

*For published version: see “Theology and Families,” Theology Today 65 (4): 525.*

**Adrian Thatcher**

**Maden, MA: Blackwell. \$34.95. 278 pp.**

To the banquet of books on families and children in the last decade, research Fellow at the University of Exeter Adrian Thatcher serves up a curious blend of conservative and progressive claims. He advocates marriage as the “best family form” while admitting that those outside marriage sometimes exemplify “marital values” better than those within. He proclaims the centrality of the Father-Son-Spirit while also decrying the patriarchal equation of husbands and fathers with the Father God and its abusive enactment in family relationships of submission, obedience, and violence.

This is not the first time Thatcher has stretched the boundaries of the wider discussion. This book builds on his own prior publications, such as *Marriage After Modernity* (1999) and *Celebrating Christian Marriage* (2002). It also relies heavily on books, such as Don Browning et al.’s *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (1997, 2000), Lisa Cahill’s *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (2000), Julie Rubio’s *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (2004), Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis’s *Honouring Children* (2004), and my own *Let the Children Come* (2003). Thatcher’s unique contribution is his attempt to ground a Christian theology of families in the doctrine of the Trinity and in analogies between the Father-Son-Spirit of Trinitarian theology and the Father-Mother-Child of families.

After sketching the state of today’s families, the book is divided into two parts. It moves in a slightly outmoded fashion from *sources in the tradition* (biblical understandings, Jesus’s teaching, and the Trinity) to their *application in practice*

(marriage, children's rights, parenting, non-conventional families, and family as "domestic church"). Organized serially around a string of themes more than around a cohesive argument, the book still advances several roughly connected claims. Doctrine and creed provide a better foundation for a theology of family than scripture, which is plagued by plural, ambiguous, and historically relative meanings. Just as the Triune God is a "loving communion of Persons-in-relation" so also are father-mother-children. Parents and children embody the Trinity, participating in analogous movements of mutual and sacrificial love among persons who are both distinct and the same. From the perspective of a relational anthropology, our children are not just our neighbors. They "are us." Liberal claims about children's rights can be grounded in Jesus's identification with children and children with God. Those who choose childlessness often have good reasons, but their choice represents a lamentable refusal of God's gift, especially if driven by affluence, greed, and indifference toward children.

Throughout his analysis, Thatcher awkwardly straddles huge political and theological tensions. Overall, however, marriage and the Father God are the default mode. The "evidence is clear"—a mantra throughout the book—"marriage, on balance, is better for everyone." Support is extended from marriage to other forms "in spite of themselves." His "liberation of children" centers on renewed commitment to marriage and does not consider other ways to give them voice or power. He assumes *Father* can function generically to represent male and female and ignores creative re-readings of the Trinity in theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson, for example. God the Father is not masculine, he insists. The "Father and Son exist beyond sexed distinctions." So "God's fatherhood is expressed through *mothers and fathers*."

Challenges besides such divisive theological debates trouble this book. Many of its arguments grow out of and are positioned over against the work of others. In one case, Thatcher says his intent is not “to enter a fruitless argument or score exegetical points.” But readers may wonder, especially when unfamiliar with the finer details. Authors and texts are not always given their due, with material and quotations sometimes taken out of context. Readers “will want to consult the book directly,” as Thatcher himself suggests. Some assertions present unnecessary extremes. So, for example, one cannot help but wonder if “there are no weightier considerations for Christians to ponder” than the creeds, “hardly a more positive affirmation of women’s bodies” than Mary giving birth to God, and “no better illustration of parental love than the Parable of the Prodigal Father (sic).”

Determining whether Thatcher succeeds in mediating adversarial positions and securing a more fruitful basis on which to establish Christian families depends largely on where one stands politically. But readers who want to keep up with literature on Christianity and families should add this book to their list. It is to be praised for its identification of important questions and interlocutors and its insistence on a Christocentric and theocentric reading of the dilemmas facing contemporary families.

Vanderbilt University Divinity School

Nashville, TN