

Twisted Scriptures

Spiritual Fathers

TWISTED SCRIPTURES – 1 CORINTHIANS 4:15

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There is a new wave of error being foisted on people claiming the name of Christ – “spiritual fathering.” It really is not a new error - it is simply a regurgitation of the old “personal pastor” error that retains its destructive errors while merely changing the titles of those willing to lord over other believers. As with the “personal pastor” deception, “spiritual fathering” takes something that is only mentioned marginally in the New Testament and concocts a “one size fits all” false doctrine that results in tyranny, oppression, persecution, exclusion, favoritism and a host of other evils, not the least of which is the creation of a multi-level “spiritual” marketing pyramid scheme and the divisiveness of yet another denominational sect.

Let us consider the scant New Testament evidence upon which the “spiritual fathering” error rests:

- Paul wrote of the Corinthians: “For though you might have ten thousand instructors [teachers, tutors, guides, guardians] in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.” (1 Cor. 4:15)

- Paul referred to Timothy as a true and beloved son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2, 18, 2 Tim. 1:2, 2:1) and reminds the Philippians that they already “know [Timothy’s] proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel.” (Phlp. 2:22) and tells the Corinthians that Timothy was “his beloved and faithful son in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 4:17)

- Paul referred to Titus as “a true son in our common faith.” (Tit. 1:4) Titus was with Paul when he and Barnabas went to Jerusalem regarding the question of circumcision (Gal. 2:1, Acts 15:2) and was his partner and fellow-worker ever after and was especially prominent in his work with the Corinthians. (2 Cor. 8:23, etc.)

- Paul referred to Onesimus, a runaway slave he sent back to his previous master, as “my son whom I have begotten while in my chains.” (Phlm. 10) Under Roman law, Onesimus’ return could have resulted in his being severely punished or even being condemned to a violent death – and even with such a letter as Paul’s, only someone trusting in Christ would be likely to face such serious, even lethal, possibilities.

- Peter referred to Mark as “my son.” (1 Pet. 5:13) Mark, also called John Mark, was a younger cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10) who travelled on Barnabas and Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13:5) but he returned home to Jerusalem after Paul’s dramatic confrontation with Elymas the sorcerer. (Acts 13:13) John

Mark was later the point of disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. (Acts 15:37-38) Apparently, still later though, John Mark became “useful” to Paul (2 Tim. 4:11) and John Mark is the author of the Gospel of Mark in which Peter is so evident as the primary source of information.

- The apostle John, in a metaphorical portion of his fatherly letter addressed to his “little children” (1 Jn. 2:1, etc.), writes of “fathers” who “know Him who has been from the beginning.” (1 Jn. 2:13-14)

That’s it. From this scant base, a whole system of teaching has evolved. Perhaps these teachers have chosen (or demonic beings have chosen for them –1 Tim. 4:1) such flimsy evidence for fabricating this “doctrine” because the evidence for refuting the error is only slightly more available from the Scriptures and this only to those who know, for themselves, how to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15), people not likely to come seeking truth from men claiming to be “apostles,” “fathers,” “super-apostles” and “patriarchs” anyway.

The Corinthians

Paul’s claim to be the Corinthians’ father is probably the most relied-upon “proof text” of the “spiritual fathering” error. But one needs to recognize Paul’s *purpose*, both in claiming to be their father as well as in writing to them in the first place. Paul wrote:

“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. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every assembly of believers and disciples.” (1 Cor. 4:14-17)

But whereas “spiritual fathering” requires *all* followers of Christ to submit themselves to a previously- and “apostolically”-approved “spiritual father” in order to remain in “God’s good graces,” Paul is instead referring here to an actual historical event in order to draw the Corinthians away from divisive and even deceived and false teachers who were drawing followers after themselves by stressing supposed differences between Paul, Apollos, Peter and even Christ Himself. (1 Cor. 1:11-12)

The background of Corinth is useful:

“Corinth was a key city in ancient Greece until it was destroyed in 146 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony in 46 B.C. and it grew and prospered, becoming the capital of the province of Achaia. Its official language was Latin, but the common language remained Greek. In Paul’s day Corinth was the metropolis of the Peloponnesus, since it was strategically located on a narrow isthmus between the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea that connects the Peloponnesus with northern Greece. Because of its two seaports it became a commercial center, and many small ships were rolled or dragged cross the Corinthian isthmus to avoid the dangerous 200-mile voyage around southern

Greece. Nero and others attempted to build a canal at the narrowest point, but this was not achieved until 1839. The city was filled with shrines and temples, but the most prominent was the Temple of Aphrodite on top of a 1,800-foot promontory called the Acro-corinthus. Worshipers of the “goddess of love” made free use of the 1,000 Hieroduli (consecrated prostitutes). This cosmopolitan center thrived on commerce, entertainment, vice, and corruption; pleasure-seekers came there to spend money on a holiday from morality. Corinth became so notorious for its evils that the term *Korinthiazomai* (“to act like a Corinthian”) became a synonym for debauchery and prostitution.

In Paul’s day the population of Corinth was approximately 700,000, about two-thirds of whom were slaves. The diverse population produced no philosophers, but Greek philosophy influenced any speculative thought that was there. In spite of these obstacles to the gospel, Paul was able to establish [an assembly of believers and disciples] in Corinth on his second missionary journey. (1 Cor. 3:6, 10; 4:15; Acts 18:1-7) Persecution in Macedonia drove him south to Athens, and from there he proceeded to Corinth. He made tents with Aquila and Priscilla and reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue. Silas and Timothy joined him (they evidently brought a gift from Philippi; 2 Cor. 11:8-9, Phlp. 4:15) and Paul began to devote all this time to spreading the gospel. Paul wrote First and Second Thessalonians, moved his ministry from the synagogue to the house of Titius Justus because of opposition, and converted Crispus, the leader of the synagogue. Paul taught the Word of God in Corinth for eighteen months in A.D. 51 and 52. After Paul’s departure, Apollos came from Ephesus to minister in the Corinthian [assembly]. (1 Cor. 3:6; Acts 18:24-28)

When Paul was teaching and preaching in Ephesus during his third missionary journey, he was disturbed by reports from the household of Chloe concerning quarrels in the [assembly] at Corinth. (1 Cor. 1:11) The [Corinthian assembly of believers] sent a delegation of three men (1 Cor. 16:17), who apparently brought a letter that requested Paul’s judgment on certain issues. (1 Cor. 7:1) Paul wrote this epistle [First Corinthians] as his response to the problems and questions of the Corinthians (he had already written a previous letter; 1 Cor. 5:9) It may be that the men who came from Corinth took this letter back with them. Paul was planning to leave Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:5-8), indicating that First Corinthians was written in A.D. 56.” (Bruce H. Wilkinson, *New Open Bible Study Edition*, “Introduction to First Corinthians,” 1990)

Paul actually *was* the first to come into Corinth and establish an assembly of believers in Christ. But against this simple usage of a picture of Paul’s “fathering” the Corinthians to keep them free of deception and error, we must, if we intend to rightly divide the word of truth, remember some other Scriptures:

- Paul wrote, “[There is] *one* God and *Father of all* who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4:6 - emphasis added)
- Jesus taught, “Do not call *anyone* on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.” (Mt. 23:9 - emphasis added)

- John wrote, “But as many as received *Him*, to them He gave the right to become *children of God*, even to those who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (Jn. 1:12-13 - emphasis added)

The Corinthians did not become “children of Paul,” they remained “children of God.” The Corinthians did not start calling him “Father Paul” and they did not give him a special place of honor or authority – rather, the Corinthians (at least the repentant majority) simply recognized his genuine role and calling in Christ and in their lives as compared to the claims of “the false apostles, deceitful workers, [who were] *transforming themselves* into apostles of Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:13 - emphasis added)

Just prior to his claim of “fatherhood,” Paul had instructed the Corinthians that “a man should consider us apostles as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” (1 Cor. 4:1-2) An unfaithful servant and steward, even one claiming to be an “apostle” or “father” or (especially!) “super-apostle” or “patriarch,” is no longer a genuine messenger of Christ but a promoter of himself or perhaps even a well-disguised worker of Satan. Jesus still commends those who, like the assembly of Ephesus, “have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.” (Rev. 2:2) Paul clearly insisted that his faithfulness to God was the integral, even primary “credential” by which the Corinthians would know that Paul, who had brought them to Christ in the first place – and not the false “apostles” – who was the pattern to follow in order to remain steadfast in Christ.

There is also a phrase in Paul’s claim to “fatherhood” that truly stops up short the “spiritual fathering” error’s practice – if one can simply accept that what Paul said is what really was. “...*in Christ Jesus* I have begotten you...” (1 Cor. 4:15 - emphasis added) and Timothy was his “son *in the Lord*.” (1 Cor. 4:17 - emphasis added) The Corinthians were not born into the family of God by the will of Paul nor was Timothy “adopted” by Paul just because Paul desired to be a “father.” Paul simply happened to be an obedient servant of Christ in the right place at the right time. And since he remained an obedient and faithful servant of Christ some years later when the Corinthians were in danger of drifting into error, he used the truth of his relationship and experiences with the Corinthians to Christ’s and their advantage.

About the only principle that can be truly drawn from Paul’s example of fatherhood is that only those who have personally participated in a particular individual or group’s spiritual birth event and who remains true (faithful and obedient) to Christ alone have any right to speak of being anything like the one true Father.

The traveling hucksters who use corrupted teachings and flattery to draw followers after themselves do not qualify to be genuine spiritual fathers. And no one can simply choose a man (or woman in some places where this “spiritual fathering” error is practiced!) to be one’s “spiritual father” and accomplish anything other than to remove oneself from the will of Christ and God. Spiritual children are born again from above (Jn. 3:5), who truly know God the eternal Father (Jn. 2:13-14) and whose fatherliness is both exemplary and evident (1 Tim. 3:4, 12, Phlp. 2:22, etc.) are those who are in any position to participate in any fatherly role in any other

believer's life – particularly that of any assembly of believers. “Father,” like “pastor,” is not a title or position over other believers – though after 20 centuries of deception and malpractice they are just that in most “church” circles – rather they are descriptions of one's lifestyle and leadership traits.

The Sons of Peter and Paul

When we examine the New Testament more carefully we discover a consistent pattern among these “sons” of Peter and Paul.

- Timothy's physical father was Greek and probably not a believer or even a Jewish proselyte since Paul speaks only of the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother and Timothy was still uncircumcised until Paul “circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all know that [Timothy's] father was a Greek.” (Acts 16:1-3, also see 2 Tim. 1:5)

- Titus' physical father is completely unknown and it is presumed that Titus entered Paul's circle as a young disciple in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:26) before accompanying Paul on the trip to Jerusalem (Acts 15:2) wherein “not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.” (Gal. 2:3)

- Onesimus' physical father is likewise completely unknown and Onesimus became Paul's “son” while Paul was imprisoned in Rome. (Phlm. 10)

- John Mark's physical father is conspicuously absent from the New Testament accounts – the house “where many gathered together and prayed” is even said to be his *mother's* house (Acts 12:12) Peter was familiar enough that the household servant girl Rhoda recognized his voice when he came knocking in the middle of the night. (Acts 12:13-14) It is also quite probable that Mark's description of “a certain young man” who was seized but who managed to escape naked from the garden of Gethsemane, is a description of his own experience that night. (Mk. 14:51-52)

The pattern that emerges here is similar to Paul's *experience* with the Corinthian believers. Both Paul and Peter were participants in the conversion to Christ of their “sons” and “children.” These “sons” performed faithfully *in Christ* and won, in the hearts of these “fathers,” a place of special affection – beyond or in addition to that of the agape love we are all to have for one another. (Jn. 15:12) In the absence of these younger men's natural fathers and in the absence of these older men's naturally born children (neither Peter nor Paul are recorded as having any children of their own), this pattern may be nothing more than the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life.” (Mt. 19:29)

The only principle that can be rightly drawn from these instances is that if, *in Christ*, these things occur – without anyone carnally or soulishly

initiating, forcing or enforcing the relationship – then these “fathers” and “sons” are blessed by God in return for any losses they may have sustained by turning to Christ and laboring in His gospel.

The talking-head television and internet celebrities who travel land and sea looking for “sons” from whom they can extract a “tithes” or “cover” under a “covenant relationship” are no different from the Jewish scribes and Pharisees who produced proselytes who were twice the sons of hell that they were. (Mt. 23:15) Anyone who chooses a “spiritual father” for himself is rejecting God as his only Father and will reap the consequences that come from that carnal or soulless decision. It is through the Spirit that comes from the Father that we know to cry out to our one true Father. (Gal. 4:6) – it is by listening to one’s own heart cries for a “visible representation” of our invisible Father or by listening to the deceptions of demonic voices that we are able to replace our heavenly Father with some man.

John’s “Fathers”

John wrote his first, fatherly letter when he was advanced in age. He saw his “children,” probably the assemblies he served in the province of Asia, as being threatened to be lured away from their steadfastness in Christ by the seductiveness of the world and the duplicity and deceptiveness of false teachers – exactly the same situation Paul faced with the Corinthians. In the passage where John metaphorically speaks of “fathers,” he includes two other categories: “children” and “young men.”

John wrote,

“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” (1 Jn. 2:12-14)

It is important to note here that John *never* uses the same words Paul used – words that have been used, misused and abused throughout church history to create and justify titles and positions and offices that simply did not exist in the minds or practices of the New Testament writers. In his letters, John *never* uses “saints” or “disciples” or “overseers” (traditionally “bishops”) or “elders” (except for identifying himself as “the elder” in his second letter to “the elect lady and her children” – 2 Jn. 1 – and his third letter to Gaius – 3 Jn. 1 – and for all we know for certain, he could have referred to himself as such because of the many other *Johns* in their circles!) or “deacons” or “apostles” or “prophets” or “evangelists” or “shepherds” (traditionally, “pastors”) or “teachers.” He uses only *family* words – “children,” “fathers,” “brothers,” “beloved” – an insight that is virtually lost in today’s institutionalized counterfeit churchianity.

Yet these three metaphors – “children,” “young men” and “fathers” – corresponds exactly to Paul’s understanding of the people of Christ – “saints,” “deacons” and “elders” or “overseers.” (Phlp. 1:1, etc.) Though centuries of misuse and malpractice have caused us to see a distinction between elders and overseers – some have even ridiculously concluded that “pastor” is synonymous with “bishop” or “overseer”! – there *was no such distinction* in Paul’s day. (Acts 20:17, 28, etc.) And the same centuries of misuse and malpractice have taught us that “deacons,”

“elders” and “overseers” are especially “anointed,” “appointed” and “ordained” “men of God” who hold both a title and an office by virtue of authority they believe and teach that God *delegated* to them at their “ordination.” But this is not the case at all in the New Testament – this is only the “church” paradigm at its most deceived and deceiving heights. There simply is no active, “learned,” “informed” professional clergy caste or class nor an active, unlearned and ignorant laity caste or class. The work of the ministry belongs to the saints (Eph. 4:12) and not to a group of men who claim to have a superior anointing so that they can act as lords over their own congregations. (Mt. 24:5, 20:25-26) The clergy/laity distinction is only a 2nd and 3rd century *addition* to the original way of following Christ, an add-on that still shackles and binds many believers.

Neither is John referring to a selected group of “apostolically approved” men (or women!) who are available to adopt “sons” so as to make them illegitimate as children of God. By speaking of “fathers,” John simply refers to what Paul calls elders and overseers and the lives of these “fathers” would match the description Paul gives of such men to Timothy and Titus. (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Tit. 1:5-9) Likewise, when John uses “young men” – if we can discard the centuries-old institutional add-ons to the word – we can correlate that to Paul’s description of “deacons” (“servants” – 1 Tim. 3:8-13) And when John uses “children,” it is comparable to Paul’s usage of “saints” – anyone who is not a saint is not a child of God (some have rightly quipped that in God’s eyes there are only “saints” and “ain’ts”!) And anyone who is not a child of God, not a saint, will never be qualified to be a leader (elder, overseer or servant) in the body of Christ!

About the only conclusion that can be legitimately drawn from John’s metaphorical use of the term “father” is that genuine elders in the body of Christ should have the same love for the people of Christ as our heavenly Father has for us – a love that can only be attained to by abiding and remaining only in Christ!

Any man or woman claiming to be a “spiritual father” whose life does not match up with the description of elders given by Paul cannot be anything but false ministers of a false righteousness. (2 Cor. 11:15) The teachers who are propagating this “spiritual fathering” error are nothing but spiritual frauds out to kidnap “sons” away from God and unto themselves to satisfy their own desires. Those who submit themselves to a “spiritual father” – apart from a genuine working relationship developed over time with an older laborer in the work of the true gospel – have introduced a barrier, a man influenced in varying degrees by the demonic, between themselves and their true and only Father. Beloved brothers in Christ, these things simply ought not be and they cannot remain as a permanent condition in a genuine believer’s life.

Let he who has ears hear.

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