

Why are Priests Called “Fathers”?

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A question to Foma (Thomas) magazine—a journal for those who doubt:

Hello, Foma. Not long ago, I went into an (Orthodox) Church. The services were going on; it seems they were reading the Gospels. They read rather long and unintelligibly; nevertheless, I could understand a sentence that sounded basically like this: Christ categorically forbids us to call anyone, other than God, fathers and teachers. This made me a little confused, because in the church, the priests are called just that—Father Sergius, and Father Vladimir. One Christian friend of mine says that Orthodoxy long ago departed from the commandments of Christ. As an example, she also mentions this practice of calling priests "fathers". My Orthodox grandmother goes to church regularly, but for some reason she only sighs when I ask her this question. Maybe this rule does not apply to priests? And if not, then does that mean that I as a Christian cannot call my own papa, "father"?

Oleg



Talking with a parishioner. Photo by Anatoly Goryaninov.

When Christ addresses the Apostles in the Gospels, He indeed says the words, *But be not ye called Rabbi [teacher]: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ* (Mt. 23:8-10). This commandment is remarkable in that it... was never followed by Christians! From the moment that the Church appeared, it was accepted that priests were called "fathers" and "teachers". Outside the churches—for example, in schools—the very same Christians called their instructors "teachers" without giving it a second thought. This applied even more so to their own fathers.

The Apostles, to whom Christ directed His words, not only forbade people

from calling them fathers, instructors, and teachers, but were even first to use those names for themselves. In his epistle to the Corinthian Christians, the Apostle Paul wrote, *For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel* (1 Cor. 4:15). That is, he calls himself the spiritual father of the Corinthian Church. The Apostle James advises, *My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation* (Js. 3:1). And in general, the Apostles in their epistles very often began with, *my children*. A man would only address his listeners that way if the listeners in turn called him "father".

How can we explain this contradiction between the Gospel citation and the Apostles' behavior? Either they were acting against the commandments of their teacher, did not understand Him correctly and distorted His teaching; or, in forbidding Christians to be called "teachers" and "fathers", Jesus meant something other than a formal ban on using these words with regard to people.

If we accept the first supposition we reach a dead end—the Gospels were written by the Apostles. Here we have a logical contradiction—if they themselves were called "teachers" and "fathers", then why did they have to leave this commandment in the Gospels? To their own reproach?

If we trust Christ's disciples (and plain common sense), then this commandment must be understood in another way. In that case, what did Jesus mean, after all?

We have to read this phrase in its context, without tearing it out of the Gospel story. After all, the Bible is not a collection of citations, but a whole and coherently connected text. Christ said these words about fathers and teachers in Jerusalem, several days before his crucifixion. At that time in the city there were especially many people, for the feast of the Passover was at hand. Knowing what would soon happen to Him, Christ made use of that time to give His final sermon.

But the religious teachers of the time—the scribes and Pharisees—were also using the people who came to Jesus for their own aims. Counting Christ as a false prophet and false messiah, they tried to compromise Him in front of a large number of people, to catch Him up in some phrase that could later be used as a cause for accusation against Him.

After yet another unsuccessful attempt by the teachers and fathers of the Israelite people to "catch Him in His words", Christ addresses the people with a tough denunciation of their religious instructors:

*The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: **[1]** All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be*

borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, [2] and enlarge the borders of their garments, [3] And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ (Mt. 23:2-10).

From the context it is seen that He was talking about things more important than word usage. Christ was rebuking here the specific state of a person who takes on the role of a teacher. Firstly, the Israelite teachers were not doing what they themselves taught, and secondly, they suffered from vainglory.

These Gospel words of course relate not only to those whom Jesus rebuked in person, but also to modern Christians and their instructors. What can come of a teacher's vainglory, and why did Christ rebuke it so? Imagine, for example, a history teacher who announces at his lectures: "I am the creator, commander, and mover of world history. Everything that I am telling you is what I myself created." Probably such an individual would evoke nothing more than pity. After all, everyone understands that the teacher of any discipline is no more than the intermediary conveying knowledge, and his instructorship is his service—be it of history, mathematics, or chemistry.

This is even truer about religious instructors. Their calling is to serve God. According to the opinion of Christianity, anyone who forgets this cannot be called a teacher. This is the kind of instructorship that Christ rebuked. In this meaning of the word, Christ's followers truly cannot and should not be called teachers.

If priests teach and preach without presuming that their mission is something exceptional, if they know that the teaching that they preach is not their own, and they are only leading people to Christ, then there is nothing to prevent them from being called teachers and fathers, as were the apostles.

But if you should hear that someone, even if he is a priest, calls himself a "new Christ", "a source of revelation", the "founder of the third Testament"; or even if he simply proclaims that his own spiritual experience is exceptional and the only true experience—he has no relationship to authentic Christianity. It is very often this kind of people who take the commandment of Christ out of context, explain it as a ban on word usage and strictly forbid people to call themselves fathers, teachers, and instructors. Often in sects, everyone calls each other "brother" (or "sister"). What does this change? Nothing! You can publish thousands of instructions forbidding the word "father", but at the same time become a real idol for your followers, although you call yourself "brother". But what difference does it make who deceived people give away their property and slavishly, fanatically follow— Father X,

or Brother Y?

Those who have made the greatest contributions to Christian teaching are generally called fathers and teachers of the Church. But they never presumed to call themselves saviors of mankind. The Apostles compared themselves to laborers in the field that belongs to God. Therefore, priests—spiritual fathers and teachers—always greatly fear becoming Fathers and Teachers to their spiritual children; that is, teaching something of their own instead of Christ's teaching, and leading people to himself rather than to Christ.

Foma

[1] Moses's seat is a metaphorical image of teaching. It was the Prophet Moses who received the Law from God on Mt. Sinai and gave it to the Israelites. That is, he was the first teacher of Israel.

[2] Phylacteries are bands or little boxes with the words of God's commandment written on them, which the teachers of the Jewish people fixed to their foreheads and hands in accordance with the commandment of God Himself. These bands were called phylacteries, or "preservers" because they preserved the people from forgetfulness of God.

[3] The borders of their garments were a reminder of God. So that the people would not forget Him, He commanded that they sew hyacinth blue tassels to the border of their garments. Thus, the "borders of their garments" consisted in the purple-light blue tassels, sewn to the borders of the Jews' outer clothing. Both the phylactery and the borders were only supposed to remind the people of God. But the religious teachers of Israel turned them into a symbol of their own authority.

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