

# The Pauline Names for God

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In the New Testament the most characteristic description of God is as Father. Clearly this stems from the memory of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is shown praying to God as his Father (Matt. 11.25ff.; Luke 10.21-22; Mark 14.36 and parallels); he invites the disciples to pray to God as Father (Matt. 6.9; Luke 11.2); and describes God as the Father who cares for his children (Matt. 7.11 and elsewhere). It has been strongly argued that this was one of the distinctive marks of Jesus' life and teaching.<sup>1</sup>

In John this theme is taken up theologically as the relationship between the Father and Son, and is continuously explored (for example 5.19ff.; 8.28ff.; 17). It is in Paul, however, that the concept of Father becomes explicitly conjoined in a formal way with the name of God. In the standard Pauline greeting he blesses his readers: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' (Rom. 1.7 etc. with variants). That this is in fact a Pauline trait is supported by the fact that God is only named as Father in this way in four other places: viz. 1 Peter 1.3,7; James 3.9; 2 John 3; Jude 1. Moreover, Paul takes the formulation a stage further by designating God specifically as 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (2 Cor. 11.31; Gal. 1.3; Eph. 1.17; Col. 1.2; 1 Thess. 1.3; 2 Thess. 1.2; and outside Paul, only 1 Peter 1.3).

What Paul appears to have done is to take the normal Jewish form of the name of God and to give it a Christian context.<sup>2</sup> This can be illustrated by recalling Jesus' reply to the Sadducees' question on the resurrection (Mark 12.26f. and parallels) where God is called 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', quoting from Exodus 3.6. That is, God is described as the God with whom the Patriarchs deal: he has chosen them and they have put their trust in him. But more than that, God becomes known as the one whose character is defined in his relationship with his followers. It is an attribute of God himself revealed in his action. So now, says Paul, we can sum up our faith as followers of Christ, his people, as we name God in relation to Christ: he is our Father as the God and Father of Jesus the Christ. And we can put our trust in him because he has revealed himself as that kind of God.

Paul in fact further pursues his Jewish heritage in relation to the naming of God. In the Old Testament God is frequently referred to by a quality revealed in his dealings with his people. So we find God described as merciful (Exodus 34.6), saviour (Is. 45.21), a refuge (Psalm 46.1), a rock (Psalm 42.9). Paul, similarly, calls, for example, God the God of patience (Rom. 15.5) or the God of hope (Rom. 15.3).

However, the characteristic name of God for Paul is 'the God of peace' (Rom. 15.33; 16.20; 1 Cor. 14.33; 2 Cor. 13.11; Phil. 4.9; 1 Thess. 5.23; 2 Thess. 3.16). Outside Paul the phrase is only found in Heb. 13.20 where it appears to be in some kind of liturgical formula which may have become part of the post-Pauline tradition.<sup>3</sup> It is notable, too, that in Paul's letters, except in one instance when the formula is not strictly adhered to (1 Cor. 14.33 – referring to the ordering of worship) this phrase is always found in the farewell passages, part of the parting benediction. This may be of some significance for it picks up the greeting which also refers to peace. 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' (Rom. 1.7

and other epistles). It may not be fanciful to suggest that Paul would normally expect his letters to be read out at the point when the whole local Church was gathered, namely at the weekly eucharist, and they could very well have constituted part of the fellowship greeting. In Rom. 16.16, in what appears to be an Ephesian appendix<sup>4</sup> he bids them salute each other with the 'holy kiss'.

At the commencement of the letters God is named as Father while at the end as the 'God of peace'. Does this reflect some kind of pattern? We start with the revelation of God in Christ whose grace and peace is proffered anew. But by the end of his admonition and exhortation we have once more been caught up in the reconciling work of Christ through whom God has wrought his peace. This then is the primary expression of God's saving activity by which he is to be known. God is the one who gives peace because he is the one whose nature is peace. It is fitting, therefore, that Paul's last prayer for each Church is that they receive gifts from the 'God of peace'.

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*[Readers are reminded that the views expressed by the author do not necessarily represent those of Church Society].*

Endnotes:

- 1) This was classically done by J. Jeremias in, for example, *New Testament Theology* (S.C.M., London, 1971) but see also articles by James Barr: *Journal of Theological Studies*, 39 (1988) and *Theology* May 1988 (XCI-741).
- 2) See G. A. F. Knight: *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (S.C.M., London, 1959) chapters 3 and 4; W. Eichrodt: *Theology of the Old Testament* (S.C.M., London, 1961) I, chapter V.
- 3) That this can be recognized as particular to Paul is confirmed by the fact that other areas of the New Testament have their own emphasis. The Johannine literature underlines God's love. (1 John 4.8 and the discourses on love John 3.10f.; 13.23ff.; 14.15-31). (Paul couples love and peace in 2 Cor. 13.11). God is described as 'the living God' in 1 Tim. 3.15; 4.10; 6.17; Heb. 3.12; 9.14; 10.31; 12.22 (cf. 2 Cor. 3.3); as 'saviour' in 1 Tim. 1.1; 2.3; Titus 1.3; 3.4; Jude 25; as 'almighty' in Rev. 16.7; 9.6. It is interesting to find that the later strands of the New Testament seem to tend to use what may be described as more characteristically Greek titles as opposed to the Hebraic shalom, peace, and the Dominical Father.
- 4) See the discussion of the possible solution of the textual issues set by Romans 15-16 in, for example, F. V. Filson: *A New Testament History* (S.C.M., London, 1965) p. 263f. and F. J. Leenhardt: *The Epistle to the Romans* (Lutterworth, London, 1961) pp. 25-29.