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Table of Contents

Christological Exegesis of Theophanies and the Making of Early Christian Theology	
Bogdan G. Bucur	97
Communing with the Betrayer: The Presence and Significance of Judas at the Last Supper among Patristic Sources	
Charles R. Schulz.....	125
The Burden of Kneeling: The Bavarian Kneeling Controversy and the Debate between Ignaz von Döllinger and Adolf von Harless	
James Ambrose Lee II	141
Theological Observer	173
Fatherly Spiritual Leadership	
Book Reviews	177
Books Received	185

Theological Observer

Fatherly Spiritual Leadership

The loss of many young people from congregational memberships over the last fifty years has triggered various reactions and programs to reverse this trend. Significant attention and energy has been directed toward various church growth plans, ranging from alternative liturgical ceremonies, novel orders of service, and the inclusion of popular music styles in the Divine Service, to social events intended to retain or attract people of post-confirmation age all the way into their thirties or forties. In spite of these efforts, correction of the demographic downturn in congregational attendance and membership has been unsuccessful.

Regardless of what else one might think of these efforts, one of the ways they miss is by aiming at a demographic that is already too old. The general direction of a child's worldview, while still immature, is already largely established at around age 10. Pastors have long recognized this in their confirmation classes: most confirmation students don't change radically during the course of confirmation education. They may learn quite a bit, but their attitude and orientation to the Scriptures is already largely in place when they walk into their first class in sixth or seventh grade.

Because of this, pastors also recognize that catechesis must find its roots and ongoing sustenance in pious practices in the home. As a result, many pastors have encouraged and seen a revitalization of household piety within their congregations. Such piety may include daily hearing of Scripture, singing of hymns, prayer, and reflection on and application of the word of God as assisted through the Small Catechism or similar prayer book. When the word of God is heard, sung, prayed, and lived in faith and love, children are markedly impressed by the importance of Christian faith and life, both as it is lived day to day and as it finds its culmination and lifeblood in the Divine Service each Lord's Day.

Such an awareness of the importance of home catechesis and piety is growing in many places, and should be further encouraged and taken up where it has not yet been. This practice assumes and expects the active role of parents in home catechesis. While success rates vary in getting parents involved, pastors can begin in two ways: first, by modeling this kind of catechesis in their own homes and leading it when others are visiting or when they are visiting members in their homes; and second, by explicitly and actively teaching and encouraging a core group of member households also to practice it. As these other households also take up and grow in

their practice of regular prayer and catechesis, word will spread to other households, further encouraging them.

Fathers are particularly central to this catechesis, and pastors and congregations should emphasize and even focus on their spiritual leadership in the home. “Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph 6:4).¹ Without a doubt, both fathers and mothers catechize. The admonition for fathers does not exclude mothers, but impresses upon fathers the seriousness and vitality of their role.

In this light, congregations should be aware of a particular American heritage that subtly and implicitly marginalizes the father’s role in the home. Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture*² identifies the nineteenth-century transition of men working in the home to working outside of the home in factories, offices, and other company locations as a significant contributor to what she calls the “sentimentalization” of American culture. Prior to industrial and economic developments, the household was the center of economic activity, and both husbands and wives contributed robustly to economic production. With economic life centered in the home, both men and women worked together as partners, in household organization, work, education, nurture, leisure, and—most importantly—in catechesis and prayer.

The departure of men from the household to the company may have given men a leg up in income, but it also shifted men away from ongoing and fundamental influences on household culture. The dissolution of a common working environment pushed husbands and wives into different contexts, isolating them and breaking down their partnership. What has long been interpreted as an advantage to men—working outside the home—actually served to marginalize husbands and fathers from an integrated place in the home, and the household from his vital leadership.

The gradual movement in the nineteenth century of production and material income from the home to the company also meant that women took on a new kind of cultural influence. Relieved to some extent from preindustrial demands of domestic production, some women turned their energies to new, refined feminine virtues, such as temperance, elegance, demureness, and sentiment. Such virtues were promoted through the expansion of popular writing in this time period. Any piety practiced in the home became more associated with the wife’s role—newly

¹ Scripture quotations are from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

² Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

refined and sentimentalized—in contrast to the man’s role of business and politics out in the world.

Even the so-called “Muscular Christianity” of the Victorian era was not a reaction to the sentimentalization of Anglo-American society, but a partner with it. This “Christianity” was hardly concerned with doctrine and piety, but with patriotism and civic duty (so that one could engage one’s business or political opponents with courtesy), the care and protection of women (keeping up the domestic-social divide), and athleticism (the masculine counterpart to the elegant beauty of the ideal woman). The result by the end of the nineteenth century was an underlying social antipathy between the sexes, with women having captured the sentimentalized domestic sphere of life and men the modern, industrial, economic sphere.

These developments have had lasting effect, in that life outside the home (work and activity) remains sharply divided from life inside the home (rest and recovery), now also for wives and children (in school and other organized activities). The bifurcation of home and work life has resulted in the radical individualization of the lives of those who occupy the same household, with family members interacting less and less with one another in meaningful ways. Family devotions or catechesis, where they occur at all, are nevertheless often at the behest of the mother, due to the vestigial association of piety with the refined, feminine, domestic life.

I can hardly suggest turning back time, of course. But the first step in any change is recognizing deficiencies that need to be addressed. A truly powerful revitalization of catechesis and piety in the home must account for the breakdown of domestic life brought about by the sea change in American economic society. Husbands and fathers must be explicitly aware of the ways they are drawn away from household life, and they must make conscious choices to restore their presence and leadership in the home, especially in catechesis.

The point of all this is not to pit men against women, husbands against wives, fathers against mothers. The contemporary world has already done this. Rather, we should see that in making a helper meet for Adam, the Lord expected husbands and wives to partner in their tasks, following the loving, sacrificial leadership of the husband. Such a partnership may be revitalized with fathers taking up again their place in domestic life, especially in the catechesis of the family. Husband and wife are not to become one flesh only to divide their lives so drastically that each goes his own way, so that the primary domestic task of nurturing spiritual life is forgotten and lost.

Catechizing is not just enforcing memory work or saying grace at the table, although it includes such things. The Christian life of piety and catechesis depends on the eager practice of praying the word of God, by which the word fills the hearts

and minds of those in the home; teaches for understanding; moves to mercy, joy, and compassion; and finally finds activity in good works of love. Catechesis—the passing on of true piety—is a way of life that is not only taught, but modeled and practiced.

How can fathers do this under current economic and social structures and pressures? First, although many households are dispersed in various directions throughout the day, fathers can intentionally and even ritually mark the day with catechesis in the morning and the evening. Morning time in many cases can include the gathering of the household, for whom the father reads aloud the word of God. Not only does he teach it, but he also models what is done with the word by giving thanks for the new day; by asking the Lord for faithfulness, holiness, and protection; and by blessing the household as they move into their daily tasks. The evening, likewise, can be marked when all or most have returned from daily tasks, with reading, singing, and prayer for repentance, protection, and refreshment in the night. The father can lead the way by confessing any sins, asking for forgiveness, and also forgiving the sins of those with him. Before bed, the father can again gather the family, even if very briefly, to ask for Jesus' blessing and protection through the night, to model the committing of one's life and cares to the Lord.

In other times of the day, the father strives to model the character of the Christian life, such as faithfulness, courage, confession, and compassion. He is the first to confess his sins or to be open to rebuke; he is the first to exercise discipline when needed, not to exasperate or lord his authority over others, but in order to lead them into forgiveness. He is the first to forgive.

Fatherly leadership in the spiritual life depends ultimately on Christ's authorization of this office, an authorization that expects sacrificial love and catechesis in the fear and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. It lives out of Christ's institution and promises; it is invigorated by Christ's own forgiveness, love, compassion, and rejuvenation. Indeed, a father with little or no earthly status is still able to confess his faith and thereby instruct his children; it is a joyful task that he can never be stripped of, no matter how much of his earthly life and possessions are taken from him. Strengthened and encouraged by Christ, fathers should resist and flee the temptation to ignore or avoid spiritual teaching and example. Let them embrace this holy and blessed task, commissioned by Christ. Thus they can practice it with piety, courage, and deliberation.

Gifford Grobien