THEOLOGY AND FAMILIES

Adrian Thatcher
THEOLOGY AND FAMILIES
Challenges in Contemporary Theology

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Challenges in Contemporary Theology is a series aimed at producing clear orientations in, and research on, areas of “challenge” in contemporary theology. These carefully co-ordinated books engage traditional theological concerns with mainstreams in modern thought and culture that challenge those concerns. The “challenges” implied are to be understood in two senses: those presented by society to contemporary theology, and those posed by theology to society.

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Adrian Thatcher
For James Robert Thatcher
and Loren Rose Thatcher
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In several previous books I have tried to think theologically about sexuality, marriage and divorce, and the growing practice of cohabitation. A book which tries to think theologically about families and children broadens the range of recent writing and extends the line still further. Previous writing has required me to become familiar with a particular theological literature, and I am still shocked at the lack of attention this literature gives to children. With notable exceptions, theology of all types, schools and branches, past and present, theoretical and practical, stands accused. Given the teaching of Jesus about children, this hiatus is extraordinary. Elsewhere child neglect is a crime. In this volume children are center-stage. The desire to put children (and parenting) first, and to tap into the neglected theological riches that remain available for the purpose, is the reason why I have postponed other projects and written a further volume in an area similar to my other recent writing.

Extraordinary changes are happening to families at the present time. They raise new questions for everyone interested in them, theologians included, and the impetus of the questions prompts fresh theological insights which make the theological enterprise excitingly worthwhile. I have faced conflicting demands. On the one hand, all academics in British universities face peer review of their “research output” in the national Research Assessment Exercise. This book too must be subjected to that fateful scrutiny. On the other hand, researchers are expected to be accountable to their “publics.” This is called “dissemination” (an unmistakably phallic term). The theological “public” is considerably broader than the academic élite who write for one another and read papers to one another at prestigious conferences. A theological book about families has also to be intelligible at least to people in the churches who minister to, and belong within, families, and to the broader academic and professional communities. I have tried to respond to
both sets of demands. There is no virtue in obscurity. Originality (whatever that is) and accessibility need not be incompatible. It is equally possible to fail in both these undertakings. Readers (and peer reviewers) will judge the outcome for themselves.

During the writing of this book I came to be blessed with not one, but two, beautiful grandchildren, James and Loren. This book is dedicated to them. They will soon know what granddad does (writes boring books with no pictures in them!). They have taught me afresh what it is to see the face of Christ in the face of a child. Their wise parents, Valerie and John, are superb in the art of parenting. The long sections on parents, and on genuine reciprocity between parents and children, were written with them as my role models.

Also during the writing of this book I left the College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth, after working there for 27 years. I rejoice in my new theological colleagues at the University of Exeter and thank them for their welcome, friendship, geniality, commitment, and remarkable erudition. I also thank Caroline Major for her assiduous proof-reading of the text and compilation of the indexes. This is the fifth book on which we have worked together. She has also provided me with a regular flow of press-cuttings about families and children which have been invaluable.

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Part I

Sources
Chapter One

Beginning with Real Families and Children

1.1 Family Forms

“I kneel in prayer to the Father,” exclaimed the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph. 3:14). This tantalizing aside assumes that families are a universal, human institution: indeed families are not even bounded by terrestriality. More than this, we are invited to visualize the identity of every family, past, present, and future, as constituted in some way by their relation to God. The Christian faith names this family-constituting God, “Father.” While family forms are relative to time and space, and so to religions and cultures, we are encouraged to envisage human parenting as rooted in the being and will of the divine Parent of all.

This book is a contribution to a Trinitarian theology of families and children, offered both to the Christian community as the fruit of what we already tacitly believe about God, and about families as constituted by God; and to the wider community as an honest contribution to multidisciplinary reflection on what families are, what they do, and how best they flourish. It arises out of the conviction that the Christian Gospel speaks transformative to families and children, and to the societies to which they belong, and that it will continue to do so in ways that have not yet been fully articulated. It addresses the root question “How may the resources of Christian faith and practice contribute to the thriving of families, and in particular, of children?” Indeed, one of the most disturbing features of contemporary theology is the neglect of families and children. Marcia Bunge writes “Until very recently, issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology.”