

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME . . . BUT FATHERS, DON'T LET THEM DIE

While the disciples thought them a distraction, Jesus set them straight about how little children centrally focus what is required to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:14). Then also, from the Lord's perspective, new-born babes are not cute. They are enemies of God, slaves to sin, and citizens of Hell. Reborn children, however, are another story. Jesus explained that all enter the Kingdom as little children (Matthew 18:3) - children who get crucified with Him - dying to sin but raised up as a New Creation (Romans 6:3ff). It all happens when they are splashed with grace by a deluge of water and the Word in their Baptism. Parents often have a sense of got-that-base-covered when their children are baptized. The baptismal garment, the sponsors, attending relatives, and the ham dinner afterwards are traditional trappings that signal and celebrate a sense of *a done deal*. The kid's *Happy Forever* has now been assured. Well . . . maybe.

Often not taught or explained to parents, especially to fathers, is that their child's Baptism has landed her in a spiritual war zone where the Devil relentlessly prowls *to get her back*. The often-unspoken truth is that the Baptism of our kids has landed them in a life-long spiritual war with the Devil. Jesus taught; *he who endures to the end, will be saved* (Matthew 24:13). With his close allies - the fallen world (say, youth culture) and the Sinful Self - Satan is working to see that your child is not one of them. They are out to make her collateral damage in the Kingdom of God. Let me say it plainly: *Fathers, the Devil is out to kill your kid!* You have suffered your daughter to come unto Jesus; but fathers, *don't let her die!* You have suffered your son to come unto Jesus; but fathers, *don't let him die!*

Luther understood that the chief vocation of fathers is the spiritual nurture of their household – to care for their children by teaching them the faith into which they are baptized. As Scott Keith explained in *Being Dad: Father as a Picture of God's Grace: The mother supplies the physical nurture to the child, whereas the father supplies the spiritual nurturance . . .* (p. 77) His observation follows Luther's understanding of the father's primary spiritual vocation. It was to assist fathers in this work that he wrote his *Shorter Catechism*. Luther began each *Chief Part* with the words: *as the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household*. It was Luther's conviction that fathers had the primary responsibility to provide the basic nurture of the grace of Christ to their children. Unfortunately, his efforts to instill this sense of fatherly responsibility failed. Indeed, from Luther's day until now among Lutherans, fathers have largely demurred and ceded this primary responsibility to pastors, schoolmasters, and their wives. And about this misplacement of primary spiritual responsibility, all three have been more than complicit.

Today when our children look at their fathers exercising leadership in Christ's Church, they mostly observe them making sure the congregation's parking lot is in good repair; the receipts from the Sunday offering are rightly recorded and deposited; everyone is seated with a worship folder; and they receive a timely cue of when to come forward for Communion. The one they usually observe engaging their spiritual nurture (when not the pastor) is either Mom, or assorted volunteer rent-a-moms. Moreover, often missing by Christian parents is any awareness

that their children are living in the midst of intense spiritual warfare where life and death are in the balance. And yet, when the lives of their children *are* understood to be in jeopardy, what father does not remove all other priorities and sacrifice whatever to see that what their children need is provided - by blood, sweat, and tears if necessary. What father tells the oncologist of their cancer-stricken child that they will not make their next appointment because it conflicts with her soccer game? And yet, recent statistics suggest that many of our children baptized as infants joined many a soccer league, but never made it to their confirmation as adolescents.

When it comes to wars that must be fought, real men have always understood that their place is not hiding behind their wives. They are to be adequately equipped and moved to the front lines for battle. Real fathers understand that when the lives of their children are at stake from deadly spiritual warfare, they need to be there to protect and equip them to survive the onslaughts of the forces of evil out to destroy them. Real flowing testosterone, needs to move our Fathers to rule their children with grace (Keith); fit them with the breast plate of righteousness; defend them with the shield of faith; teach them how to take it to the Devil with the sword of the Word of Christ; so that in the end . . . they stand (Ephesians 6:13-17). *Suffer the little children to come unto me . . . but fathers, don't let them die.*

Steven A. Hein