

The Figure of Fatherhood.

AN IRENICON.

Without taking either side in the controversy concerning the Fatherhood of God, and with a strong desire to help to a better understanding of the term, I would suggest what may show that the dispute after all is due not so much to different views of doctrine as to different views of terms. To thus lessen unprofitable logomachy (surely "a consummation devoutly to be wished.") is the object of the following irenicon on the Fatherhood of God. Would it not make for harmony if it were recognized more clearly than it is, at least by the majority: (1) that there is a radical difference between the real and figurative meanings of fatherhood, and that, as used concerning God, the term father is figurative; and (2) that, taken figuratively, the meaning of the term is so elastic, that different men at the same time, and one man at different times, may legitimately use it with widely different meanings?

I. What is real fatherhood as distinguished from that which is figurative? Though the meaning of real fatherhood varies considerably, and is therefore difficult to define, we find in it something that is always there. In this it differs from figurative fatherhood in the meanings of which there is nothing that is always present. That meaning which is constant, without which there is no real fatherhood and which we therefore call its primary meaning is: male parentage of a human child. The secondary meaning, which varies and may include fatherly love, etc., is not absolutely essential to real fatherhood; for, as a father may not even know he has a child, he may be a father and not be fatherly. If therefore a definition of real fatherhood be asked for, the only logical definition is its primary meaning. While real fatherhood may mean more than mere male parentage of a human child, it must mean that. If, where the term father is used, it does not include this meaning the reference is not to real but to figurative fatherhood.

Can there be any question but that the reference is figurative when the term is used concerning God? When the Psalmist called God his Shepherd, God was not a real shepherd to him; the term was a human term figuratively applied to God. When in Isaiah we read: "Thy Maker is thine husband," we do not think of God as a real husband; but that the word, obtained from human relations, was simply used figuratively concerning God. When we speak of God as Father, whatever may be our view of Eph. 3: 14, 15, is it not true that the term, as used concerning God, is taken from the relation between a man and his child and is applied figuratively to God. As when we say of a certain child that his father is his God, so when we say that God is "Our Father," as when we say a certain father is godly, so when we say that God is fatherly: do we not speak in metaphors? This common figure of speech is defined as that "in which one object is likened to another by asserting it to be that other or speaking of it as if it were that other." It differs from the figure called simile because, in the latter, a word of likeness is always expressed. That which distinguishes it from the simile is that which causes it to be less readily recognized as a figure. As if then to show, that where fatherhood, elsewhere in the Scriptures, is used concerning God, it is a metaphor and so figurative, the "word of likeness" is expressed in some passages where we read:

"Like as a father pitieth his children
So the Lord pitieth them that fear him."
"Even as a father the son in whom he delighteth"

As the primary meaning, always essential to real fatherhood, is "male parentage of a human child," when the term is used, not only of the devil as father of men and of God as father of lights but also of God as father of men, surely the meaning is metaphorical. Unless God is a male parent, unless he has physically begotten a human child, he is not a real father. Surely for most, at least, it is not necessary to go further? As, in order that there may be male parentage, there must be female parentage, need we ask that, if God be a real father, how about the real mother? It would not be necessary to carry out this line of thought as far as we have, if it were not that many, who readily recognize as figures of speech the representations of God as Shepherd, or as king, yet have great difficulty in understanding that the representations of God, as father, are also figurative. Some even speak of the "new birth" as though it were through a literal begetting of the Holy Spirit. They fail to see, not only how crass it is to think of God as a real father, but also how narrow; that the term regeneration is but a figure of speech for that which, in the writings of Paul, is expressed by the figure of adoption; that the two figures, taken literally, are contradictory; and that though God is not a real father, the reality, the human mind strives in vain to fully express through the meaningful metaphor of fatherhood, far surpasses the reality of fatherhood itself.

While we most frequently use the term "Father" in speaking to God, or about him, because it is the most expressive single term we know, for God's relationship to us, yet I believe this relationship itself transcends what may be most fittingly expressed through this soul

enriching metaphor. As in times of sorrow, I have, in God's presence, been as "one whom his mother comforteth," I have felt God was a mother as well as a father. Again and again have I been helped by the thought of divine immanence—a truth which is not so readily conveyed to me by the figure of fatherhood. Because, however, of the elasticity of figurative language, if a man has a strong imagination, he may stretch the figure of fatherhood so that it will practically cover his whole conception of God. To this there is no serious objection provided it be recognized that other figures, such as kingship, may be similarly stretched. It should be borne in mind, however, that according to the philosophical distinction between noun, or the "thing in itself," and phenomenon, or that which it appears to be, we may think that God as he is, is greater than, to our limited minds, he appears to be; and so, still greater than any representation of him in our still more limited speech. If the feeling that, when real fatherhood is taken away, everything is gone, were displaced by the conviction that the figurative meaning is richer than the real, and that the reality, the figurative meaning seeks to express, is richer than the meaning of the figure at its best, how much misinterpretation and controversy would be saved. The "good measure" of the figure, even though it be heaped up, "pressed down and shaken together and running over," is still unable to contain the rich meaning of the reality of God's relationship to us.

II. It remains for us to briefly consider the elasticity of the figurative meaning of fatherhood and its relation to creation, regeneration, sonship, etc. While real fatherhood, because of its variable secondary meaning, may vary considerably, because of its definite primary meaning, its varying is greatly limited. On the other hand, because of the elasticity of figurative language, the range of possible metaphorical meanings of the term father is limited only as the powers of imagination are limited. The American school boy can say that Washington was the "father of his country." Wordsworth said, "The child is father of the man." Elisha called Elijah his father and was called father by the king. Job said he was a father to the poor and that corruption was his father. God may be the father of rain, as well as of lights, and may be the begetter of the dew. As a childless good man may be said to be fatherly to a lad who is enough like a childless bad man to be called the bad man's son, so the good God may be fatherly to those who may be called children of the devil; even though God and the devil are not real fathers. Not only may the one child have two fathers, but a man may be father to the same child twice. For while the frequent reference to the mutual contradictoriness of the fatherhoods of creation and of regeneration are correct, if we look upon fatherhood, in both cases, as real (for a father cannot twice be the male parent of his child,) yet, if we look upon them as figures of speech, they each may express an important truth. The question is not which is real, but, since both are figurative, what is the meaning of each. Whenever we use the term father otherwise than concerning a human male parent, the question is not does the term denote real fatherhood, but, rather, in the unlimited variety of possible figurative meanings, what is the meaning intended. In this variety some applications of the figure are more fitting than others. The sculptor who makes a child-like statue may be said to be its father. If he would give life to the statue, so that in many respects it would be like himself and capable of loving him, the term father would be more fitting. If, further, by means perhaps of another being, the living statue so increases in likeness to its maker and in love for him that the relations between them become greatly changed, the term father has a much richer meaning and is still more appropriate. So the references to God's fatherhood of creation vary in appropriateness, and are not so rich in meaning as the references to His fatherhood of regeneration. Because the figure may mean much, or little,—this, or that, which if taken literally may be contradictory—is not the great need simply that, when fatherhood is used concerning God, the one who uses it be more careful to make plain what he really means. In Browning's Saul we read:

"God made all the creatures and gave them our love and our fear,
To give sign, we and they are his children, one family here."

While the poet may sing of the animals as God's children, yet the figure of father is more fitting and full when used of God's relationship to all men, who are figuratively represented as being made in his image. The figure is more fitting still for those who, through Christ, are made more godly, and the term most fitting for Jesus Christ himself. This does not mean that Christ's relationship to God differs from ours only in degree. It simply means that the common term as used for God's relations to us and to his "only begotten son" has when thus used two different meanings.

How much does the relation between the terms father and child help us to understand the meaning of the one from the meaning of the other? In logic, father, like cause, is a relative term. As cause and effect necessarily imply each other, so do father and child. To what ex-

tent? All we can answer definitely concerning real fatherhood and sonship is, that the primary, physical meaning of the one necessarily implies the primary meaning of the other. On the other hand, from the figurative meaning of the one, while more or less may be indefinitely suggested or naturally expected concerning the other, nothing definite is necessarily implied. A man may be fatherly to another who is not filial to him. Since divine fatherhood and human sonship are figurative terms, we cannot necessarily infer from the meaning of the one anything definite in the meaning of the other. The meaning of each must be finally determined not by the term itself or by a necessary inference from the meaning of the other term; though both these ways may be helpful in finding its meaning. It must be determined by its use. As we turn to the Scriptures it should be borne in mind that, as the figure of fatherhood used in both its universal and in its limited sense is legitimate, whether it, as thus used, is found in the Scriptures or not, and that, as its meaning varies according to our view of God, the passages to be searched for an understanding of the meaning of the divine fatherhood are not simply those where the figure itself is stated or suggested, but all those that teach anything concerning the nature of God in his relations to men. In all honesty, however, it ought to be recognized that, in spite of the fact that the universal fatherhood is being so much emphasized to-day, and even if it be believed that it ought to be so emphasized to-day, yet the emphasis of Scripture is upon the fatherliness of God to those who are so led by the Spirit of God that they can love their enemies, pray for their persecutors, etc. Remembering that the expression is figurative, there surely can be no objection to saying, what to all may express more or less truth, that God is the father of all men; but it should not be ignored that, in the Bible, the great thought is that filialness towards God means enjoyment of his fatherliness. If, with the recognition that divine fatherhood and human sonship are elastic figures, it be recognized that the work of interpreters is not to put meanings or emphasis into the Bible, but rather to show what meanings are there and with what emphasis, how much misunderstanding and misinterpretation would be saved. My prayer is that this irenicon will give some clearer understanding of terms and thus help them out of the dark labyrinth of discussion, into the sunlight of the glorious truth that is figuratively, but fittingly, and therefore frequently represented as the Fatherhood of God. H. F. WARING.

C. H. Spurgeon and the Fatherhood of God.

BY PASTOR J. CLARK.

A recent writer in the MESSENGER AND VISITOR closed his article with an intimation that Mr. Spurgeon was a believer in the universal Fatherhood of God. Any such impression is totally incorrect. Perhaps before presenting Mr. Spurgeon's view as stated by himself, I may be permitted to quote Professor A. H. Newman's words regarding that greatly honored servant of God. Dr. Newman says:

"Mr. Spurgeon was a Baptist, and he nall the Baptist colors to the mast. All men honored him for his consistency. . . . Among the specially endowed men raised up by God from the time of the apostles, none seemed to have caught so fully and reflected so refulgently, as Spurgeon did, the whole truth of the Lord Jesus Christ." (MacMaster Hall University Magazine, 1892.)

Now for Mr. Spurgeon's own words:

"I believe that this prayer ('Our Father which art in heaven') was never intended for universal use. Jesus Christ taught it not to all men, but to his disciples, and it is a prayer adapted only to those who are possessors of grace, and are truly converted. In the lips of an ungodly man it is entirely out of place. Doth not one say, 'Ye are of your Father the devil, for his works ye do?' Why then should ye mock God by saying, 'Our Father,' when your heart is attached to sin, and your life is opposed to his law, and you therefore prove yourself to be an heir of wrath, and not a child of grace? Oh! I beseech you, leave off sacrilegiously employing these sacred words; and until you can in sincerity and truth say, 'Our Father which art in heaven,' and in your lives seek to honor his holy name, do not offer to him the language of the hypocrite, which is an abomination to him." (New Park Street Pulpit, vol. 4, p. 385.)

His belief did not change. Nearly twenty-five years later, preaching on John 8: 38, he says:

"I want you, dear friends, to look at the text, and notice two or three things that come out of it, as it were, incidentally. The first is, that the doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God is a lie. That is clear enough from this passage: "I speak that which I have seen with my Father; and ye do that which ye have seen with your Father." Then there are two Fathers, and there are two sets of children; there is a Father whom Christ calls 'my Father;' and there is another father whom he calls, in speaking to the Jews who hated him, 'your father.' The prayer beginning 'Our Father which art in heaven,' was never meant to be used by everybody; in the mouth of the ungodly it is altogether out of place, for God is not their father. 'Ye must be born again' before ye can be the children of God. The Scripture statement is clear and distinct: 'As many as received