

**Vocation of Christian Marriage and Family
Thirteenth Annual Symposium on Catechesis
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“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.” 1 Peter 2:9-10

Everybody has a divine call these days. Everyone has a ministry, too. God calls people to do things nobody ever heard of only a few years ago. It's not as if you can go to the Bible to learn of these new ministries and divine calls. The Bible says nothing about them. Apparently, the Spirit blows where He wills and nobody can keep up with Him. There are divine calls for every conceivable kind of ministry, and everything you can conceive of has become a ministry. Sometimes ministry becomes an unformed and undefined movement of sorts that uses no article, whether definite or indefinite. It's not a call to the ministry or even to a ministry. It's just called to ministry. Make it up as you go along, the Spirit guiding you, of course.

Well, I don't like this, and I'm not exactly persnickety about placing into neat and tidy categories everything that is theological. I don't like it because there's something suspicious about the claim that God is calling us to do things that aren't even taught in the Bible. Everyone has an ego. Everyone has pride. Most people have a certain amount of imagination. So it is likely, even inevitable, that if everything is a ministry and everyone has a divine call to do it pretty soon God will be credited or blamed for every hair-brained idea our sinful pride has been able to fashion.

God has called us out of darkness. God has called us into light. This is a divine call. It is a call to praise God. It is to declare His virtues. It is to report the news concerning Him, that news we call the gospel. Now some might want to say preach. Others may want to say confess. Others will want to share. And, of course, we will argue about which word is best, depending on which theological error has gotten under our craw most recently. So to avoid annoying anyone, let

me use a more generic description of what we are all called to do by the simple fact that we are Christians. We are called to talk theology.

Some of you present here today may remember a talk my father gave years ago when he was serving as president of Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne. He was going on and on about how the students at the seminary loved talking theology with their wives and what a wonderful thing it was. Then he said that the sem wives were having many babies. The crowd laughed at that one and for years thereafter talking theology became a euphemism for enjoying marital intimacy. Why not? They're both divinely ordained. Marital love, talking theology, having children, all go together.

Where I live the high school graduation is a big event. Families will put on quite a party to celebrate their son or daughter's graduation. Pastors are usually invited to several such gatherings every year. This year I was visiting with a young lady from one of the congregations I am serving who had just graduated from high school. I gave her a copy of my brother's book, Why I am a Lutheran. She introduced me to her boyfriend. We were making small talk, and just before I was going to ask him where he attended church she told me he was Catholic. "So," I asked, "Do you talk religion?" "Yes," he replied, "And it always ends up with her telling me that I have to become a Lutheran." I told her to lend the book to him when she was done reading it.

Talking theology defines who and what we are as individual Christians. I'm not talking about what people generally refer to as witnessing, sharing the faith, or telling people about Jesus. It's not a matter of having to set before someone God's plan of salvation. It's simply a matter of talking theology. Theology is God-talk. It is saying words that speak of God and what God has to say. Everything is theological: politics, culture, literature, economics, and most domestic concerns that arise in any conversation. As Martin Scharlemann used to say, "This is our Father's world." This means that theology permeates every other kind of talk that pertains to the things of this world. Theology is not primarily an academic discipline that may be confined to theologians. It is a habit of speech. We learn to think theologically and so we learn to speak.

Children – especially teenagers – are a wonderful means of learning what you are actually saying at home. They often develop their critical faculties before they learn the gentle art of tact. That's good, because there's a fine line between tact and deception. A teenage theological assertion is quite assertive. And that gets a reaction, whether the topic is evolution, abortion, the Da Vinci Code, or the

movie, Brokeback Mountain. Where do teenagers learn their theology? At home. From whom did they first learn how to talk? From their parents and their older siblings. The talk of the home is the talk that will go outside of the home. There is no better way of learning what you are actually communicating to your children at home than to listen to your teenagers talk about the conversation they had at school or at work or down the street.

Talking theology defines who and what we are as individuals. Individuals are bound to a family. The family is more than a collection of individuals. It is a gathering together of people bonded to one another by the love of marriage and, in most cases, by common blood, genes, and physical traits and mannerisms that are passed down from one generation to the next. The home is the primary place for religious instruction for children in both the Old Testament and the New Testament church.

Listen to the Creed of the Old Testament church and the words that follow it:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

First the words are to be in your heart. You hold on to them in faith. You treasure them as more precious than any amount of money, for the word of God lasts forever. Then, when you have God's words in your heart, the first thing you are to do with these words from God is to teach them to your children. Luther followed these instructions when he placed at the top of each of the six chief parts the words: "As the house father should teach it in a simple way to his household."

We who belong to synods of the former Synodical Conference are heirs to a tradition of parish schools in which the congregation took on a great deal of the responsibility of catechizing the children of the parish in the word of God. One of the hottest points of theological debate among Lutherans of that tradition these days is how to define the office of Christian schoolteacher. Does this office derive from the preaching office that belongs to the congregation? Or does this office derive from the parental office? Or is it a bit of both? Luther derived the

office of schoolmaster from the parental estate. We read in the Large Catechism under the Fourth Commandment:

Out of the authority of parents all other authority is derived and developed. Where a father is unable by himself to bring up his child, he calls upon a schoolmaster to teach him; if he is too weak, he enlists the help of his friends and neighbors; if he passes away, he confers and delegates his authority and responsibility to others appointed for the purpose. (Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, Paragraph 141)

When the Germans who founded the Missouri Synod came to America they encountered a pluralistic religious culture with a strong stamp of Arminian theology upon it. This religion permeated the public schools. It was only natural that confessional Lutherans should establish their own schools that would indoctrinate the children in the true Lutheran religion. They could not in good conscience mark and avoid the rationalism of Germany only to acquiesce to the errors of American Protestantism. It is joked, with some accuracy, that the German Lutherans who settled here in Wisconsin established churches, schools, and breweries, and in that order. That was commendable, but sadly, most of the breweries are now long gone.

Being theologically somewhat persnickety (something I have assured you I am not), they had to fit the office of parochial schoolteacher into the correct theological category. While it was never actually denied that the schoolteacher stood in the place of the parents, it was commonly held that the Christian schoolteacher also took over a part of the preaching office under the supervision of the pastor who retained the entire office. This is where the notion of a divine call for a parochial schoolteacher came from. If an office is divine, a part of the office is divine. If the pastor should be called if he is to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments, a schoolteacher should also be called if he is to teach the lambs of the flock. Jesus' words to Peter, "Feed my lambs," were interpreted to refer to the teaching of God's word to the children of the congregation. Certainly children are included among those who need to be fed, but the word "lambs" by no means refers exclusively to children. If it did, we adults would have to remain silent and not sing, "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb." It certainly doesn't give to the congregation a special responsibility to teach children as opposed to teaching middle aged men or old women. At any rate, a theological tradition was born. It grounded the religious instruction of children firmly in the parish school. This tradition thrived and evolved and we are heirs of it. We can

embrace its most recent manifestation, reject it entirely, or retain what is good about it while returning to our confessional Lutheran roots.

There are serious problems with this tradition, not the least of which is that it has no foundation in the word of God. Nowhere does the Bible speak of a man or a woman being placed into an office in the church in which he is to teach God's word to people while being forbidden to carry out all of the duties of the pastoral office. There simply is no churchly office of teaching children God's word in the New Testament. There is a domestic office of teaching God's word to children, but no churchly office.

A second problem with the tradition of teaching that there is a divine call to the office of parochial schoolteacher that is somehow connected to the public ministry of the word is that the public ministry of the word is instituted solely for the administration of the means of grace. The Augsburg Confession puts it this way:

In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. (AC V, Paragraphs 1-2)

Teaching arithmetic, reading, writing, science, and penmanship is not a means of grace. But these activities are essential to the office of parochial schoolteacher. Nothing is essential to the divinely instituted office of preaching other than teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments of Christ. To define the office of Christian schoolteacher as being joined to the pastoral office, as the Missouri Synod does, or as a limited form of a more generically defined ministry of the word, as the Wisconsin Synod does, is to mix the means of grace together with what are not the means of grace, causing confusion.

A third problem with this tradition is that it equates the loving and essentially parental discipline of children with the preaching of the gospel. Confusion on what the gospel is results. Schoolteachers sincerely believe that being kind is "evangelical" and being harsh is "legalistic" as if the evangel is a category within the law. But human kindness does not exist only among Christians! It is possible to be a thoroughgoing legalist and to show exceptional kindness. I recall interviewing a teacher for a position at our school when I was pastor at St. John's in Racine. I wanted to elicit from him his understanding of what the law and the

gospel were. So I asked him why he would speak the law to the students and why he would speak the gospel to students. He replied that you need the law for when the children are bad. “And why would you speak the gospel?” I asked. He replied, “Well, you need to encourage them when they have been good.” This is what the gospel was. It was encouragement to be good. He had been taught that he had some kind of a gospel ministry. He knew what his job was, but he couldn’t rightly define the gospel. That’s because the office of schoolteacher – regardless of whether or not he teaches religion – is not the gospel ministry, and it’s wrong to teach schoolteachers that it is. We are only breeding legalistic confusion.

A fourth problem with the notion that a parochial schoolteacher has a divine call that is somehow within the gospel ministry of the congregation pertains most directly to our topic for today. It undermines what the Holy Scriptures teach about the divine vocation of Christian fathers and mothers. Surely, this has not been the intent on the part of those who crafted this theological theory, but it has been the sad effect. As we have seen, God has given to the father the duty to teach God’s word to his children. This is the duty of the mother as well. We read in 2 Timothy 3:14-15, “But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” To whom was Paul referring when he said to Timothy, “knowing from whom you have learned them”? It could not have been Paul – at least not Paul alone – but had to include Timothy’s mother as well, as he went on to say, “From childhood you have know the Holy Scriptures.” Timothy learned the Bible from his mother. It was from the biblical teaching that he learned from his mother that he gained the wisdom that brings salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Earlier in this Epistle, the Apostle wrote, “I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.” (2 Timothy 1:5)

If there is a divine call to teach God’s word specifically to the children, this call is not extended by God through the church. This call is part and parcel of the vocation of Christian fathers and mothers. As St. Paul writes, “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4) Nowhere does the Bible establish an office in the church specifically for the teaching of God’s word to children. There is no need. God has called Christian fathers and mothers to teach God’s word to

their children. Should they delegate this authority and responsibility to a teacher the authority and duty of the office remain with the parents.

Does anyone believe this anymore? It appears that neither parents nor teachers do. Many public and parochial schools have in recent years adopted the practice of having the students, parents, and teachers all sign a contract in which they all agree to do certain things that will help to improve the children's education. Someone somewhere came up with this idea and schools all over the place adopt it, requiring teachers to send these contracts home so that parents will sign them. Of course, if the parents won't sign them, the student must provide an explanation to the teacher as to why. It doesn't occur to administrators that perhaps they have no calling to require of parents a promise to do what God has given the parents to do.

After this contract from a school in East Grand Forks had been sent to us via our children for a few years, I got tired of having to explain to every new teacher why my wife and I wouldn't sign the contract so I wrote a letter in which I explained to my children's teachers why we would not do so. Here is a portion of that letter.

Implicit in the Contract that we are asked to sign is the understanding that the school is not carrying out duties delegated to it by the parents, but that the school actually has a teaching/oversight responsibility for the parents themselves. The school presumes to ask the parents to carry out certain parental responsibilities and to sign a "Contract" that they will do so. This is highly inappropriate. Parents are not answerable to the school for how we raise our children. The school is answerable to the parents for how they teach our children. We would like to emphasize that we have no complaints in this regard. However, there is a principle involved here, a principle of deep religious conviction that would be violated were we to sign the Contract that we are asked to sign.

In discussing this matter with other parents I discovered that most parents did not want to sign the contract but assumed that they had no choice. I talked to several conservative Lutheran parents about this. Not one approved of the contract, but not one refused to sign it. It was given them to do by the powers that be and as dutiful citizens they obeyed the authority.

But it was not given them to do by the powers that be. Their own God-given authority as parents was being usurped. They didn't object to it because it never crossed their minds to do so. Parents simply aren't aware of the office to which

God has called them. And there is a simple reason for this. They don't talk theology. They don't talk theology with each other and they don't talk theology with their children. This is why they don't think theologically. Talking and thinking go together.

Pastor families are no different. How many pastor families are there in which theology is rarely the subject of conversation at the dinner table? Some pastors insist that they should shelter their own family from the unpleasantness of theological controversy. But theology will always involve us in controversy. Avoiding it consigns our children to ignorance. They don't need to know who wears the white hats and who wears the black hats in the current church-political battles, but to learn the doctrinal issues of the day is a part of a child's education. How many pastors object to "talking shop" when relaxing with parishioners or even with other pastors? Talking theology is confined to its ghetto in the classroom and the pulpit.

But this is not what God intended for His people. What does Moses say right after telling fathers to teach God's word diligently to their children? He goes on and says, "[You] shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." This isn't advocating some kind of mantra or repetition of theological formulations. It isn't even addressing the formal worship life of the home. It is a command to talk theology. The Decalogue contains within it every single article of the Christian faith. And with what words is it always introduced? "I am the LORD your God." That divine assertion contains within it all Christian theology. When God binds Himself to you, He determines who and what you are and what will occupy your mind.

And it all begins with marriage. When God joins a man to a woman in marriage and then chooses to bless that union with children He is establishing here on earth something that is both unique and necessary for the well being of the church, the nation, and every godly endeavor. It is in the home where children learn who God is, as they see God in their parents. Luther, in his comments on the Fourth Commandment in the Large Catechism, speaks of the honor that children are required to give their parents. He writes:

To fatherhood and motherhood God has given the special distinction, above all estates that are beneath it, that he commands us not simply to love our parents but also to honor them. With respect to brothers, sisters, and neighbors in general he commands nothing higher than that we love them. Thus he distinguished father and mother above all other persons on earth and placed them next to himself. For

it is a much greater thing to honor than to love. Honor includes not only love but also deference, humility, and modesty, directed (so to speak) toward a majesty hidden within them. (Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, Paragraphs 105-106)

If our children are to see hidden within us the very majesty of God, we had better know what it is about God that God wants us to emphasize. It is the forgiveness of sins won by Christ's vicarious suffering and death, freely given to us in the gospel and sacraments of Christ, and received by us through faith alone. And we need to know this by experiencing it because our children learn much more from us by watching what we do than by listening to what we say. Husbands and wives will fight, bicker, disagree, and at time behave in ways that blur into complete obscurity whatever majesty is hidden within them. What to do? Confess and forgive. Bringing children to God's house is bringing them to where God most clearly defines us according to His gospel. We confess our sins to one another at home, we forgive one another in the home, and we go to church together. There Christ is preached to us. There His body and blood are given to us to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. There we receive together the treasures of salvation, and thereby the home and the church are joined together as God intended that they should be.

If the father is to be the pastor of his own home, this means that the language of the home and of the church should be the same. Teaching good chorales in the home around the dinner table will give children a love for what is spiritually edifying and aesthetically satisfying. There is no reason why children should be raised with spiritual fluff. I suppose one can always make an argument for teaching the little ones cutesy and shallow kiddie songs in the home. There's always going to be someone defending such foolishness by appealing to Christian freedom or demanding to see a Bible passage forbidding it. But has it ever crossed their minds that perhaps little children would rather learn something of quality as they see their older siblings resonate to the solid, Christ-centered, doctrinally rich Lutheran fare preserved in the great hymnody of our church?

Here we should distinguish between useless children's songs and useful children's songs. "Jesus Loves Me" is a good song. It's even better in the Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary. "I am Jesus' Little Lamb" is a fine song. Children love both of these songs. "If I Were a Butterfly" is an utterly useless song. If we want our children to learn theology and to love talking theology it is best to avoid songs that trivialize God's truth or that promote shallow praise at the expense of any theological substance.

One of my favorite hymns as a child and a favorite as well of my own children has never been included in a Missouri Synod hymnal. Its author is unknown. The first stanza goes like this.

Christ alone is our salvation, Christ the rock on which we stand;
Other than this sure foundation will be found but sinking sand.
Christ, His cross and resurrection, is alone the sinner's plea;
At the throne of God's perfection nothing else can set him free. (ELH, 484)

These words have been embedded in my heart all my life. We stand before the throne of God's perfection every day of our lives. We stand on the edge of eternity. What Christ has done for us is our only plea before God. It stands at the center of all Christian theology.

But in talking theology day by day in the home, at school, at work, or wherever we are, we aren't necessarily talking specifically about what Jesus has done to save us sinners. We aren't preaching a sermon. We aren't making an offer. We aren't giving a lecture. We're not expressing pious wishes. We're simply giving voice to what we believe. I believe, therefore I have spoken. We confess what we believe. There isn't a specific time or place or even topic. As we live on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, so we speak what we speak whenever the circumstances call for it.

Recently a rather unnatural notion of packaging the gospel for effective consumption has found its way into the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod under the name, Ablaze. Now I hesitate to address this because I know so very little about it. Most of you here are members of the LCMS and so have heard of this thing that isn't a program but a vision, a movement of sorts. I have been too preoccupied with other matters to become educated about Ablaze, but on the off chance that it might somehow be relevant to today's topic, I looked it up on the LCMS website and found the following.

Ablaze! Terms and definitions.

Number of people who were presented with the clear Gospel message and given an opportunity to respond.

When one person gives a clear presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to another person, so that there is an opportunity for that person to respond, this

activity “counts” toward the 100 million goal. A person may “respond” by receiving the message, rejecting it or asking for more information.

An example: A congregation puts 1,500 flyers in the local paper. The 1,500 flyers do not count. But, any inquiries that came as a result of the flyers and opened the door for the congregation to share the Good News with an unreached or uncommitted person will count toward the 100 million goal.

We are not specifically counting baptisms or conversions--visible fruit of the Holy Spirit. We are counting the number of Gospel seeds planted. We depend on the Holy Spirit to work the miracle of faith. President Kieschnick refers to this activity as the "Critical Event."

What is critical, however, is not presenting the gospel in such a way that someone is given an opportunity to respond. What is critical is talking the language of the faith every day in the home. It is confronting the world with the ones you love.

This is how they will learn God’s word and take it to heart. It is discussing abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and extra-marital sex. It is asking why Rome says priests cannot marry and learning why they are wrong to do so. It is talking about the latest politically correct doctrine promoted at school and how it is in conflict with the doctrine of original sin. It is trashing the gospel of self-esteem, arguing with the pope, discussing the inerrancy of the Bible, objective justification, infant baptism, the Charismatic Movement, and why contemporary Christian music is so very, very bad. Out of this milieu of every day theological conversation, the catechetical, polemical, devotional, and liturgical language of the church combines to become part of the fabric of the home and in this way God’s word becomes planted within the heart to be cherished.

Will there be an opportunity to respond, as the Ablaze program, I mean movement, requires? Maybe, if he’s quick enough or bold enough or angry enough to do so. In fact, people will be responding constantly. Anger, curiosity, inquiry, denial, joy, and serious consideration are just a few of the responses one will get. But the language of the faith will keep on being spoken wherever and whenever anyone is willing to listen. Or even when they are not! Sometimes it brings people into the church to visit. Sometimes they stay and sometimes they don’t. Sometimes their lives are changed radically. Yes, they are born from above, and it all started with a meeting with someone who learned to talk theology at home with Mom and Dad. It can’t be packaged. It isn’t a program or even a movement. It certainly isn’t a vision. It is a habit. And this habit of talking theology grounds us deeply in the God-man whose life was given for our lives, whose righteousness covers our sin, and whose words are spirit and life for us.

The vocation of Christian marriage is burdened by crosses often too painful to put into words. Christian children suffer. They die. They fall into serious sin that threatens their very souls. They may even deny the faith into which they were baptized. When confronted by such tragedies Christian fathers and mothers suffer much but they do not despair. They love the theology they've talked with their children and so they are constantly seeking a theological explanation for the tragedy, but even more than that, they are seeking a theological reason to have hope. There isn't a sin too disgusting to be forgiven and there isn't a heart so hard that God's grace cannot conquer it. There isn't a loss that is final in this life. The word of God is almighty. When God turns His face away from His children, He isn't abandoning them and He isn't playing sport with them. He's loving them in everything He does. He disappears just for a while. He'll be back. The reason we know this is so is because He has bound Himself so tightly to His word and promise. This is what made us love talking theology in the first place. This is why we taught the talk to those we love the most in this world, and we never tire of it. It is our life and it will see us through death to heaven. Then, at the resurrection, when we see our Savior face to face in heaven, with all our theological questions finally answered with crystal clarity, will we stop talking theology? Not on your life! It is there and then that the conversation will have just begun!

Amen

Rolf D. Preus
