

This paper was written for the benefit of Art Kelly.

Call No Man Father

First, that everyone understand who I am and where I am coming from:

I was raised Christian Protestant fundamentalist. At the age of 18 I left home and God. I could not accept such a God. For twenty years I wandered agnostic, searching the sciences and philosophies for answers to life. Then, through a peculiar array of information, I came to know my Creator in his greater reality. I learned that he was an eternal high spirit being who took up residence within his creation of time and space, Ps 46:4, Ps 48:2, Isa 14:13, Heb 11:16, Heb 12:22. Refer also to the writings of C. S. Lewis, who describes spirit beings resident on material spheres. Our Creator did so in order that he be near his creative realms, to control and to administer them.

At that time I had a deep and unusual spiritual experience. I knew that he could reach down and place his Spirit on his servants, Judg 3:10, I Sam 10:6, 10, I Kings 18:12, Isa 42:1, Isa 63:11-12.

As a result of that experience I was forever liberated from allegiance to human authority or institutions. My loyalties were now directly with my Creator and with the heavenly Father. I did not need, nor could I tolerate, another human being intervening between myself and God.

I also knew with powerful conviction that he came down here to live as a man, that he did so to teach us, that he gave himself for us by submitting to murder on a Cross as an ultimate symbol of service, and that he rose again to ascend to his mighty throne on high. Thus he became victorious over death and offered eternal life to all of us sinners, Rom 5:8, I Tim 1:15.

I could not return to the mythological framework of my fundamentalist past, nor could I express allegiance to any human institution, religious or otherwise. I was a child of God, and not of human priesthods or churches. I found myself isolated from conventional religious social expressions.

Hence, when I come to the question of calling other men by the title of Father, I am conditioned by that religious experience and knowledge.

When I read individuals defending their practice of calling other human beings by the title of Father I cannot help but recognize the social conditioning that goes into such habit. While I shall not here trace the historical origins of such religious expression, I recognize the powerful influence it has on many Christian minds.

In order to get myself more fully informed about the arguments supporting such practice I did a Google search of the Internet. I had more than 2,000 hits on the phrase "call no man father." Clearly it was important to many people. I learned of the debate over Matt 23:9, and the urging to "keep things within context." I also went into the biblical commentators to determine the historic interpretation of this passage.

I shall now quote the passage in full, lest anyone accuse me of taking my arguments out of context. I use the Revised Standard Translation, but I could use others. To be fair I compared important words and phrases against other translations.

Matt 23:2-12

2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. 4 They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, 6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and salutations in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. 8 But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. 9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. 11 He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; 12 whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Obviously, Jesus was teaching us to not exhibit religious superiority by titles, garments, social positions, or public displays. We should not use social symbolism to show our religious importance. We should not place our personal importance over that of other human beings in our service to our brothers and sisters.

Within this context he gave the admonition about calling other men by the title of Father.

Universal agreement exists among Bible commentators, and among most individuals who have examined this passage, that Jesus did not mean we should not call our natural fathers by that title. To do so would be absurd. The difficulty arises when we extrapolate that application to other persons who show greater learning, wisdom, religious acuity, or religious position. We then apply the word "Father" to them by capitalizing for social honor.

Jesus did not mean "call no man father," he meant "call no man Father."

Since our New Testament Greek does not display upper and lower case, so familiar in modern writing, we cannot say with certainty how Jesus may have emphasized this word by intonation. Did he do it in such a way that his audience knew he meant Father, and not father?

As the many commentators have done, I could quote passages showing how the word father is used in the Bible to justify the practice of calling a man Father, but I do not feel it necessary. In all of my searches I did not run across anyone, amateur or professional, who made the distinction between father and Father. Personally, I felt that such failure showed a confusion in understanding of how Jesus intended his admonition.

We can further see how Jesus was admonishing us about pretending to superiority in religious matters.

They do all their deeds to be seen by men:

Jesus was calling attention to the fact that people want to be recognized for their deeds, rather than offering service without recognition or reward. Such persons need and crave social recognition. They must have assurance that they are important in the eyes of other people. They do not understand that reward is in heaven; reward on earth is not essential to service. In fact it is an obstacle to humble service. In other words, they are religiously immature, and spiritually deficient. If their priorities are earthly reward, not looking forward to heavenly reward as adequate, they may have placed themselves in the position of not finding eternal rewards.

for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long:

The idea behind phylacteries is that they carry spiritual power. Although we may regard the Jewish practice as superstitious yet Christians engage in a similar practice by wearing or waving crosses. That also is supposed to carry spiritual power, now displaced from the Laws of Moses to the sacrifice by Jesus. By such symbolism we project God's power to our desires. The symbolism is extrapolated even further by making the sign of the cross, with supposed greater spiritual potency. Such reliance on human symbolism is important in the eyes of human beings; it carries no weight with God. He looks upon the heart, and not upon human gestures. An immature mind with religious gestures cannot invoke God's power. A wicked heart with religious gestures cannot save that soul from eternal loss.

The idea behind long fringes (tassels) is their display of religious superiority. The person wearing the fringes carries more religious power than an ordinary layman, and can assume a closer avenue to God. The fringes symbolize a spiritual privilege not available to the common person. They become a social symbol which evolves into the notion of a garb to denote spiritual superiority. If priests, pastors, or ministers also dress themselves in religious garb they assume the same display of spiritual superiority.

Jesus was remonstrating against such material displays. Spiritual superiority does not exist in the Kingdom of Heaven.

they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues:

In modern terminology we should say **the best seats in the churches.**

We all know who takes the best seats in the churches.

The mother of the Zebedee brothers came to Jesus, requesting privilege for her two sons, Matt 20:20, Mark 10:37. Jesus said to her, "You do not know what you are asking." Such privilege was not his to grant. Further, the request was a presumption against God. He then illustrated with the Gentile rulers lording it over the Jews. He gave us a very specific command: we were not to lord it over one another in the Kingdom. By assuming ecclesiastical authority men lord it over other men spiritually. Such action is against the heart of Jesus.

salutations in the market places:

Walk through a Department store, or a Farmer's Market, or Wal-Mart and you will witness how priests, pastors, and clergy are greeted in market places. They are given special salutations.

being called Rabbi by men:

In modern terminology we can say **being called Father by men.**

The word Rabbi means one who is greater, or superior, a master in teaching. The word Father is used to denote one who is greater, or superior, a master in spiritual matters. Can any of us pretend to superior spiritual teaching? Is not our relationship with God one that goes beyond arbitration by another human being? If some of us are more educated, and greater in our knowledge, should we then make a public pronouncement of our spiritual superiority? Should we not recognize the abysmal ignorance of all human souls, and that none can be considered above another in the Kingdom?

But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren:

Jesus explicitly instructed us against such social recognition. We have one teacher, and that one is our Lord and Savior through the Holy Spirit. We are all brethren and should not assume to ourselves such titles, whether Rabbi or Father, Doctor or SJ.

And call no man your Father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven:

We can now understand the manner in which Jesus intended this instruction. I now put it back into the context that so many ignore or pervert.

Neither be called Masters, for you have one Master, the Christ.

None of us should presume to being a Master. Only Jesus deserves such designation.

He who is greatest among you shall be your servant:

whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

By garbing themselves in long robes, and ecclesiastical uniforms, men exclaim their religious greatness. Go to any Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran or many other churches to witness the long robes. While the persons who don such garments may pretend to humility of service their conduct belies their claim. They cannot be humble while assuming spiritual superiority. By exalting themselves they shall be humbled in the coming Kingdom. If they would humble themselves in this life they would be exalted in the next.

Is not this teaching by Jesus perfectly clear?

In summary, we can see that Jesus was admonishing against pretending to superior spiritual positions through social titles, garments, symbols or gestures. Such pretense has no place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

For myself, I experience great appall when I see another human being pretending to spiritual superiority by the title of Father, but I am driven to shame when I see a mortal human being, with all the fallibilities and weaknesses of human kind, being addressed as Holy Father. No human being on earth is holy.

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