

A Word to Sheepdogs

FOREWORD

“The gates of hell will not prevail,” said Jesus regarding his church. Yet let’s face it; the church is clearly in the devil’s crosshairs just as it has been since the days of the apostles.

Tim Pauls offers concrete help to weary pastors and wary parents as they face the onslaught. He is not oblivious to the ominous signs: the church has lost its privileged position it once enjoyed in society and cultural forces in direct opposition to Christian doctrine have been unleashed. In our cancel culture the Christian profession is not only unpopular, but dangerous. Statistical decline has been the steady pattern among churches large and small for decades now, and prospects for the future are not encouraging. And American birthrates are alarmingly low.

Yet, there is cause for hope, Rev. Pauls contends in this third in his series of essays on the church as family. While earlier he argued that the church is a family writ large, here he demonstrates that the family is a church writ small. In both cases our Lord’s promise holds true: “I will build my church.” The gates of hell be damned; Christ Jesus remains our sure and certain foundation in these days of dark distress.

Yet no one said it would be easy. Raising children to responsible and faithful adulthood in our chaotic culture is not for the faint of heart. As a father, Pastor Pauls knows the difficulty firsthand. As a shepherd, he sees the challenge clearly. Yet with wit, charm, and wisdom he provides parents with hands-on tools to fill hearth and home with the faith once delivered to the saints so that yet another generation may teach it to their children with confidence and grace. Every page is chock full of practical, winsome advice for harried moms, dads, and pastors. Read it and rejoice!



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The Congregation as Family

Part III: The Family as Congregation

Rev. Tim Pauls

I. The Field of Battle

The Alarm

Picture a Sunday school class of ten 3-year-olds. They're a busy bunch. They've learned a Bible story, they've sung a song and maybe practiced a memory verse; and now they're on to the craft for the last twenty minutes of class under the careful eye of their teacher.

God bless Sunday school teachers.

Statistically within the LCMS, however, maybe five of these children will still be attending church to confess the faith on their Confirmation Sunday.¹ If that's not dismal enough, only 1-2 of those who are confirmed will still be attending church after college.²

Out of ten 3-year-olds, only one or two will attend church as young adults; and I don't know many Sunday schools that have ten 3-year-olds to begin with.

When these churchgoing 3-year-olds are in their twenties, where will they find pious spouses? One imagines that many will marry outside the faith. If so, predictions for the following generation can only be bleaker. Children are

far more likely to stay in church if their parents attend together.³

The Implications

The implications are alarming. Many within Christendom are thrown into a near-panic, proposing that we must change the very form of the church if it is to survive;⁴ at this rate of exodus and without a phenomenal rate of adult conversions, congregations will be reduced to a few faithful within a couple of generations, if they manage to survive at all.

Beyond the survival of church bodies and congregations, however, this is about salvation – most specifically about the salvation of children who are already baptized into the Christian church. It is also about the salvation

¹ 44% of infants baptized in LCMS congregations in 1999 were confirmed in 2012. <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/insights-lcms-statistics-reasons-hope-growth/>

² "A 2017 Confirmation Survey identified around a 1-in-3 rate of retention for individuals after confirmation. An additional 11%, however, occasionally attend their home congregation." Harrison, Matthew. *Joyfully Lutheran: A message to the Church about the challenges we face and how to face them*. St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2018. Page 24. <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=JZuzcBj0weh8mYPxlaFRTwjBSaTzldKl>

³ These statistics are admittedly hard to find: in fact, one will often find the same numbers quoted all over the internet, but never with a link to an actual study. However, *Touchstone* magazine links to one study that comes to the following conclusions: If both father and mother attend regularly, 33 percent of their children will end up as regular churchgoers, and 41 percent will end up attending irregularly. Only a quarter of their children will end up not practicing at all. If the father is irregular and mother regular, only 3 percent of the children will subsequently become regulars themselves, while a further 59 percent will become irregulars. Thirty-eight percent will be lost. If the father is non-practicing and mother regular, only 2 percent of children will become regular worshippers, and 37 percent will attend irregularly. Over 60 percent of their children will be lost completely to the church. Even then, there's an important caveat: this is a 1994 study conducted in Switzerland. (<https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-05-024-v>)

⁴ One may find an analysis of such claims in the second paper of this series: "The Congregation as Family, Part 2: Form and Commission." *Seelsorger: A Journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls*: 4, 2018, 133-148.

of their parents, because parents love their children. When kids stray from the faith, they stray into stuff that kills faith. When this happens, parents face the painful dilemma of sticking with God's word or justifying the sins of their kids. Too often, they shipwreck their own faith rather than hold fast to the truth and speak it in love.

It's sobering. Frightening. What are we to do?

The Enemies

Of the various callings I've been given through life, parenting has been the most intimidating by far. In the usual order of things, parents start out with a helpless infant and are given roughly two decades to shape them into a mature, responsible, Christian adult. This task requires constant, around-the-clock attention. It also requires the difficult discipline of *consistency*, because children thrive in stable, ordered environments. At the same time, it requires wisdom and adaptability, because kids run through so many cognitive stages and experiences that change is always taking place.

Parenting always requires patience: slow-fuse, take-a-deep-breath patience. I have in my mind's eye the mom whose toddler melts down in the grocery store aisle, or the longsuffering parents teaching their children to sit still in the pew. As a parish pastor, I'll gladly admit that I always felt much safer in the pulpit than my wife in the pew when our kids were young.

Parenting is hard. Why? There are lots of reasons, but let's focus on the enemies. They are the usual suspects: the devil, the world and the sinful flesh.

The devil hates the gifts and promises of God. He also hates order and stability, always working for chaos instead. The more trouble and temptation he can introduce into a family, the more likely he is to derail the faith of all. The evil one is observant: when children are baptized, he takes note. He'll do what he can to

make them reject the Lord and His gifts.

It is no coincidence that the devil is called the "ruler of the world." In one sense, he is, because all who reject Christ are following his lead and lies whether they know it or not. The consequence of this is that the world doesn't much want your kids in church either. Don't be fooled: the world is not a neutral observer. It opposes the Christian faith, as the shifts in morality and legislation in our nation make so evident today.

Then there's the sinful flesh, shared by parents and children. By nature, sinners are predisposed to resist the word of God. Even when gathered in by the Holy Spirit, they'll be attracted to all sorts of shiny things in its place.

Those are the big enemies. Parents and children are no match for them. No Christians are.

Facing the School Bully

It's precisely because we are no match for these enemies that Jesus became flesh, lived, died and rose again. Until his return in glory, he is ascended into heaven, interceding for his people at the right hand of God.

Confronted by these enemies who prey, Christians remind me of the proverbial little kid facing the gang of bullies on the playground. He speaks the truth and says, "I get it. I know that I'm no match for you. I know that you're bigger than me, but..."

"...have you met my big brother?"

This is the life of the Christian. Confronted by devil, world and sinful flesh, the believer says, "I know that I'm no match for you. I know you're bigger than me. But have you met my 'big brother'? His name is Jesus. I believe you know him well. Devil, you tempted him in the wilderness for forty days. You rode him hard, and he sent you packing. World, take heed that your 'ruler' is conquered. Death, you had him on a cross and even in a tomb – but that stone rolled away on the third day, and the grave will

never recover. As for sinful flesh, I know I'm talking to myself. But I've been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

Christians need not be so wordy, but can sum it up like this: "I am baptized."

Rather than foolishly try to defeat devil, world and sinful flesh on their own, believers confess their sin and weakness. They trust in Jesus, who joined them to his death and resurrection in baptism. Against these bullies, he is the "big brother." After all: when he was baptized, the Father said, "This is my beloved Son." By baptism, believers are adopted as God's children. They're in the family.

This is also good news for harried parents seeking to raise godly sons and daughters: they're not alone in the task. Christ has joined them to Himself and promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Here's some more good news: this promise is for them *and* for their children. (Acts 2:39)

It is given to pastors to proclaim this victory over sin, death and devil to all who will hear; and as part of that proclamation, pastors will want to foster the devotional life of the households within the parish. This paper is a modest attempt to assist pastors in that task. It is not written at a particularly technical or academic level; rather, it is designed to gather together information and arguments that pastors can readily convey to parents, with the goal of making home catechesis a simple, doable task.⁵

II. The Three-Legged Stool

To raise godly children of good character, some educators make use of the "three-legged stool" analogy: church, school and family.

⁵ This paper is actually designed to accompany a booklet written for parents – location and method of distribution to be determined.

The church is the community of believers who are gathered around the Lord's word and sacraments (CA VII). They believe that they are sinners in need of God's grace. They believe that Christ is present in his word and sacraments to forgive their sins and strengthen their faith. When choosing a congregation to attend, that's what parents are to look for, with a pastor who preaches God's law and gospel, who calls sinners to repentance and points them to Christ and his means of grace. That's what feeds and strengthens faith.

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It bears repeating that God's word and sacraments strengthen the faith of parents and children. It's worth repeating because many parents today are under the impression that it's better to choose a church that children find to be entertaining, with the sincere hope that this will motivate them to attend church faithfully. Unfortunately, this will likely teach children to seek entertainment over orthodoxy. This is not to say that church should be dry, dull or aggravating. I believe that a reverent worship service of word and Sacrament can be gripping, enjoyable and uplifting. However, forgiveness isn't found in entertainment. It's found in the means of grace.

Even where such a Christ-focused church is found, though, it's only part of the equation for parenting. Worship and Sunday school account for maybe three hours a week. If devil, world and sinful flesh get to take their shots unencumbered for the other 165 hours, children will be under fire almost constantly, and the temptations will almost certainly drown out the word they hear on Sunday morning.

It would be foolish to believe that Sunday morning is enough time for cultivating faith

in children. Furthermore, recent months of a pandemic have demonstrated how quickly Sunday-morning worship and education programs can be crippled or disrupted. They are indispensable – especially the Divine Service, for that is where Christ gathers his people to feast upon his grace; but children need more throughout the rest of the week – and children spend much of that time at school.

“Where a father is unable alone to educate his rebellious and irritable child, he uses a schoolmaster to teach the child” (LC I:4:141), writes Luther. Even when children are not irritable rebels, the prevailing practice is that, during the years when Christian character is formed, they will spend thousands of hours at school. Ideally, school is an extension of the family. We, however, are far from an ideal world.

It would be foolish to pretend that the culture and curriculum of public schools is friendly to the Christian faith and Christian character. A course of study that does not permit mention of God is terribly inadequate, indoctrinating students to view the world without taking God and his word into account. Culturally, the classroom and the locker room are the battlefield in the fight to deny God’s gift of sexuality, as various groups contend for the right of a biological male to change clothes and shower in the girls’ locker room. As gender fluidity becomes the legally-established norm, Christian views of sexuality and conscience are considered offensive – perhaps, soon, legal offenses. All of this is at work, on a daily basis, to destroy a young Christian’s faith and sense of God-given identity.

My purpose here is not a blanket call for all Christians to quit the public schools, and I continue to pray for Christian schoolteachers who remain in the public system. My purpose here is simply to make the obvious point that in the labor of training children in the Christian faith, public education is not a friend

– yet parents too often regard it as a neutral environment rather than hostile territory. I can point to young adults who attended public school and have a strong faith, but in such cases, parents kept a sharp eye on what was going on in the classroom, locker room and hallway. Those parents also made sure that, in the metaphor of the three-legged stool, the weight rested on the other two legs.

Public education remains the choice of many Christian parents today, perhaps because of availability, opportunity or affordability: availability because other options are an unreasonable distance from home, and opportunity because public schools will offer more options for athletics, college credit and special needs. Affordability can be a controversial topic: sometimes, this argument is completely legitimate. However, we should also note that the average American household spends less than 2% of household income on education, but a combined 8% on “entertainment” and “food away from home.” Furthermore, that meager 2% includes college tuition!⁶ Obviously, private education is expensive, sometimes prohibitively so; but the problem might instead be misplaced priorities on the part of the household.

Private schools are a viable option in many areas. A secular private school will usually offer a superior education to public schools, but it will not work to promote the Christian faith: thus, it will present a better polished version of the same trouble found in public schools today. Private Christian schools are generally dedicated to instilling a Christian morality and teaching; however, it may not have an appropriately rigorous curriculum, and a typical non-denominational Christian school is going to teach a Christianity without the sacraments. Without the sacraments, a void is created that will be replaced with unbiblical teaching, usually about the nature of personal faith. In short, a private Christian school can be a much

⁶ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cesan.nr0.htm>

better option for education, but it still has its share of shortcomings. Once again, parents need to stay alert to what is taught, extol the good and correct what is not.

Given the current landscape, it's no surprise that homeschooling is growing in popularity, and homeschool families have two of the three legs under the same roof. For a host of reasons, this is a viable option for many, but not for all. It requires one parent who is fully dedicated to, and fully capable of, teaching. It also requires a certain mentality for both parents and students: sometimes, even in the best of families, the personalities within are not designed for homeschooling.

Clearly, an orthodox Lutheran parochial school is a gift; and congregations that still maintain them should labor hard to preserve the treasure. Even so, it's still not enough by itself. If the word heard at school isn't heard at home, the home's sermon stands a good chance of trumping the school's.

There is no perfect educational choice. Parents need to evaluate the options seriously, pick their battles and stay engaged throughout the formative years of their children. They cannot afford to assume that they have fulfilled their obligation by making sure their children get to school on time, trusting that the curriculum and environment will do no harm to faith.

This is a warning, but also a comfort. In the Lord's order of things, he gives parents the most influence over their children. Kids will encounter a lot of bad stuff along the way, but parents can guide them through and use it for good. It's a great responsibility wedded to a priceless privilege, and the Lord will provide all that parents need for what he requires.

This brings us to the third leg: family. Before we get to what the Lord provides, we need to address two big temptations that seek to discourage parents from training their children in the ways of the Lord at home.

Two Temptations

The first terrible assumption of parents is what I call the organic error: this is the assumption that catechesis happens organically, without effort. In other words, parents look at the household and see a family at peace, where all are happy and healthy; and they assume that this blessed peace means that the children are on track to being faithful Christians. This training of children in the ways of the Lord appears to "just happen," so there's no need to work at it. Where this theology of glory sets in, parents are quick to assume that Sunday morning is enough catechesis for the week, because it seems to be working.

Parents know that feeding and clothing children takes a lot of effort: in a sinful world where the devil seeks to destroy faith, why would the Christian faith take less labor to maintain?

This error should be irrational to Christian parents who understand that God works through means. Take away good food in proper amounts, as well as appropriate clothing, and a child's wellbeing will suffer. Take away the word of God, and faith will wane and die. Parents know that feeding and clothing children takes a lot of effort: in a sinful world where the devil seeks to destroy faith, why would the Christian faith take less labor to maintain? However, temptations to lazy, negligent assumptions remain strong.

The other assumption is one of fear: it's the fear that the task is too great. When it comes to caring for souls of children at home, parents don't even know where to begin. The enemies cast such an overwhelming shadow that any defense seems woefully inadequate. At the same time, theology seems like such a vast field

of study that parents feel it's best left to the professionals. But once again, how much time will children spend learning at church?

Coupled with the perverse busyness of the current day, these twin temptations prevent or discourage Christian education in the home, but this is nothing new. Luther warned:

[God] does not assign this honor to [parents], that is, power and authority to govern, so they can have themselves worshiped. But they should consider that they are obligated to obey God. First of all, they should seriously and faithfully fulfill their office, not only to support and provide for the bodily necessities of their children, servants, subjects, and so on, but, most of all, they should train them to honor and praise God [Proverbs 22:6]. Therefore, do not think that this matter is left to your pleasure and arbitrary will. This is God's strict command and order, to whom also you must give account for it [1 Peter 4:5].

Here again the sad plight arises that no one sees or hears this truth. All live on as though God gave us children for our pleasure or amusement and servants so that we could use them like a cow or an ass, only for work. We must not think only about how we may amass money and possessions for them. God can indeed support and make them rich without us, as He daily does. *But for this purpose He has given us children and issued this command: we should train and govern them according to His will. Otherwise, He would have no purpose for a father and a mother.* (LC I:4:170, emphasis mine)

"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?," asks our Lord (Matt 16:26) The danger is apparent and

the temptations nothing new; but there is no greater responsibility and privilege given to parents than to teach their children the Christian faith. Lots of parents want to do the right thing, but don't know where to begin. In his mercy, however, the Lord has provided all that is needed for the task of Christian instruction in the home.

III. Setting the Stage

In his formation of the family, the Lord has set the stage for care of the soul in the home.

The Opposite of "Submit" is ...

Ephesians is known in the New Testament as St. Paul's great treatise about the church. The first four and a half chapters are a beautiful feast in that regard; suddenly though, the apostle switches to a discussion of marriage and family, and it might appear that he ran out of things to say about the church before he ran out of papyrus to write on.

It's significant, then, that the word "church" appears more in this section than the rest of the epistle. There's a good reason for that: St. Paul is making the case that the structure God has given to family is designed to teach about the Lord and his people.⁷

The first part about marriage (Eph 5:22-33) is the best known, especially because of the instruction, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" — a scandalous directive to a society that bows to idols of feminism and egalitarianism. The world is quick to denounce the notion of submission as misogynistic, rather than see that the Lord establishes the office of wife as one of order and service. Briefly, the word for "submit" actually means to *subordinate*, to put or keep oneself in the order that God has given. When a wife subordinates herself to her husband (the

⁷ A detailed study of this may be found in the first paper of this series, "The Congregation as Family." *Seelsorger: A Journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls*: 3, 2017, pp. 5-23.

head of the household), she says, “I’m here to serve you, not bend you to my will.” In doing so, she’s an illustration of the church submitting to Christ.

If the world is correct and St. Paul holds women to be inferior, one would expect the apostle to direct husbands to dominate, order and rule their wives — as do many secular writings of his time. But the complement to “submit” isn’t “dictate” or “govern.” It’s *love*: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). St. Paul tells husbands to love their wives sacrificially — as Christ loved the church, even dying for her. When husbands so love and serve their wives, they illustrate how Jesus loves his people.

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old enough to sit still
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Near the end of his words on marriage, St. Paul exclaims, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32). What is “this mystery” that proclaims the church? It’s what he’s just quoted from Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” How does Genesis 2:24 talk about the church? Because it points to Jesus, who left His Father (John 1:14) to be born of Mary; who left his mother in John’s keeping (John 19:26-27) to hold fast to his bride even to death (Eph 5:25); and who joins his people to himself (John 15:4-5).

Marriage is designed to typify Christ and the

church; and as such, marriage is given to teach even the youngest about the gospel. Long before children are old enough to sit still and listen to a sermon, they get a glimpse — flawed and tiny though it may be — of how Jesus serves his people and his people serve him. As husbands and wives love, serve, confess and forgive one another, their actions are preaching a sermon to their children.

This is how it is supposed to be. Not every marriage is so happy, and many single parents are trying to teach the faith to their children. Sometimes, it’s given parents to teach their children not by saying, “Learn from how Mommy and Daddy love each other,” but by saying, “Learn from how Mommy and Daddy *should* love each other, and *don’t*.” Honesty about a bad example can be an effective teaching tool too; and even where marriages are tense or disintegrated, the Lord is faithfully at work in his word.

The Opposite of “Provoke” is...

St. Paul doesn’t stop with husband and wife, but moves on to parents and children:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:1-4)

Once again, the complement is strange. If fathers are not to provoke their children to anger, one would expect the opposite to be something like, “Be kind, patient and compassionate.” It is not: here, the opposite of provoking to anger is the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

As marriage is to illustrate the gospel, the relationship between a father and his children is designed to point to Christ and his church once

again. When children are commanded to obey their parents, the command is more refined than, “Do what you’re told.” “Obey” (ὁπακούετε) literally means, “to hear from under.” In God’s ordering of the family, children are subordinate to parents: thus they “hear from under” because they are under parental authority.

When the father speaks for them to hear from under, he is to speak God’s word — and suddenly we have a picture of the Lord and his church, who forgives our sins and makes us *his children*. We hear from under his authority, we believe by his grace and we are saved.

Where does the mother fit in? St. Paul doesn’t leave her out: he tells children to obey their *parents*, not just their father. As father and mother are to exemplify Christ and the church as husband and wife, those roles continue here. The church speaks the Lord’s word: the church has nothing different to say. When Paul says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,” he’s neither singling out fathers in the first part, nor is he excluding women from the second as if they have nothing to say. He is recognizing that the father is the head of the household because he represents Christ. The mother, representing the church, is likewise far from silent.

This order in the household is not about time spent. For the past two thousand years, the Lord has been like a master away on a long journey, hidden from sight while leaving his church to provide the instruction. Where the father is away at work, the mother has far more opportunity to teach children and cultivate faith at home. Within a marriage, she may have a better aptitude for it! As the church never says anything different than Christ, her bridegroom, so the parents agree when it comes to Christian instruction, because they’re both teaching the word to their kids.

Again, this is how it is *supposed* to be, not

how it often is. Between single-parent homes, marriages where one parent believes and one does not, and families where father or mother abdicate their responsibilities to catechize, there are plenty of households in which the positive example is lost. But the negative example, and acknowledging how things *should* be, can still be a useful ingredient for instruction.

Bishops and Bishopesses in the House

During the absolution on Sunday morning, the pastor declares that he stands “in the stead and by the command of Christ.” He is there to say what Jesus would say if Jesus were standing there. I sometimes tell the congregation that if I forgive them in the name of Tim, that won’t get them into heaven (but would probably get me into hell!). But if I forgive them *in the name of Jesus*, then their sins are forgiven because it’s Jesus doing the forgiving. In a congregation, a pastor stands in the stead of Jesus, to say what Jesus says.

When it comes to the home, Luther wrote:

The head of every family has the duty of training and teaching his children and servants, or of having them taught. In his house he is like a minister or bishop over his household, and he has the command to supervise what they learn and to be responsible for them.⁸

As it is given for the pastor to speak the word to the congregational family, it is given to the father to stand in the stead of Christ and teach his word to the household.

Again, however, this responsibility and privilege is not confined to the father within the household:

We probably think that the Ten Commandments are there only to be

⁸ Luther, M. (1999). Luther’s works, vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 21, p. 8). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

preached from the pulpit, but they need rather to be applied to use. For God has commanded you to fear and trust him. So the young can be well brought up in the discipline of the Lord [Eph. 6:4]. For they must fear God if they are to cease from doing evil for his sake and [they must trust God if they are to do the good for his sake]. It is small wages when I give you three or four guldens, but God gives you a happy life here and, after that, eternal life. The fault lies with us householders. Necessity has forced us to engage teachers because the parents have not assumed this responsibility. But every master and mistress should remember that they are bishops and bishopesses for Gretel and Hans.⁹

We note that Luther places boundaries on this bishopric. It is for the family, “But you have no right to do this outside your own household and to force yourself upon other households or upon your neighbors. Nor should you put up with it if some such sneak comes to you and sets up a special preaching-meeting in your household for which he has no authorization.”¹⁰ Furthermore, it is a limited ministry of the word, for “Neither is it fitting that each household do its own baptizing and celebrating of the Sacrament.”¹¹

The Lord defines the task and sets the boundaries: fathers and mothers are to teach the faith to their own household. So defined, it is no longer an impossible labor, but within the abilities and responsibilities of the parents.

⁹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 51: Sermons I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 51, p. 140). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹⁰ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 21, p. 8). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

¹¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 13: Selected Psalms II*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 13, p. 334). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

IV. Some Basic Truths of Life for Soul-Care in the Home

Now that we see how the Lord has set the household stage as a place for catechesis, we turn to some basic truths in which the household lives. It's by no means an exhaustive list. It is a list of truths that parents probably already know, but perhaps have not synthesized and related to the task of catechesis in the home.

1. Parental Authority Equals Sacrifice

God gives authority for service, not for power:

Jesus called [the disciples] to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:25-28)

In the world, authority is about power. That isn't necessarily bad: consider an army preparing for battle. The commander sends the troops ahead of him while he oversees the fight – he doesn't tell his soldiers to get behind him while he charges the enemy. That's how the world works among the rulers of the Gentiles. In the family, it's different. It's different because the family is designed to illustrate Christ and church. Christ the Lord came not to direct, but to serve — to use his almighty power to save, even giving his life as a ransom for many.

Likewise, the authority given to parents makes theirs a life of sacrifice and service. Mothers get a head start: soon after a baby is conceived, a mom starts to encounter all sorts of discomforts in service to the little one in the most basic aspects of life, like eating, drinking

and sleeping. The trade-off, I think, is that she can't help but be far more aware of her infant and its dependency upon her than the father is; and while she gets a head start on sacrificing for the child, she is likewise blessed with a head start in loving the child.

The sacrifices of fathers during pregnancy are in the area of support: a husband assists his wife as the pregnancy progresses, patiently accepts that he is now sharing his wife with a one who is highly demanding in its helplessness, and repents for those many times that he neither wants to support his wife nor share her. This, at least, is supposed to be the role of fatherhood during pregnancy. It is not always the case, and the husband who does not serve his wife and unborn child during those nine months is teaching himself how not to love.

Once the baby is born, there are plenty of diapers for both parents to change, not to mention a host of other ways to serve. The needs of the child will constantly change, and it is given to parents to continue to sacrifice. As children grow into adulthood, the work of the parent doesn't end: it continues always in the holy discipline of prayer.

2. Parents Will Teach Their Children More By How They Live Than By What They Say

"Do as I say, not as I do," may be a popular phrase, but it's limited. It can apply because grown-ups and children have different offices with different privileges. For instance, I can have a martini while a young child cannot; but a toddler can fly on airplanes in his pajamas, where this is less acceptable for me. However, when it comes to rules, habits and responsibilities in the home, the phrase doesn't work. If parents want children to floss, they'd better be flossing too. If they want their child to avoid vulgar language, they'd better watch what they say. If they don't, the best they can hope for is a foul-mouthed child with gingivitis — or a child who sees their

hypocrisy and holds them in contempt.

On the bright side, children learn from positive examples too. Whenever husband and wife work at serving, they send a positive message about both marriage and the gospel. When father and mother maintain a disciplined devotional life, this sets an example for the rest of the family — and benefits all as the word of God dwells richly in the parents.

The more parents work at their sacrificial calling, the more children will learn the importance of living in service to others. They might not thank their parents until they have kids of their own, but they'll learn it.

Words and actions teach, and it is important that they not contradict each other. Where they do, parents need to model confession to their children.

Remember too the organic error: even when words and actions match beautifully, they're not enough: only the word of God creates and strengthens faith. Or to put it positively, God gives more than just parents' words and actions to serve children. He gives them *his* saving word and action for their kids.

3. Parenting is not so Much About Big Events as it is About the Daily Routine of Life

I sometimes say that childhood is usually 1% Disneyland (the memorable celebrations) and 1% tragedy (inevitable because we live in a dying world). The rest of childhood is daily routine. It's eating breakfast and sack lunches, brushing teeth and combing hair. It's math homework and cleaning up after the dog.

Most of life is routine. Some would call it boring, but that's mistaken. It's orderly. It's ordered. Routine is a good thing.

Children do well with stability, order and routine. This is the thorn in the rose of the family vacation when one takes small children

on a big vacation: as bedtimes, nap schedules, menus and locations change, the instability leads to meltdowns and general crankiness.

This truth also belies the idea that “The quality of time with kids is more important than the quantity of time,” a common mantra among those justifying full-time daycare for children with working mothers. This simply isn’t true: children are learning all the time, and a child under the fulltime care of daycare workers will learn habits, character and doctrine from those care providers and fellow children, no matter the quality of the time with parents in the morning and evening.

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When it comes to catechesis in the home, there’s a valuable lesson here: caring for the souls of children doesn’t have to be a big production any more than every dinner has to be a five-course meal with *hors d’oeuvres* to whet, and a sorbet to cleanse, the palate. In fact, it shouldn’t be. It should be a part of the daily routine, because it’s part of God’s order for everyday life.

4. A New Day Comes Daily

Days are seven times more common than weeks, and an astounding 365.25% more common than years. I’m all for planning a memorable Christmas and Easter, and there’s no excuse for not making weekly worship a habit. But if children learn best from the daily routine of life, then there’s no better place for soul care than the daily routine.

A new day also means a fresh start. Time is a tyrant, the devil is busy, good habits are hard

to maintain, sometimes parents just don’t want to teach and children don’t want to learn. With each new day comes the knowledge that Christ’s forgiveness covers the sins of yesterday, setting his people free and renewed to go about their tasks once again.

5. Who Ever Said that We Should Teach Kids the Commandments in a Childlike, Playful Way?

Actually, it was Martin Luther in the Large Catechism. The man often perceived as a steadfast confessor and stern theologian was also a family man. As he writes about the Second Commandment, he says:

Look, we could train our youth this way [Proverbs 22:6], in a childlike way and playfully in the fear and honor of God. Then the First and Second Commandments might be well kept and in constant practice. Then some good might take root, spring up, and bear fruit. People would grow up whom an entire land might relish and enjoy. In addition, this would be the true way to bring up children well as long as they could be trained with kindness and delight. For children who must be forced with rods and blows will not develop into a good generation. At best they will remain godly under such treatment only as long as the rod is upon their backs [Proverbs 10: 13]. But teaching the commandments in a childlike and playful way spreads its roots in the heart so that children fear God more than rods and clubs. This I say with such simplicity for the sake of the young, that it may penetrate their minds.

Then he adds, “For we are preaching to children, so we must also talk like them” (LC I:2:76-77).

We must “prattle with them,” he says in another translation.

It doesn’t sound like Luther wants catechesis to be a drudgery for anyone, parents or children. It can even be built into play. A parishioner recently sent me a video of him pushing his not quite 2-year-old on the backyard swing. He gave a push and said, “Our.” As she got to the back of her arc, she said “Father.” He gave another push and said, “Who art in...;” “hebben!,” she shouted. Another push and petition: “Hallowed be thy....” “Name!” she giggled out.

The dad didn’t need a degree in theology. He was just repeating what we say in church; and along with learning the Lord’s Prayer, the little one learned that her dad is thinking about the Lord’s Prayer, even in the backyard by the swing set. A little bit of playtime became enjoyable catechesis.

6. What Do Little Kids Want to Be When They Grow Up?

An educational expert posed that question to me over lunch one day: “What do little kids want to be when they grow up?” While I was still trying to choose between “astronaut” and “forest ranger,” he answered his own question: “Grown-ups! They want to be grown-ups when they grow up!”

Kids want to be adults. It’s why they love to follow parents around the yard with a toy lawnmower while adults push the real one, or why they want to hold the very wrench needed next to tighten the washer hose. When kids play “dress up,” they don’t dress up like other kids. They dress up like adults.

Grown-ups want kids to be kids, because childhood doesn’t last long and we know that being an adult isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I can enjoy watching kids be kids all day long; but when it comes to catechesis, remember that they want to be grown-ups — and that the goal of catechesis is a mature faith. Children

can memorize Bible verses, learn big words and sing grown-up hymns. They may not know what all the words mean, but the meaning will fill in later on. So even while perfecting the art of prattling with children, feed them grown-up things. They’ll take it seriously and surprise you.

7. Kids Have Five Senses — Little kids Have Memories Like Sponges

Children are far better at remembering things than we are. This is why they can hear an annoying radio ad in the car one time and then sing it for the rest of the five-hour drive. Those brain cells are fresh, new and uncluttered. It’s far harder for adults to memorize and remember new things. It’s frustrating.

This, I think, is where we grown-ups make a big mistake: we reason that, since we don’t like memorizing things, children don’t either. We even have proof: we’ve witnessed how much confirmands hate memory work. Anyone who has tried to coerce an eighth grader into memorizing the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed on a Saturday night will testify that it’s not worth the fight.

Have you spotted the error in the argument? An eighth grader isn’t a child. Eighth graders like to argue, and wise parents and pastors will use this to their advantage.¹² Little children are built for memorization. Those five senses are catching all sorts of stimuli that makes them curious explorers, so they’re learning and memorizing all the time. When grown-ups say that memorization doesn’t work, we’re ignoring how little children learn.

If we wait until our kids are in eighth grade before we tell them to memorize the Small Catechism ...well, if they say that we’re treating them like

¹² An enjoyable exercise in teaching seventh and eighth graders is to teach them all the pertinent doctrine of a given topic, and then become “the heretic” who argues against the truth. This enables them to construct an argument *and* make it for the good!

babies, they have a point. I'd still make them memorize it anyway: just because they don't like memorizing doesn't mean they can't do it, and eighth graders are known to argue against things just because they don't like doing them. They're nearly adults, after all.

The big point of this section is that little kids like memorizing, so it only makes sense that they should be learning and memorizing the things of God.

V. The Means

For the holy task of home instruction, the Lord provides parents with several means. Parents will already be aware of them, but they may not be convinced that these are instruments to fit their hands.

The Word

"The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). The Lord created the heavens and the earth by speaking, and he healed all sorts of diseases — even raised the dead! — by speaking his word.

In the book of Acts, the apostles are able to work miracles because they are speaking God's word, with his authority. Parents are given authority to train their children in the ways of the Lord. When parents speak God's word to their children, that word is just as living and powerful as when Jesus spoke it in the flesh.

Powerful things do damage when misused. Parents know this: it lies at the root of the statement, "I'm afraid to teach my kids what the Bible says, because I don't want to say the wrong thing." Nevertheless, the privilege should far outweigh the fear: God has given parents the authority to speak his powerful, life-giving word to their kids!

How might parents teach the word? A two-pronged approach is ideal: the Small Catechism and Bible stories.

The Small Catechism provides a summary

of Scripture, and thus the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. To know its doctrine is to have a foundational understanding of the word of God, and so it serves as the baseline for communicant membership in Lutheran congregations.¹³ It is written to be simple, brief, easily-memorized and teachable to children in the home. Sadly, the Small Catechism has, in the minds of many, taken on the guise of a nearly insurmountable Everest — rather than a pamphlet for teaching children, it's opposed in the mind's eye as a book as long and opaque as *Moby Dick*, an obstacle that stands between the catechumen and the altar.

However, it remains a short pamphlet that is simple, brief, easily memorized and teachable to children in the home. The old Adam detests the doctrine within and warps our view. A family that memorizes merely three words a day around the dinner table will have memorized the basics of the Christian faith in less than 2½ years.

Our culture has nearly forgotten the power of story for teaching, and thus suffers a narrow, historical and cultural, amnesia. God, however, makes great use of story.

The Small Catechism also provides a lens through which one can read Holy Scripture. As a colleague shared many years ago, if the Bible is a jigsaw puzzle, the catechism serves as the picture on the box. With its six chief parts, it introduces the dichotomy of law and gospel at an early age. As such, it maintains an honored

¹³ "Do you confess the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Scriptures, as you have learned to know it from the Small Catechism, to be faithful and true?" Rite of Confirmation, *Lutheran Service Book*, 273.

place among those who wish to teach a faithful and true exposition of Scripture.

Scripture undoubtedly contains long passages of doctrinal, catechetical exposition; and these are a great blessing for the clarity with which they deliver pure doctrine. However, the Bible is also full of [true] story, and those portions are no less inspired or important.

With its focus upon both STEM and self, our culture has nearly forgotten the power of story for teaching, and thus suffers a narrow, historical and cultural, amnesia. God, however, makes great use of story. In the desire to ensure that people have a clear, firm grasp of doctrine, I fear that the church has largely turned from stories, too. This is unwise: the entire Bible is the story of salvation, from *the* beginning to *the* end. The Lord creates for each of us the unique story of our lives, then gloriously intertwines them with the stories of others. Best of all, he weaves our stories into the redemptive story told throughout Scripture: if one draws out a timeline, for instance, of the fourth vision in Revelation (12:1-15:8), somewhere on that line is a marker that says, “You are here.”

While one can hardly praise the Small Catechism enough for its clarity and rigor in brevity, it ought not be used exclusively at the expense of story. This certainly was not Luther’s intention, as he rejoiced to find Christ proclaimed in stories throughout the Old Testament.¹⁴

¹⁴ For instance:

“For this reason, too, all the narratives of the Old Testament point so nicely and beautifully to Christ and confess him; all of them, indeed, stand around him, just as Anna physically stood in his presence. It affords great pleasure to read and hear how they all look and point toward Christ. Let us note just one example: Isaac was sacrificed by his father and yet remained alive, being replaced by a ram, which Abraham saw behind him entangled in the thicket by his horns. This signifies Christ, the Son of God. He is in all respects like a mortal human being who died on the cross; yet the divine nature remained alive, and the human nature was sacrificed in place of it; like the ram with his horns (that is, the preaching of the gospel which rebukes and castigates the perversity and obstinacy of the scribes and priests) which was caught in this same thicket behind Abraham, so Christ’s human nature came after him in time.

Parents are usually aware of the benefits of reading stories to their children, as educational experts routinely observe that “story time” contributes to cognitive development and literacy. Stories cultivate imagination and creativity, and they portray virtue and vice in action. Pastors are painfully aware of growing biblical illiteracy among young parishioners in the Church, and this ignorance is detrimental to faith and a proper understanding of Christ. For these reasons alone, it only makes sense that “story time” at home include Bible stories.

The benefit of story, however, is far more significant. First, God has endowed story with a marvelous ability to slip past our sinful defenses that we erect against learning. There’s a reason, I think, why movie theaters don’t feature many documentaries: most would far rather escape into a story for two hours, no matter how insipid the plot and cardboard the characters. Whether the viewers intend to learn or not, the story still teaches.

Better yet, Bible stories teach doctrine, while biblical doctrine normally doesn’t tell a story. For example, I can teach children that Jesus is both God and man, that he is Lord over all creation and that his word is powerful. To make these truths stick, I will have to make use of repetition on my part and intentional memorization on theirs. On the other hand, I can read to them Luke 8:22-25 and tell them the story of Jesus silencing the storm. After only four verses, listeners have learned that Jesus is God and the Lord over all creation (because he can silence a storm), Jesus is man (he sleeps in

Many additional great lessons are hidden in this story.

“Another example: Joseph was sold into Egypt and became a ruler over the country after his imprisonment. This happened and was written that he might prefigure Christ, who became through his passion Lord of all the world. Who has time enough to explain all these stories and to see how Samson, David, Solomon, Aaron, and others literally and accurately signify Christ?” Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 52: Sermons II*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 52, p. 126). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

the boat), and Jesus' word is powerful (because he silences the storm with a rebuke). After four verses, the hearers know the same doctrines — plus an example of how these doctrines are true. They may not be able to recite them in list form, but they have learned them and are incorporating them into the knowledge they possess.

Children will be more receptive to repetition of Bible stories than repetition of memory work, and stories provide parents with a variety of options to review the doctrine therein. They can ask the children to tell the story back to them, or tell the story with intentional errors while asking the children to listen and correct. Children will often enjoy drawing a picture of the story — a process in which they tell themselves the story again, and then *again* as they explain the picture to their parents.¹⁵

Second, stories feature two qualities that the Small Catechism does not: mystery and ambiguity. The six chief parts are carefully worded to leave no doubt, to teach what “is most certainly true.” Stories, even Bible stories, are not so straightforward: many a character who is a type of Christ has manifest sins or makes grievous mistakes — consider David, Samson or Jephthah. Stories include actions that are simply descriptive, with neither praise nor condemnation from God. Unlike the concise catechetical explanation to a commandment, even Bible stories get messy.

The messiness is a blessing, because the life story of every Christian is full of ambiguity, mystery, mistakes and questions. Sooner or later, children learn that life is not cut-and-dried, and situations rarely conform to the textbook answer. Catechetical instruction apart from story risks teaching children that the Small Catechism is for a textbook life, and thus inapplicable to disordered, chaotic situations.

¹⁵ One colleague told me of a family that keeps a blank wall in their home for the purpose of drawing pictures from what they've heard in their family devotions.

Story apart from catechetical instruction has no established truth to serve as guideposts, leaving learners without tools to discern what is right, what is wrong and what is left unanswered.

Our lives are lived in story, not catechism — in reality, not abstraction; and it is in these life events that faith is tested and found to be true. Flannery O'Connor saw the same flaw in Roman Catholicism, and wrote to her fellow Catholic authors:

Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac. Both of these kinds of knowledge are necessary, but in the last four or five centuries, Catholics have overemphasized the abstract and consequently impoverished their imaginations and their capacity for prophetic insight.¹⁶

I can offer no more proof than a gut feeling, but I suspect that the lost use of story in the church is an unintended victim of the fight against theological liberalism. An extreme example is the fundamentalist practice of banning, if not burning, books that feature accounts descriptive of one sin or another — often with the justification of shielding children from evil.¹⁷ Lutherans view literature through a different lens, asking if the total effect of the writing is worth the less-salutary portions therein. However, the fundamentalist idea creeps in, and parents find it easier to avoid topics than to address them in their messy ambiguity, leaving the child “shielded” until he encounters the evil

¹⁶ O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Morals: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969. 202-203

¹⁷ At my graduation from a conservative Christian high school, I received a copy of *The American Heritage Dictionary* for some academic achievement. Though it has long outlived its usefulness, it remains prominently on my shelf for its irony: at the time, it was considered a “banned book” by many for the offense of classifying “bed” as a verb.

at college or elsewhere, with little preparation.

Stories provide an opportunity to discuss the dangers of sin while children are still under parental care at home. The Bible doesn't shy away from depicting sinful man at his worst; and in these accounts, families can use the Small Catechism as a lamp to expose what is good and evil. Such a use of story is an excellent help in equipping children to apply the faith to a hostile, messy world, and to know what can be known and what can't be answered. O'Connor observes with astute reverence, "There is no reason why fixed dogma should fix anything that the writer sees in the world. On the contrary, dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality. Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery."¹⁸

Prayer

Everything created by God is good, and it is made holy by the word of God and prayer, writes St. Paul (1 Tim 4:3-13). As the Lord continues to create the days in which we live, it's most appropriate for us to commend all things to him in prayer.

A good prayer is one that rightly prays God's word back to him: after all, it begins with us hearing God's word, for that is where we learn what to pray for. God's children hear their Father speak to them in Scripture; and knowing what he says, they pray, "Dad, you promised!"

When it comes to simple soul care for small children, make use of repetition. Children learn the grammar of prayer through repetition, so praying the same prayer repeatedly is a good thing. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther provided prayers for morning, meals and evening; and I cannot recommend these highly enough to frame the day, as the head of the household teaches his children about prayer.

There's an old objection that prayers lose their

¹⁸ O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Morals: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969. 178

meaning when they're prayed repeatedly. The truth is that the words don't lose meaning, but we stop paying attention to them. The problem is us, not the prayer. If adults can say a mealtime prayer without thinking, kids can too. When parents teach children prayer with repetition, it's important, as they grow, to teach them

*To pray for one's children
is not just to pray to God
for them, but to pray
with God for them.*

what the words mean. Eventually, God willing, they've learned to pray extemporaneously from the prayers they have repeated.

A salutary exercise with older children is to teach them the structure of a collect (invocation, acknowledgment, petition, aspiration and conclusion), and then use the structure to compose prayers based off of Scripture passages.¹⁹

One other aspect of prayer should not be overlooked: it is given to parents to pray for their children from the time they are conceived until long after they leave the house. When parents pray for their children, they are not alone: the Son also intercedes at the Father's right hand (Rom 8:34), even as the Holy Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words (Rom 8:26). To pray for one's children is not just to pray to God for them, but to pray *with* God for them.

Blessing

As prayer directs the Lord's word back to him, blessing directs his word toward others in a

¹⁹ For example, in one confirmation lesson I will teach the parts of a collect, have confirmands identify the parts in historic collects and then have them compose a collect from a short passage like Isaiah 41:9b-10. The result may be something like, "O God, you promise to help and strengthen your servants. Help me as I struggle with _____, and help me not to be afraid, so that I might serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

performative way:²⁰ it bestows the promises of God on his people. The most familiar blessings will be the Aaronic and apostolic benedictions that conclude the Divine Service, though the various offices in the hymnal contain several others. These blessings are most fitting for use in the home as well. In his role as a symbol of Christ, a father might send his children on their way in the morning with, “The Lord order your days and your deeds in his peace;” or tuck them into bed with the Aaronic or apostolic benedictions, or perhaps “The Lord grant you a quiet night and peace at the last.” A mother might do the same; but as a symbol of the church, I encourage mothers to change the object from second person to first: i.e., “The Lord bless *us* and keep *us*.”

As with prayer, parents may compose blessings that are not found verbatim in the liturgies of the church: the guiding principle is that the blessing should deliver what God promises to give in that situation. However, the blessings already found in the hymnal will likely suffice for home use, and they have the added benefit of tying the words of worship in church to daily life in the household.

Music

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God,” writes St. Paul in Colossians 3:16. Music is a profound and blessed means for delivering the

word of God.

Educators are well aware that music is a beneficial tool. A simple song can serve as an effective memory aid, and musical mnemonics are “particularly effective as a memory aid for the learning disabled and mildly handicapped student.”²¹ Studies demonstrate, among other things, that the musical brain consists of “extensive neural systems” and operates at birth and throughout life.²² Practically speaking, music is a powerful instrument in education, even if the reasons why remain a mystery.

The mystery extends far beyond the susceptibility of neural transmission: the ancients understood music to be powerful. Plato wrote that rearing in music is “most sovereign ...because rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them; and they make a man graceful if he is correctly reared, if not the opposite.”²³ Clark and Jain write, “...The songs we sing, the stories we read, and the art we make and admire, form our souls. They go directly to the heart and fasten mightily upon them, making one the friend of reason. Musical education is soul-craft: carried out properly it tunes the soul, and makes one receptive to truth and goodness.”²⁴

Music is a powerful tool for catechesis, with a mysterious ability that we cannot fathom. Added to the mystery is that St. Paul speaks of spiritual songs above: as songs convey the word, the Holy Spirit is at work to give and

²⁰ For instance, “The performance of blessing is primarily a verbal act. Thus God blesses by speaking his creative word either as a command (eg. Gen 1:22, 28) or a declaration (eg. Gen 12:2-3; Mal 2:19). People likewise bless others by speaking blessing to them. When humans bless, they wish others well; they wish what God wishes for them. Yet blessing is much more than mere wish; it is a speech act, a performative utterance that does what it says. Benedictions enact blessing; they make blessing happen; they communicate God’s blessing.” Kleinig, John W. “Pastoring by Blessing.” http://www.johnkleinig.com/files/5513/5934/3089/Pastoring_by_Blessing.pdf, p. 6. Originally printed in *Lutheran Theological Journal* 43/1 (2009): 28-38.

²¹ Hayes, Orla C. “The Use of Melodic and Rhythmic Mnemonics to Improve and Recall in Elementary Students in the Content Areas.” Unpublished: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree master of science in education, Dominican University of California, San Raphael, 2009. 5

²² Hayes, 15.

²³ Republic, III:401d. The Republic of Plato, ed. Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 1968. We note that the classical definition of “music” included literature and other subjects — anything inspired by the Muses. Here, however, Plato is quite specific speaking of music as melody, tempo, etc.

²⁴ Clark and Jain, 26.

strengthen faith, where and when he wills.

Parents will be well aware of the effect of music upon even small children: a lullaby will put them to sleep, while a strident drumbeat will energize them. They may well keep music in the car to occupy young minds on drives. Parents will often share anecdotes of their children singing portions of the liturgy at home. It makes sense, then, to make use of music in the home for catechetical purposes.

Musical mnemonics are an extraordinary tool, as most learn better when information is set to music. For younger children, Concordia Publishing House has produced a CD entitled, “Sing the Faith,” setting the text of the Small Catechism to “67 upbeat songs.”²⁵ The music is unabashedly didactic and effective in its purpose, even if it’s not the sort of choral work one might want in the background at dinner time. One can use it to teach children a specific portion of the catechism at a set time of instruction, or it can serve as an excellent selection to play repeatedly in the car.

Family devotions or bedtime prayers are also opportune times to sing hymns. Previously, I mentioned that children want to be grown-ups, and there is no reason not to teach “grown-up” hymns to young children. When I served as a school administrator and led the chapel services, I intentionally chose sing-able hymns with rich doctrinal content. Grammar-school children learned selected verses from hymns such as “Salvation Unto Us Has Come” and “Oh, Blessed Holy Trinity.” They were proud to sing grown-up hymns; and in doing so, they learned a lot about justification, the nature of God and other important doctrines.

VI. Framing the Day

It is also useful that we form the habit of daily commending ourselves to God [Psalm 31: 5], with soul and body, wife,

children, servants, and all that we have, against every need that may arise. So also the blessing and thanksgiving at meals [Mark 8: 6] and other prayers, morning and evening, have begun and remained in use [Exodus 29: 38–43]. Likewise, children should continue to cross themselves when anything monstrous or terrible is seen or heard. They can shout, “Lord God, protect us!” “Help, dear Lord Jesus!” and such. Also, if anyone meets with unexpected good fortune, however trivial, he says, “God be praised and thanked!” or “God has bestowed this on me!” and so on, just as the children used to learn to fast and pray to St. Nicholas and other saints before. This would be more pleasing and acceptable to God than all monasticism and Carthusian acts of holiness. (LC I:2:73-74)

God, the Father almighty, continues to create the days and nights in which we live, and I recall a couple of remarks that give each a spiritual significance. It’s well known that, from the time of creation, days began at sundown: “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day” (Gen 1:5). Eugene Peterson has written that he still considers this to be the case. As a result, when you and I awaken in the morning, the Lord has already been at work for hours on the new day, preparing it for our labors.²⁶ On the other hand, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that the start of the day changed on Easter Sunday with the resurrection of Jesus “on the first day

²⁶ “We go to sleep, and God begins his work. As we sleep he develops his covenant. We wake and are called out to participate in God’s creative action. We respond in faith, in work. But always grace is previous. Grace is primary. We wake into a world we didn’t make, into a salvation we didn’t earn. Evening: God begins, without our help, his creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated. Creation and covenant are sheer grace and there to greet us every morning.” Eugene H. Peterson. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Kindle Locations 680-683). Kindle Edition.

²⁵ <https://www.cph.org/p-3422-sing-the-faith-cd.aspx>

of the week, at early dawn” (Luke 24:1) — thus every sunrise is a reminder of the Son’s rise from the dead.²⁷ The Bible doesn’t side with Peterson or Bonhoeffer. I keep both of them in mind to remind me of the Lord’s ongoing care and grace, and I would teach both to my kids.

Remember: every day is full of rituals and patterns, and ordinary days follow a routine — it’s why they’re called ordinary, because they’re ordered. That’s not bad: order and stability go together, and faithfulness is a companion. The key is to make soul care part of the daily routine.

The daily routine of any household has moments common to every other: people wake up, they eat meals and they go back to bed at the end of the day. It is wise to tie catechesis to these gathering points where parents and children already interact.

Imagine a family with young children, where the mother stays at home and the father is off to work. As the mother awakens her children in the morning, she prays Luther’s morning prayer with them; were I to do it all over again, I might even wake up my kids by praying out loud by their bedside so that it might be the first thing they hear. At breakfast, lunch and dinner, they ask the Lord’s blessing on the meal. After dinner, or perhaps as part of the dinner conversation, the father leads the family in learning and repeating a few more words from the Small Catechism, as well as reviewing previously memorized part. Along with this, or once the Small Catechism is memorized and under ongoing review, parents can introduce key Bible verses for memorization. Later, the day ends with a Bible story, a prayer and a blessing as the children are tucked into bed. Depending on the family, the parents might sing

a hymn verse as a lullaby. None of this requires monumental effort: it simply adds the Lord’s word to the daily activities of the household.

Times of transport also provide times for conversation and review: pushing a stroller around the neighborhood is an excellent opportunity for parents to sing a hymn verse or recite a bit of catechism, and a car ride to soccer practice is a chance to talk about a Bible story. Where a mother is home with young children, a daily exercise might be a Bible story time, followed by a chance to recreate the scene by drawing, acting or building with clay, Legos or other material. The Lord’s instruction from the time of Moses still holds: “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut 6:6-7).

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Not every family will fit the template above, of course, and not every day will go according to plan. But despite the alarming statistics and dreadful enemies, parents have all that they need — in conjunction with faithful worship attendance — to strengthen the faith of their children on a daily basis.²⁸ Again, these are

²⁷ “The Old Testament day begins on one evening and ends with sundown of the next evening. That is the time of expectation. The day of the New Testament church begins at sunrise in the early morning and ends with the dawning light of the next morning. That is the time of fulfillment, the resurrection of the Lord.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. P. 57

²⁸ There are plenty of other variations, too. Parents can incorporate the seasons of the church year into home catechesis, as well as commemorations of various saints. Stories need not be confined to Bible stories, although that

hardly monumental labors. In these simple exercises, daily tasks are sanctified and children learn that the Lord and his word are not located just within the walls of a church building on Sunday, but woven into their daily lives. For parents, it is not a matter of aptitude, but of discipline — of maintaining the habits of word and prayer while devil, world and sinful flesh do their best to distract. Above all, it is work done in glad response to God’s grace for parents and children both; and in all their labors, parents should always commend all things to the Lord.

Moreover, in the management of the household father and mother are the instruments through which the house and household affairs are governed. But they themselves should also acknowledge that by their own power, diligence, or effort they can never bring up their children properly and successfully. Therefore they should cry out: “Lord God, heavenly Father, help us that our children may turn out well!”²⁹

Help us, heavenly Father, indeed. As we noted at the beginning, the statistical outlook for the church regarding the next generation is a bleak one. At the same time there is no need to despair! The Lord doesn’t deal in statistics; and as an early reviewer of this project pointed out, it is often said that the Church is always only one generation away from extinction. Yet, built upon the Rock of Christ, the Son of the Living God, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. In each generation, he establishes families and gives parents all that they need to train their children in the Christian faith — simply, daily and effectively. While the devil will do his best

to make the task seem impossibly big, one little word from his Conqueror fells him; and the Lord will preserve his own people forevermore.



is the most pressing need; there are plenty of stories of the saints of God in the past 2000 years that are beneficial in their telling.

²⁹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 5, p. 124). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Reflection

AFTERWORD & PRAYER

I remember my father carrying me off to bed nearly every night when I was young. He carried me either on his shoulders or like a sack of potatoes (hanging over his shoulder). When we arrived at my room, he didn't just deposit me at the bedside and bid me a goodnight. Instead, he made sure that our day concluded with praying the Lord's Prayer and reciting the Apostles' Creed. Every night it was the same routine. It became a part of me. Without even realizing it, my father taught me the language of prayer. He was laying the groundwork for fostering a living faith within my young and receptive heart.

Within the pages of this masterful work, Pastor Pauls demonstrates that fostering the devotional life of households within the parish is not a complicated endeavor but it does need to be intentional. Pauls points out that parents need not be extraordinarily proficient in theology to adequately teach the Christian faith to their children. Fostering a devotional life within families of the parish sets most prominently against the backdrop of routine and intentionality rather than acquiring a certain skillset.

The practical nature of this paper makes it especially useful for both pastors who want to teach the devotional life to parishioners and to the families themselves. It not only explains the biblical foundation for familial headship but also shows how to apply the most fundamental biblical principles for the sake of teaching children. Readers will want to especially take note of the practical guidance Pauls gives in the "Means" section, including the parts on prayer, blessing and music.

Most importantly, this work is a bright light of encouragement for the church. In a world filled with chaos and trouble, Pauls gives hope to families who desire to teach their children well but aren't sure where to start. It's not easy raising Christian children. However, having a rich and full devotional life is a momentous step forward in the fight against the world's influence.

✠ *Dear Heavenly Father, you provide your word of instruction and grace to all families. Grant your blessing and strength to parents who guide their children in the way of truth. Give them confidence to boldly teach the faith. Preserve all children by the work of the Holy Spirit in the eternal hope that they may always remain steadfast in the true faith nurtured through fathers and mothers in the home. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Rev. Dr. Tyler C. Arnold

