

Spiritual Fathers

1 Corinthians 4:14-16

Introduction: In our scripture reading Paul refers to the Corinthians in a very curious way. He calls them “my little children” because he had begotten them in Christ. This relationship between Paul and those he converted has caused some people today to conclude that we all have spiritual fathers; particularly those who have converted us to Christ.

The Catholic Church has their members call their priests “father” perhaps for this reason. Though I believe we would be giving them too much credit for finding a passage to justify their dubious practice.

Is Paul teaching we are spiritual fathers and mothers to those we convert, teach, or spiritually lead?

I. We are all grateful to those who brought us to Christ.

A. However, we are not to call anyone “father” in a spiritual sense (Matt. 23:9).

B. Though Paul calls his converts “children,” he never had anyone call him “father.”

C. We are all simply brethren (Matt. 23:8).

D. Job expressed this sentiment well (Job 32:21-22).

II. Paul is using a term of affection in a special relationship he had with those he converted to Christ.

A. This relationship had nothing to do with those he personally baptized (1 Cor. 1:14-17).

B. In fact, he rebukes the divisiveness that was borne among those who align themselves with those who converted them (1 Cor. 1:11-13; 3:4-7). Paul is not encouraging a practice for something he rebuked.

C. However, Paul does feel a paternal relationship with those he converted. Let's illustrate it this way: A girl who had lost her parents was educated by a guardian. Her guardian was a good and faithful man who took care of her. Though the guardian was never her father, the girl expected him to give her away in marriage. The guardian who taught the girl well was more properly the father in their relationship than the one who conceived her.

D. In Paul's case, he worked hard to maintain a fatherly relationship with those he helped convert and those churches he founded through his teaching (Gal. 4:19).

1. He didn't just baptize them and sent them on their way. He continued to teach them throughout his life.

2. As any good father, he was aware of his example upon those he converted (1 Thess. 1:5-7). "Therefore I urge you, imitate me" (1 Cor. 4:16).

III. Many people maintain a special relationship throughout life with those who taught them well in Christ. We would more commonly call them mentors.

A. I suspect such people often call them for spiritual advice.

B. I suspect such people recognize the godly example they maintain.

C. If such a mentor were to call them "my child," I doubt they would object.

D. But if that mentor wanted to be called their "spiritual father," I would suspect that relationship would end quickly.

E. The only way that such relationships work, is if the feelings for each other are mutual.

Conclusion: There was a preacher here once that did not start this congregation. He might have helped to convert a few individuals but he certainly did not maintain a godly example. He wanted others to call him their spiritual father because he was the appointed minister. In no way is anything like that equivalent to what Paul taught or expressed in his writings to those he converted. Nor would Paul want anyone to refer to another man in the church as "father" in direct violation of Christ's command (Matt. 23:9)!