

# SPIRITUAL FATHERING

## Fathering

The world seems to be full of men who have fathered children but yet aren't "fathering" them. Fathering, in the true sense of the word, is to pour one's self into his child and nurture or discipline him in love. This includes teaching, correcting, providing, affirming, and training him so that the child grows, matures, and becomes a healthy individual who can live and contribute within society. This man looks ahead to the time his children have children, which will afford him the opportunity to pour into his grandchildren's lives and see them grow strong and healthy. This is how the cycle of life is able to continue.

## The Spiritual Realm

Is this any different in the spiritual realm? We are God's children by new birth and by adoption, so ultimately, He is our Father. Because of this we are able to become fathers by fathering others in the spiritual realm of life. As fathers, we pour our lives into others so that they might become more Christ-like. We teach, correct, provide, affirm, and train so they will become strong healthy Christ-like individuals. Matthew 28 is known as the great commission, and is typically taught as focusing on "discipleship." What seems to be often missed is the reproductive model Jesus commands us to make. We are to reproduce disciples, "Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." This command must be carried out throughout every generation or we will cease to exist.

## Spiritual Fathering

In I John 2:12-14, John uses three levels of Christian growth: children, young men, and fathers. Most all commentators agree that this passage is referring to the spiritual, not physical, levels of Christian growth. In his Bible commentary, John MacArthur states, "These very clear distinctions identify three stages of spiritual growth in God's family. 'Fathers,' the most mature, have a deep knowledge of the eternal God. The pinnacle of spiritual maturity is to know God in His fullness." Further, R. C. Sproul in his *Reformation Study Bible* says, "They are fathers because their knowledge of God in Jesus Christ qualifies them to hand this knowledge down to future generations." Is that not reproduction language? They wouldn't be said to be fathers unless they had children, and since it is not referring to the physical family but to God's family, it must mean they are spiritual fathers. These men have reproduced spiritual children, and John is writing as a good father to warn them and to instruct them so that they might grow up and mature spiritually. He wants them to stop being babies, or children, and grow to become warriors who will eventually become spiritual fathers.

## The Apostle Paul

Second only to Jesus, a case could be made that Paul was our best example of a spiritual father. He makes an interesting statement in I Corinthians 4:14-15, "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (NKJV). He calls these his beloved children and says he is their father. He can only mean spiritual father, as these were not his physical children. In fact, John MacArthur commenting on this verse says, "Only Paul was their spiritual father." He was their father because He brought them to faith and was fathering them by teaching and exhorting them in the word of God so that they would grow and mature and no longer be carnal babies.

In Galatians 4:19 Paul says, "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you" (NASU). He uses reproductive, personal, family terms. My children, I labor so to form—reproduce—Christ in you. Paul sees these brothers and sisters as his children, and he labors as a good spiritual father to pour his life into them until they become more and more Christ-like.

Paul is a very good example of a spiritual father and even encourages Timothy, his son in the faith, to be a spiritual father. In I Timothy 2:1-2, Paul writes, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Notice Paul calls Timothy his son. Paul is his spiritual father and he even encourages Timothy to reproduce this in the lives of other men. It's also interesting to realize this is a command not a suggestion: we're commanded to be spiritual fathers just like Paul and there are four generations mentioned in this passage, Paul, Timothy, the faithful, and others. Even the "others" are commanded to teach/reproduce, which clearly indicates the process is never to end. If reproduction ends, we become extinct and Paul, by way of the Holy Spirit, **never** wants that to happen.

Paul uses these same terms in Philemon 1:10, "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment." Paul speaks of Onesimus, the runaway slave, as his son. He even used the word begotten—is that not a reproductive term? The word begotten means to procreate, to father, to bear, beget, be born, bring forth, and conceive. Paul is saying that he has fathered him in a spiritual way and even uses reproductive language.

### **Matthew 23:9**

There are those that may be concerned about calling a man on earth a "father" in the light of Matthew 23:9. In that passage Jesus says, "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for one is your Father, He who is in heaven." In this expression, He was referring to the use of titles in inappropriate ways to usurp God's authority over others. This puts someone in the position to act and speak for our Father God. Clearly the underlying issue here is pride and pretense, not the role of a father. Otherwise, it would contradict Paul and others calling their converts children and using titles as apostles, elders, etc., and even father in I Corinthians 4:15 as quoted above. The Bible uses and gives titles such as teacher, pastor-teacher, and others within the church to designate positions. Being a spiritual father is not a position, title, or an award given out; it is simply stating what the Bible says we as men should be when we're used by God to bring about spiritual children by His grace and His power. *It is all about Him using us!* It is not about us, it is about Him.

### **Only in His Power**

We would never say that being a spiritual father in the life of another is our doing; it is Christ in us by the power of His Holy Spirit. We are simply instruments, as a scalpel in the hands of a physician. No one gives the knife the credit—it's the doctor who gets all the credit and praise. So, in being a spiritual father, to Him goes all the glory, praise and honor. We are simply instruments being used by the Great Physician and Heavenly Father. *Our job as an instrument is to help people attain their purpose here on earth—to know and grow in Christ and to build spiritual fathers! In other words, to become spiritual reproducers.*