

Mr. Thomas Manton's Epistle to the Reader

Updated language by William H. Gross – Colorado Springs 2006

CHRISTIAN READER,

I CANNOT suppose that you are such a stranger in England as to be ignorant of the general complaint concerning the decay of the power of godliness, and more especially of the great corruption of youth. Wherever you go, you will hear men crying out about bad children and bad servants; although indeed the source of the mischief must be sought a little higher. It is bad parents and bad masters that make bad children and bad servants. And we cannot blame so much their unruliness, as our own negligence in their education.

The devil has great malice toward the kingdom of Christ, and he knows no more succinct way to crush it in the egg than by the perversion of youth and supplanting family-duties. He strikes at all the public duties in the assemblies of the saints, but they are too well guarded by the solemn injunctions and dying charge of Jesus Christ for him to ever hope to totally subvert and undermine them. But he strikes at family duties with more success because the institution is not as solemn; the practice is not as seriously and conscientiously regarded as it should be; and the omission is not as liable to public notice and censure. Religion was first hatched in families and there the devil seeks to crush it. The families of the Patriarchs were all the Churches God had in the world at the time. Therefore (I suppose), when Cain went out from Adam's family, he is said to go out from the face of the Lord, Gen. 4:16. Now, the devil knows that it will be a blow at the root, and a ready way to prevent the succession of Churches, if he can subvert families. Then other societies and communities will not long flourish, nor subsist with any power and vigor, for the family is the stock from which these are supplied both for the present and for the future.

For the present, a family is the seminary of Church and State. If children are not well principled there, everything else miscarries. A fault in the first preparation is not mended in the second; if youth is ill-bred in the family, they will prove ill in the Church and in the Commonwealth. They are first made or marred in the family, and the presage of their future lives is taken from there, Prov. 20:11. By family discipline, officers are trained up for the Church: 1 Tim. 3:4, *One that rules well his own house*, etc.; and it is there that men are bred up in subjection and obedience. It is noted in Acts 21:5 that the disciples sent Paul on his way with their wives and children; their children probably are mentioned to intimate that their parents would, by their own example and affectionate farewell to Paul, breed them up in a way of reverence and respect to the pastors of the Church.

For the future: It is comfortable, certainly, to see a thriving nursery of young plants, and to have hopes that God shall have a people to serve him when we are dead and gone. The people of God comforted themselves in that: Ps. 102:28, *The Children of your servants shall continue*, etc.

Upon all these considerations, how careful ministers and parents should be to train up young ones in the knowledge and fear of God while they are yet pliable, like wax, capable of any form and impression. And they should be early to instill the principles of our most holy faith, as they are summarized in Catechisms and placed so readily in view of the conscience! Surely these

seeds of truth planted in the field of memory, if they work nothing else, will at least be a great check and bridle to them. Just as throwing it in cold water keeps the pot from boiling, this will somewhat allay the fervor of youthful lusts and passions.

Having been asked, I had resolved to recommend to you with great earnestness the work of catechizing, and as a fit help, the usefulness of this book as printed with extensive Scriptures. But receiving the private letter of a very learned and godly divine, in which that recommendation is excellently done for me, I will boldly transcribe a part of it, and offer it to public view. The author, having bewailed the great distractions, corruptions, and divisions that are in the Church, presents the cause and the cure:

Among others, a principal cause of these mischiefs is the great and common neglect of the heads of families to discharge that duty which they owe to God for the souls under their charge, especially in teaching them the doctrine of Christianity. Families as well as Churches are societies that must be sanctified to God. Family heads have as true a charge of the souls in their family as pastors have of those in the Churches. But, alas, how little this is considered or regarded! But while negligent ministers are (deservedly) thrown out of their positions, negligent heads of families think themselves almost blameless. They offer their children to God in baptism; there they promise to teach them the doctrine of the gospel, and to bring them up in the nurture of the Lord. But they easily promise and easily break that promise. They educate their children for the world and the flesh, even though they have renounced these things and have dedicated themselves to God. This covenant-breaking with God, and betraying the souls of their children to the devil, must lie heavy on them either here or else in the hereafter. They have children and keep families merely for the world and the flesh; but they little consider what a charge is committed to them, and what it means to bring up a child for God, and to govern a family as a sanctified society.

O how sweetly and successfully the work of God would go on if only we would all join together in our separate places to promote it! Men need not then run to be preachers without being sent; Instead, they might find that the part of the work which belongs to them is enough, and it is the best work they can be employed in. Especially women should be careful of this duty. Because they are around their children the most, and have early and frequent opportunities to instruct them, this is the principal service they can do to God in this world, being restrained from more public work. Doubtless many an excellent magistrate has been sent into the Commonwealth, and many an excellent pastor into the Church, and many a precious saint to heaven, through the happy preparations of a holy education, perhaps by a woman that thought herself useless and unserviceable to the Church. If only parents would begin early, and labor to affect the hearts of their children with the great matters of everlasting life, and to acquaint them with the substance of the doctrine of Christ. And when they find in their children the knowledge and love of Christ, if they would then bring them to the pastors of the Church to be tested, confirmed, and admitted to the further privileges of the Church, what happy and well-ordered Churches we might have!

Then one pastor would not need to do the work of two or three hundred or thousand heads of families, teaching children those principles which their parents should have taught them long before. Nor would we have to preach to so many miserable ignorant souls who are not prepared by education to understand us; nor would we need to exclude so many from holy communion because of ignorance. These believers do not yet have the grace to feel and lament that exclusion, nor the wit and patience to wait in a learning state until they are ready to be fellow-citizens with

the saints and of the household of God. But instead they come to us with aged self-conceitedness, being past their childhood, and yet still being worse off than children. They have the ignorance of children, but they are past the teachableness of children. They think themselves wise, indeed, wise enough to quarrel with the wisest of their teachers because they have lived long enough to have been wise, but the only evidence of their knowledge is their aged ignorance. They are readier to demand Church privileges than to learn from us, and to obey our instructions until they are prepared for them, so the privileges may do them good. They are more like snappish curs that will snap us by the fingers for their meat and snatch it out of our hands, than children who wait until we give it them. Parents have so trained them to be unruly, that ministers must deal with too few other than the unruly. For lack of laying the foundation well at the beginning, many who profess Christ are themselves as ignorant as most. This is why so many, especially the younger ones, will swallow almost any error that is offered to them, and follow any sect of dividers that will entice them, as long as it is done with earnestness and plausibility. Regrettably, though their hearts may be changed in an hour by the grace of God (whenever they understand just the essentials of the faith), their understanding must have time and diligence to furnish them with the knowledge necessary to establish and fortify them against deceits.

Upon these and many similar considerations, we should entreat all Christian families to take more pains in this necessary work, and to get better acquainted with the substance of Christianity. To that end (with the addition of some moving treatises to awaken the heart), I know of no work better fit for their use than what has been compiled by the Assembly at Westminster. It is a Synod of as godly and judicious divines as ever England saw; I truly think so (notwithstanding all the bitter words which they have received from discontented and self-conceited men). They had the unhappiness to be employed in calamitous times when the noise of wars shut men's ears, and the licentiousness of wars set every wanton tongue and pen at liberty to reproach them, and the prosecution and event of those wars, exasperated biased and discontented men to dishonor themselves by seeking to dishonor these divines. I dare say that in days of old, when councils were in power and account, if they only had such a council of bishops as these presbyters, the fame of it for learning and holiness and all ministerial abilities would, with very great honor, have been passed down to posterity.

I do therefore desire that all heads of families would first study well this work themselves, and then teach it to their children and servants according to their various capacities. Once they understand these grounds of religion, they will be able to read other books more understandingly, and hear sermons more profitably, and confer more judiciously, and hold fast to the doctrine of Christ more firmly, than they are likely to do by any other course. First, let them read and learn the Shorter Catechism, and next the Larger, and lastly, read the Confession of Faith.

Thus far he has written, whose name I shall conceal (though the excellence of the matter and its style will easily reveal him), because I have published it without his knowledge and consent – though I hope it is not against his liking and approval. I shall add no more, but that I am,

Your servant in the Lord's work,

THOMAS MANTON