

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

July 2001. Volume Five, Number Three



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For the Life of the World is published quarterly by Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 6600 North Clinton Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46825. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the written consent of the publisher of *For the Life of the World*. Copyright 2001. Printed in the United States. Postage paid at Fort Wayne, Indiana. To be added to our mailing list please call 219/452-2150 or e-mail Rev. Scott Klemsz at CTSNews. *For the Life of the World* is mailed to all pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the United States and Canada and to anyone interested in the work of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Recovering Christian Spirituality

For the Family



By Dr. Beverly K. Yahnke, Ph.D.

As baptized children of a loving Heavenly Father, we prize our membership in the family of faith that has been created, redeemed, and is sustained by our Triune God. We are heirs to the eternal abundance of God's grace, and we are eager to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him.

In stark opposition to those eternal realities, the state of the family on spaceship earth is entirely more fragile and its fate far less certain. Let's begin with an abridged diagnosis: the postmodern family is alive, not particularly well, and struggling mightily to parent its children. Families are marinating in a culture that has grown progressively chaotic and Godless. Our culture has invited us to become saturated with self at nearly toxic levels; loneliness and discontent are legion among us. In the relentless quest for personal control and self-esteem, we have euthanized marriages, diminished precious time with our children, and substituted the "new family values" of wealth, well-being, happiness, and acquisition for the holy virtues given us by God.

The media have profiled the decline of the American family with heart-breaking trend lines and graphic video portraits. The media, however, have missed the point. The well-kept secret is that the postmodern family is in spiritual crisis.

The church can remain a spectator in the bleacher seats of this cultural arena, or we can adopt a sense of urgency regarding the need to provide Christ's gifts to the faithful, as well as refuge for the spiritually homeless and remedy for all kinds of postmodern nomads traveling without hope or compass. The challenge is great; the media have profiled the decline of the American family with heart-breaking trend lines and graphic video portraits. The

media, however, have missed the point. The well-kept secret is that the postmodern family is in spiritual crisis.

The less well-kept secret is that some churches are in spiritual crisis as well, and families have been sent away empty. Some of our churches have lost spiritual altitude. Creedal statements, if they are used at all, may be stretched beyond recognition, and an indifference to holy things is epidemic. God's Holy Word is seen as useful only if it

teaches "What Jesus Would Do", and homilies of Law and Gospel are dissed in favor of the puppet sermon *du jour*. We have brought into our churches the Trojan horse of American Evangelicalism, replete with happy theological trinkets, and have

unpacked all manner of heterodoxy and spiritual mayhem. In so doing, we have lost our vision regarding what the church must do in service of today's families.

As a Christian psychologist, I'm keenly aware that our church must be eager to distribute Christ's gifts. I see countless families struggling across my clinical threshold, choosing to remedy their lives with only the poverty of their own will in concert with psychological resources. I'll be the first to insist that psychological help can be valuable as individuals choose to learn more effective life strategies. Yet, many of these souls, cloaked in anxiety or depression, have also been bruised or hardened by sin, guilt, or shame. Most have not even considered the need to receive spiritual care, which is essential for true healing. What is it that the family of faith needs in this world? The answer is not more family psychotherapy.

We need the Triune God—desperately, completely—throughout this world and into the next. We need to acknowledge our failures, our inclinations to live by the prompting of our own sinful hearts, and we need to admit that we come before our God empty handed, with nothing we can offer Him except our sin.

We need to return to our churches with reverence each LORD's day where the risen Christ has promised to be present in His Holy Word and Sacraments. We must be fed so that our faith may be nurtured and sustained through participation in our LORD's holy meal. We must receive His forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation as we eat and drink the very body and blood of Christ.

We need to hear from our pulpits how Almighty God donned human flesh and lived a perfect life under the Law. We need to hear that the very Son of God took all of our sin into His own body, died, rose, and ascended into heaven, making us clean, pure, and holy in His own righteousness. We need to hear that we have been given Christ's own Spirit to bring us to saving faith, to encourage, uplift, sustain, and sanctify us. And we must quiet our raging lives and listen, for faith comes by hearing after all.

The bottom line is that the family of faith will perish without Christ's gifts. For it is only as God's new creations that we will ever find the real hope required to sustain us in the face of life's hardships, fear, and reversals. It is only when, by faith, we take possession of God's holy absolution that we are reconciled with Him and with one another, thereby allowing us to begin anew. And it is in new beginnings wherein we stop bludgeoning ourselves and one another with the blunt history of sin and failure that has defeated our family. It is only when we receive Christ's gifts that we are given His strength to live faithfully and sacrificially in marriages that aren't perfect. We are given His love so that we might love and discipline our children prayerfully through the early joys as well as the later land mines of adolescence and beyond; and it is only when we are given His peace that we are equipped to have Him work out His will in us, through us, or in spite of us as we serve Him in our vocation as parent, child, or spouse.

Beyond the Divine service, today's churches are nearly frothing with desire to create novel family programs. This is an opportunity for our church to reach deeply into the wealth of our Lutheran tradition. It is a time to teach our practice and our doctrine as we "Lift High the Cross." In these days, the fascination



with spirituality of all sorts pulses through our culture, yet families hunger for a safety net of certainty in life. Our called and ordained servants must teach the curriculum of faith with love and authority to pagans and pew-sitters alike. How can the church do such noble things?

We began with a diagnosis of the family, so it is fitting that a prescription be offered as well. Perhaps pastors will receive these humble pleas as both a reminder and an encouragement in the face of all that must be done to recover and renew the spiritual health and the soul of the family. Pastors, we must rely upon you to do the following:



✠ Teach us the Catechism, thoroughly and unapologetically. We have at least two generations of church members and pagans alike who know fearfully little about the promises of God and His means of grace. Help us to cultivate a life of prayer and teach us to meditate on God's Holy Word.

✠ Help us to understand that the soul requires ongoing spiritual care provided by a physician of the soul just as surely as teeth require a dentist. Stand with us in the stead and by the command of our LORD providing pastoral care that is drenched in prayer, Scripture, and Sacrament. Assure us that you are eager to offer individual spiritual care and that you welcome the opportunity to bless us, to pray with us and for us in all the seasons of our family life.

✠ Patiently teach us to understand and to treasure the rite of individual confession and absolution. If we are given the courage to ask, comfort us with a healing titration of Law and Gospel so that, by God's grace, we can translate our language of emotional pain, blame, and helplessness into the spiritual language of sin, guilt, repentance, and absolution.

✠ Teach us about the theology of the cross, for we are drawn to the theology of glory as innocently as bugs to a lethal flame in the darkness. We need to believe that struggle and suffering has meaning and that God continues to draw us to Himself in the midst of our despair. Help us to discern Godly answers and to find hope in response to the most perplexing questions of family life, "Why me? Why now? Why not?" Don't allow us to imagine that tribulation is a failure of faith and that affliction is proof of God's absence, neglect, or disfavor.

✠ Finally, teach us what it means to be a Christian family in the midst of a dying world. Teach us that being parent, child, or spouse is a holy vocation, given us by God. Remind us that we are never alone, for our God is faithful to His promises. Reassure us that God will equip us thoroughly for all that is required of us and that He will provide us with sufficient grace to live outside of ourselves in humility and in service to the people He has given us to love.

By God's grace, our families will cling to their identity as His children and therein will find hope and confidence for daily living. In God's love and promises, our families will find security and purpose. And as we continue to receive, by faith, the gifts of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our families will find peace and LIFE in a world of tumult and death.

Dr. Beverly K. Yahnke is Executive Director of Christian Counseling Services in Milwaukee, Wis. and serves on the Board for Higher Education of the LCMS.

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