

“CALL NO MAN FATHER”?
A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO A DISTINCTLY
UN-ADVENTIST CRITICISM

Hugo Mendez

In their polemics, modern Seventh-day Adventist evangelists have often claimed Mt 23:9 as grounds for condemning the use of the term “father” by Catholics as a form of addressing their ministers: “And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.” In this passage, Christ’s condemns the practice of calling another person “father” on the grounds that only God is “father”; no believer has another father “on earth.”

However, the New Testament elsewhere asserts that Christians do have other spiritual “fathers,” albeit of a subordinate order. In the New Testament, Abraham is called the spiritual “father” of even those gentiles who share His faith (Rom 4:16-17; cf. Gen 17:4-5); for this reason, he is invoked by the name “father Abraham” (Lk 16:24,30). Elsewhere, Paul identifies himself the one spiritual father of the Corinthian Christians:

I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. (1 Cor 4:14-15; cf. 2 Cor 12:14)

For this reason, Paul addresses one of his epistles to “my children” (Gal 4:19). John follows the same practice in two of his epistles (“my little children”; 1 J 2:1; 3 Jn 4). Similarly, Paul claimed to be the spiritual “father” of Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus, each of whom he addressed as “my son” (1 Tim 1:2; Phil 2:22; Tit 1:4; Philemon 1:10). Peter also calls Mark “my son” in 1 Pet 5:13. Ultimately, these forms of address may be traced back to the Old Testament tradition, which records that the prophets of ancient Israel were simply addressed by the reverential title “my father” (2 Kings 6:21; 2:12).

Accordingly, the spiritual fatherhood of God is not as absolute as a superficial reading of Mt. 23:9 suggests. Rather, scripture describes many human beings as spiritual “fathers,” and portrays them being endearingly addressed by others as “father.” In this light, Mt 23:9 appears to exclude only exaggerated claims to spiritual fatherhood, such as deny the unique

spiritual fatherhood of God.¹ Only then can one reconcile the entire spectrum of biblical data on this question.

Karl Keating presents a Catholic synthesis of these facts:

Catholics know that as members of a parish, they have been committed to a priest's spiritual care, thus they have great filial affection for priests and call them "father." Priests, in turn, follow the apostles' biblical example by referring to members of their flock as "my son" or "my child."²

Surprisingly, most Protestants endorsed this synthesis before the mid-nineteenth century. In postcolonial America, Protestant ministers were most commonly referred to as "father."³ Echoes of this practice appear in early Adventist history as well, within which the spiritual fatherhood of William Miller was an object of special regard. In her writings, Ellen White often refers to the Millerite leader as "Father Miller,"⁴ observing: "He was indeed rightly called 'Father Miller,' for he had a watchful care over those who came under his ministrations, was affectionate in his manner, of a genial disposition and tender heart."⁵ This usage of "father" as a term of endearment for a minister survives in the Catholic Church, though it has long since vanished from Adventism. It is quite ironic, then, that modern Adventists should so consistently exclude the use of "father" as a legitimate form of addressing clergy.⁶

1. One might draw an analogy to the title "pastor" (lit. "shepherd"), which, when applied to Adventist clergy, does not deny the Lord's unique office as the "one shepherd" (Jn 10:4,11,16; Ps 23:11; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4). Instead the title merely recognizes the real, however subordinate, ministry of "shepherding" entrusted to the ordained (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2).

2. Keating, Karl. "Call No Man 'Father?'" Accessed Online. http://www.catholic.com/library/Call_No_Man_Father.asp

3. Evidence of this practice in early American Protestantism, and an outline of the causes for its decline (most especially, anti-Catholic reactionism at the height of Irish immigration), is presented in: Holmes, David L., "Are 'Father' and 'Mother' Appropriate Titles for Protestant Clergy?" *The Christian Century*, Dec. 4, 1985, pp. 1120-1122.

4. White, Ellen G., Review and Herald, Nov 25, 1884. Also, White, Ellen G., *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol 4, 220.

5. White, Ellen G., *Testimonies for the Church*, vol 1, 21.3.

6. It is also ironic that modern Adventists freely use other (secular) terms of address that Christ also appears to condemn in Mt 23:8,10, includ-

Hopefully, Adventists will recover the more balanced approach to the designation “father” they once possessed. Their present synthesis violates a fundamental hermeneutical principle by interpreting a particular text in isolation from other relevant passages of scripture. A correction of this mistaken approach will reconcile their theology to forgotten aspects of the biblical tradition, as well as their own historical attitudes on this question. It will also allow the denomination to move one step closer towards transcending the debilitating influences of nineteenth-century anti-Catholic sentiment, which has done much to obscure the essential scriptural issues at stake in his debate.

© 2007 Hugo Mendez.
DiesDomini.com
First Draft, First Edit, 06.28.07

ing “doctor” (from the Lt. for “teacher”), and “mister” (a Middle Eng. abbreviation of “*maister*” or “master”). When applied to ministers, the former is especially susceptible to accusations of vainglory, since it is a title conferred for academic achievement.