord himself instructing his disciples in the fundamental practice of prayer.

Yet despite its familiarity, as the Lutheran New Testament scholar John Reumann has observed, the Lord's prayer still evokes an 'awareness that somehow we have never yet plumbed its depths' (1964, p.iii).

Among the many who have sought to further fathom such depths was the great twentieth century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968). While Barth's exposition was never completed,² the extant materials published posthumously as *The Christian Life*³ offer a substantive contribution, especially his proposition that the whole of the Christian life is to be lived *in invocation of God*, corresponding to the prayer's petitions. In particular, his under-examined elucidation of the opening address of the prayer is rich with theological and spiritual insights. Accordingly, this will form the major focus of our discussion, before we consider some implications for the theme of Children and Spirituality.

¹ Variations on the Lord's Prayer are found in two Synoptic passages: in the context of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Mt 6: 9-13); and during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in Luke (Lu 11: 2-4). The liturgical form of the Prayer, sometimes known as the *Pater-Noster* or 'Our Father' in most communions follows the Mathean version, with – in some – the addition of a doxology: 'For thine is the kingdom...' In the Mathean context, Jesus is seen offering a correction, a true form of prayer vis. a vis. the ostentatiousness of Pharisaical or babbling, pagan prayer (Mt 6: 5-9). Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) suggests from the Lukan version that in instructing his disciples how to pray according to his own way of praying 'Jesus thereby involves us in his own prayer; he leads us into the interior dialogue of triune love' (2008, p.132).

² Barth set out to expound the Lord's prayer, alongside Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in what was intended to form part of Volume IV of his 8,000 page *magnum opus*, the *Church Dogmatics* (1936-1977). Like the Church Dogmatics itself, however, his exposition remained tantalizingly incomplete at his death.

³ *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Volume IV, Part 4: Lecture Fragments* (1981). Page numbers herein will refer to Barth's *The Christian Life* unless noted otherwise.

Barth on 'Abba, Father!'⁴

Barth's discussion of the Lord's Prayer comes as he seeks to develop a 'special ethics': that is, a concrete ethics for life lived under 'the command of God'.⁵ Barth distils the all-embracing command of the gracious God down to three words: 'Call upon me' (Psalm 50:15). From this, given expression by the Lord's Prayer, Barth introduces a central organising frame for his ethics: the idea that the obedient Christian life is one lived – in its totality – in *invocation* of God. This 'invocation' is much more than simply a verbal 'calling upon,' or prayer as it is conventionally understood. Rather it encompasses all action, thought, volition, belief; in fact a Christian's very *raison d'être*. It represents a fundamental God-ward posture and a consciousness of life being actively lived toward God in response to God's outreaching act in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. For Barth, a Christian's life is a *Christian life*

... to the extent that it is a human life whose purpose, will, and work focuses always on the one action of invocation of God, and which in its deepest and highest needs and desires, in terms of its achievements, is to be understood in its totality as a life in invocation of God (pp. 49-50).

This of course takes the idea of 'prayer' or 'invocation' – and with it, the Lord's Prayer – into an expansive realm: from being an occasional (and all too often marginal) practice, to being profoundly comprehensive, formative and pervasive across all of life. Whether verbalised or otherwise enacted, however, this invocation cannot be just *any* invocation, because God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ is not just any 'God', nor nebulous and ethereal. Christian invocation has a specific Audience and thereby a specific name upon which is called. This is given in the opening address of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father who art in heaven' or, in Luke's text simply: 'Father'.⁶

⁴ In neither modern translations nor extant Greek manuscripts does the Lord's Prayer begin with the Aramaic word *abba*. However the word is found in elsewhere in New Testament manuscripts (once on the lips of Jesus, during his prayer in Gethsemane, Mk 14:36; and twice in the Pauline corpus – Gal 4:6 and Rom 8:15.) The German biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias makes a compelling case that Jesus' original Aramaic prayer would have begun with the name *abba* (or derivative) (1964, pp.19–20). Barr's famous rebuttal, 'Abba' isn't "Daddy" (1988) modified popular interpretations of the meaning of *Abba*, disassociating from it overly sentimental connotations. Others have affirmed the general accuracy of Jeremias' representation of the term (see Fee 1994, p.411; Burke 2006, pp.91–96). Importantly, Jeremias writes, 'we learn from Matthew 11:27 that Jesus himself viewed this filial form of address for God as the heart of that revelation which had been granted him by the Father. In this term *abba* the ultimate mystery of his mission and his authority is expressed. He, to whom the Father had granted full knowledge of God, had the messianic prerogative of addressing him with the familiar address of a son. This term *abba* is an *ipsissima vox* [very voice] of Jesus and contains *in nuce* [in a nutshell] his message and his claim to have been sent from the Father' (1964, p.20).

⁵ "Special ethics" deals with the specific, concrete action of an individual at a specific time and place, in response to the gracious command of the living God who is not static but whose dealings with individuals occur as *kairos* – a special event between God and the individual (pp. 4-5). Unlike general ethics which belongs to the doctrine of God, special ethics falls under the doctrine of reconciliation.

⁶ There are, of course, at least two significant schools of thought which have challenged the description of God as 'Father'. The first is the critiques of patriarchal theology offered by feminist theologians. While much of this writing came subsequent to Barth preparing the material which became *The Christian Life*, as will be evident herein it is unlikely his conceptual commitments would have greatly shifted in response to the rejection of the 'masculine' term, 'Father' by some feminist writers. For our purposes we acknowledge the many valuable contributions made by the feminist critique, but will continue here with Barth on his own terms. The second challenge to God as 'Father' Barth does indeed address: that is the challenge posed by Ludwig Feuerbach and

Agreeing with the Church Father Tertullian that the Lord's Prayer is 'a breviary of the gospel'⁷ – and adding that even the address itself 'already includes all that follows' (p. 50) – Barth proceeds with 'a remarkable series of short meditations on [this] one word: "[Father]!"' (Webster 1995, p.175). God, Barth argues, must thus be understood and addressed by Christians as he actually *is*: their Father in Jesus Christ.⁸ In addressing God this way, the name Father must be used as it is by Christ when he instructs the disciples (Mt 6:9; Lu 11:2): always and only in the vocative case.⁹

This key point made by Barth has been given insufficient attention, but has significant implications for theology – usually conducted entirely in the third person – as well as Christian spirituality. Christians are not to speak *about* the Father as if he were some object of discussion or adoration, but *to* the Father in intimate, constant, invocation – even when speaking with others. Similarly, life is not lived for the self or even 'for' God but *to* God, in such a way that all of one's being, thinking, speaking, acting and decision-making are directed God-ward as an holistic calling upon the Father.

Because God is in Jesus Christ the Father of his children, this vocative cry is therefore 'the primal form of the thinking, the primal sound of the speaking, and the primal act of the obedience demanded of Christians' (p. 51). All thinking, speaking and acting that are faithful and obedient to God arise from and are encompassed in, this address: "*Father!*" This specific invocation is thereby the constituting reality of Christian being and thinking, so much so that Christians 'forget or deny that they are Christians,' Barth says, 'if they leave out this vocative in what they think and say, if their life is not seriously and finally sustained and determined by this vocative'(pp. 51-52).

his disciples (including Marx and Freud) that the concept of 'God' is simply an idealised father figure projected onto the heavens (see for example, Feuerbach's *The essence of Christianity* (1841), or Freud's *The future of an illusion* (1927).) Barth engages elsewhere with Feuerbach – positively in his early dialectical materials, agreeing that any human postulation of God, and all religion itself, is merely a human projection, for without God's intervention humankind cannot know anything of God who exists in 'infinite qualitative distinction' from humanity (cf. Barth, *The epistle to the Romans*, second edition(1968, p.10 [1921]); Barth's foil to Feuerbach's critique however is his doctrine of Revelation, according to which vis. a vis. humankind speculating or projecting the best of human qualities heavenward, God reveals himself as he actually *is*, the Creator of humanity in *his* image (thereby projecting himself 'earthward', if you like). For more on Barth and Feuerbach see Glasse (1964); or Greggs (2011, pp.15–16). For more on Barth and feminism, see Sonderegger (2000). Smail (2005, pp.12–13) somewhat provocatively suggests that feminist dismissals of God being 'Father' may themselves stem from a Feuerbachian projection of (fallen) human fatherhood/ patriarchy onto the divine, rather than allowing God to reveal the manner in which God is the true and defining Father; a suggestion in accord with Barth's thought seen below.

⁷ See Souter (transl.) (1919).

⁸ Contra Feuerbach, '[d]ivine paternity is not a postulate for Barth, a consoling or threatening projecting. It is that "which he is"' (Webster 1995, p.178). Barth refers to this as '[t]he impossible thing' that becomes 'possible and actual'; 'the inconceivable and uncontrollable fact that he is [the] Father [of Christians] and they are his children and that they have, therefore, the freedom to call upon him as Father' (p.77). Understanding God to be Father is vital to Barth for understanding the revealed identity of God: "Father" 'gives the required precision, the appropriate fullness, and the authentic interpretation to a word that in itself is indefinite, empty, and ambivalent, namely, the word "God"' (p. 53).

⁹ Grammatically, the 'vocative' case is the case of direct, first person address. Here Barth is at pains to reiterate what he says elsewhere in the *Church Dogmatics*: God is not an object to be spoken about (a 'Him'), nor even as the Commanding God simply a Subject who speaks and who is to be heard and heeded (a 'He'); rather God should be directly and in all things *addressed* as Subject: 'O Father!' Even when practical necessity compels the use of 'Father' in the nominative (e.g. 'he...') or accusative (e.g. 'him...') cases, it must be remembered, Barth insists, that 'if the word is to have a Christian meaning and content, even in third-person statements, it must be used in such a way that the function of the nominative as a *locum tenens* for the vocative is kept in mind' for 'seriously, properly, and strictly Christians cannot speak *about* the Father, but only *to* him' (p.51).

But who is this Father? He must not, Barth hastens to assert, be understood on the basis of human fatherhood. He is Father as 'the source and *raison d'être* of all other reality' being himself of supremely 'superior origin'; therefore Father denotes God as 'the one true Father whom all creaturely fatherhood' whether earthly fathers know it or not, 'must attest and confirm, but can do so only in a likeness, and not with equality' (p. 56).

God's Fatherliness, while being the benchmark of creaturely fatherhood, is thus qualitatively and indeed ontologically different to human fatherhood. This is seen especially in his inherent goodness, which is of such a character that in turn it cannot but evoke and awaken 'not forced but joyful' thanksgiving, praise and prayer and 'supremely cheerful and peaceful action' (p.59). That God speaks and acts toward his children in fatherly goodness is something to which they have no claim; that he should lavish them with it 'they can experience and record only as the one great and incomprehensible wonder of their lives (p.59).

God's 'Fatherhood' leads inevitably to the question, who are God's children? Contrary to his earlier teacher, Adolf von Harnack Barth restricts God's children (and therein Christians) as those to whom Christ has revealed God as Father, and made therefore into his brothers and sisters.¹⁰ As recipients of this revelation, Christians are those who 'find that the world and they themselves are loved in all the unbridgeable distance from God which God himself has bridged, so that now they too can and may and should love him in return ... crying "Abba, Father" to him – they who are far from him as those who are now very near to him.' (p. 59).

It is not Christians who decide that God is (their) Father; that decision lies beyond them, and was never theirs to make (p. 62).¹¹ Instead, the 'decision' of God being their Father 'has been made irrevocably at a very different place' (p. 62): it is Jesus Christ 'in whose work and word the decision is made and manifested concerning the nature and existence of the subject God the Father' (p. 62), a truth from which Christ then 'enables, invites, and summons' others to thereafter invoke God as Father (p. 63). In distinction from all others, Jesus Christ alone knows God as Father directly and without need for outside revelation because 'originally, properly and by nature God is his Father' as the unique Son of God (p. 65).¹²

The truth that God through and in Christ is the Father of Christians is not merely a nice platitude in which to find solace (or perhaps, against which to object). Just as God is in himself Father, so the corollary is that for humanity '[b]eing children is our true being' (p.73). Anthropologically, this is

¹⁰ The nineteenth century liberal Protestant von Harnack argued that the essence of Christianity is understanding the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of all humankind, and the infinite value of the human soul (1987[1901]).

¹¹ Nor does this give them any claim to superior 'concepts' of who God is: 'they are not made Christians by greater perspicacity or profundity... they have not come out as victors in the battle about the meaning of "God". It is just that, being the people they are, they cannot ignore or deny that God himself has spoken and speaks and that this means the end of all discussion concerning the word "God." "My children," they hear him say, and with this he becomes and is knowable to them as the one true and real God' (p. 54).

¹² In turn Jesus, 'in anticipation and promise of what all others are to be called, addresses certain people called Christians as his brothers and sisters, manifests God to them as their Father too, calls upon them to call upon God as Father, and confronts them inescapably with this reality and truth' (p. 65). Christians are thus a 'prophetic minority' who by their work and word witness to the truth that 'the vocative "Father" will finally, as the goal of the rule and work of Jesus Christ, be the word of all men and indeed of all creation ringing out in the harmony of universal invocation' (pp.69-70).

significant. But here in Barth's thought is a dialectic (or tension): Christ alone is ontologically Son of the Father (p. 72.). It is only in Christ and 'in virtue of God's Spirit coming upon them as the Spirit of sonship' that they are entitled and able to cry "*Abba!* Father!' (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:16). Nevertheless in Jesus Christ fulfilling of the covenant between God and humankind, 'divine sonship... ceases to be an illusory ideal and postulate and becomes a reality, the valid promise which is spoken to every human history' (p 75). Hence those who are not by nature God's children can and do find themselves elected by the Father in the Son to be his children, and can and must by the Spirit cry '*Abba, Father*' in and with their whole lives.

Children of God and... children

What has all this to do, however, with the theme of Children and Spirituality?

Barth's contention that 'being children is our true being', together with his assertion that God *is* in nature, Father, point us toward some pertinent thoughts. There are, of course, multiple ways of understanding and defining 'child'.¹³ However in Barth's thought, various 'senses' of being a child now intermingle. Children of God must understand themselves to be precisely that: 'children' – in the sense of being, as little children, beginners, learners, those entirely dependent upon Another. Indeed, '[i]f they will not be children,' he writes, 'they cannot be the children of God' (p. 79).¹⁴

In invocation of God the Father everything depends on whether or not it is done in sheer need (not self-won competence), in sheer readiness to learn (not schooled erudition), and in sheer helplessness (not the application of a technique of self-help). This can be the work only of very weak and very little and very poor children, of those who in their littleness, weakness and poverty can only get up and run with empty hands to their Father... The glory, splendour, truth and power of divine sonship, and of the freedom to invoke God as Father... depends at every time and in every situation on whether or not Christians come to God as beginners [i.e. children]' (pp.79-80).

In environments where much discussion of Christian spirituality is framed by the language of 'growing' in faith and towards 'spiritual maturity',¹⁵ this cuts deeply across such dominant discourse. Indeed for Barth it throws under suspicion any liturgical worship 'ordered and shaped by historical models and aesthetic ideals', along with any 'systematically constructed theory of practice of individual spiritual formation' (p.79) which intends to help one 'master' Christian spirituality.

¹³ In particular, there are (at least) three ways of 'being' a child: one is perhaps best described as a life stage (a child as the early years of life, however delineated; this is a common modern understanding of 'child'); the second is what Cupit (2005, p.19) describes as a more biblical concept of childhood, defined by dependence on the nurture and direction of others; lacking moral judgment or practical sense and the ability to understand, express themselves, and power, especially to meet one's own needs. A third 'sense' is a relational state – that is, being the child of parents (whether biologically, legally through adoption, or in some cases practically, e.g. someone who has been a 'father figure' by close and guiding association.)

¹⁴ Barth adds, '[t]he invocation "Our Father," and all the Christian life and ethos implicit in this invocation, can never at any stage or in any form be anything but the work of beginners... They can be masters and even virtuosos in many things, but never in what makes them Christians, God's children. As masters and virtuosos they would not live by God's grace. They might invoke it loudly and sincerely, but they would live by what they themselves can make of grace in their dealings with it' (p. 79).

¹⁵ Some of this conceptual language traditionally derives from interpretations of Pauline material (especially 1 Corinthians), which view wisdom, perfection and maturity in contradistinction to 'childishness', infancy, immaturity. This view is being challenged, however, by the recent work of Beth Barnett (2010; 2011).

For Barth, the child represents the beginner, the 'inept, inexperienced, unskilled and immature', and it is such, Barth suggests, who 'are dear children of the dear Father.' (p. 80) This is because God's way, far from being revealed to the wise and intelligent or 'great' (Mt 18:1-3) is hidden from them and given to little babes and those like them (Mt 11:26; 18:1-3; cf.21:15-16).¹⁶

To be a child of God, then, is not to strive for spiritual 'maturity'; nor is it even to strive to be 'childlike'.¹⁷ Rather it is to understand one's self to *be* a child in a manner which blurs definitional categories and embraces powerlessness, dependence, humility and needs of children as being true of one's true *being*. Invocation, then, is the calling out to God of his children, *as children*: for 'from the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise' (Mt 21:16; Ps 8:2).¹⁸

Implications for children's spirituality

This has implications for those concerned with (young) children and spirituality. Here are but a few:

- 1) Children can, by God's grace and through the revelation Jesus has given of the Father, understand themselves as children of the Father in heaven. Perhaps their capacity to understand what is meant by this truth is greater than adults because of their proximity to what is inferred by 'child' and 'children'. Regardless, understanding themselves as such is constitutive of their core being and identity – and God's.
- 2) God is not an ethereal or vague Being; nor is he overridingly 'Judge', 'Lord', 'King' or even 'Friend' (though all these things may be true); rather he reveals himself in Christ and by the Spirit to be, specifically, 'Father'.
- 3) However, whatever their experience of human parenthood, children (indeed of all ages) must be helped to understand that God's Fatherhood is of an entirely different quality (Mt 7:11): God is 'good' in the fullest and truest (indeed the defining) sense. He is therefore the standard of Fatherhood, by which all other parenthood is seen to be a shadow.
- 4) Children's lives, equally to adults, are to be lived God-ward as an invocation of God – a calling upon God in action, attitude, thinking – indeed their whole lives. Nurturing a consciousness of

¹⁶ This is because 'the wholly new thing that has come in Jesus is open only to those who are an adequate match, who are open to it, because they have nothing behind them, because they are not stopped or blocked up against it by any intellectual, moral, aesthetic or religious a priori that they have brought with them, because they are empty pages (p.81). Barth continues, '[t]his is plainly the point of the story about the child that Jesus set in the midst of his disputing disciples (Mk. 9:36 and par.); of the sayings about becoming like little children (Mt 18:3) and not entering the kingdom of God except by receiving it as a little child (Mk. 10:15; Lk. 1:17); of the Johannine sayings about the unattainable birth from above (Jn. 3:3) or from God (Jn. 1:3); of the statement in 1 Peter 2:2 about newborn babes' (p. 81). Barth also finds the Pauline statements regarding 'fools' (1 Cor. 3:18) a parallel to the babes or children of the Gospels (p. 82). In all this, Barth here comes close to the much later undertaking of 'Child Theology' see White and Willmer (2006) and Collier (ed.) (2009).

¹⁷ Seeking to construct a spirituality for Christians based on striving to become 'childlike', or using children as 'models' of Christian spirituality, would by its very nature undermine precisely what Barth is saying. It is also – subtly, perhaps – not what Christ is advocating in, e.g. Mt 18:3, where 'become like this child' does not mean 'strive to be childlike' but recognize and accept, in humility, that one has no entitlement, power, status but is, rather, entirely dependent. Thus rather than offering a starting point for constructing a 'childlike' spirituality, the point is to accept that before the Father one is always and only ever 'a child', a beginner, and to therein joyfully offer thanks and praise, prayer and petition, to the gracious Father.

¹⁸ The imperative of recognizing that as a child of God one is a child before the Father, may mean that (young) children are themselves more proximate to the experience of 'childliness'.

this God-ward-ness extends beyond 'prayer' to a sense of being ever-present to the Father, who is ever-present to them by the Spirit.

- 5) Attempts to turn children into 'little adult' Christians should be actively resisted. Rather, children should be allowed to remain childly in their relation to the Father. Our pedagogical models, where they seek to instruct children primarily in moral principles, bible stories, or which have their goal movement toward mastery of Christian spirituality, need to be re-examined: are we perpetuating a tendency toward spiritual self-achievement, or more probably, toward presenting facades of 'spirituality' to each other, by failing to collectively acknowledge that we always remain children before the Father?

Barth's exposition of the opening address of the Lord's Prayer therefore not only informs our understanding of God's nature and being – and our own – but in doing so opens up our theological understanding of 'children'. It also challenges our perception and models of Christian spirituality, including those we hold out to our children. For both adults and children are together, in our truest being, children of God the Father in and through Christ, and are thus to be enabled and called to live in the responsive invocation: 'Father!'

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