

Grace before meals

by [Linda Lee Nelson](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace. By J. Bradley Wigger. Jossey-Bass, 195 pp., \$19.95.

"Mommy, why do we pray only when the pastor comes over for dinner?" a little girl asked when I joined her family for a Sunday meal. Though her parents no doubt were embarrassed, for me this child-inspired moment gave rise to broader questions of grave importance: Why do so many religious parents find it hard to transport the activities of faith from the sanctuary to the kitchen? Why, in J. Bradley Wigger's words, are children "learning less and less about anything religious at home?" Why is the home "losing its place and power in the life of faith?" When did religious education become the exclusive domain of church professionals?

In a book for parents and for those working with parents in congregations, Wigger portrays the home and family as sacred, immediate and profound "contexts for spiritual learning." His book is meant "for those who hope homes can be places where children will see God's love and know it deeply." Wigger teaches religious education at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and directs the seminary's Center for Congregations and Family Ministries.

Not a "how-to" book for parenting, this is an invitation for families to live and practice "from a larger vision of meaning, . . . [from] a deeper glimpse into the nature and power of faith itself." The family that interprets itself theologically, asserts Wigger, is the family that derives a unique and deliberate way of being in the world from the resources of faith. Wigger focuses on "the power of home and family life in the story of faith told through the Bible." The concept of the family as a means of grace is further developed through the use of family stories, both his own and those of others, as well as the insights of theologians. Weaving together themes that result in a consistent and attractive world, Wigger moves from the contributions of the resources of faith to his own creative redefinition of traditional doctrines.

The result is a lovely and beneficial book. Gracious in style and vocabulary, it is a wonderful tool for drawing the theologically intimidated or the novice student of

faith into the values and themes of scripture and the tradition. Those more thoroughly acquainted with the Bible or who hunger for an intense exploration of theological concepts may find the book unsatisfying. For example, Wigger's overview of the content of scripture--its plots, themes and characters--seen through the lens of home and family covers a mere 34 pages! Additionally, as soon as his many tantalizing and soul-awakening theological jewels arouse the curiosity of the reader, Wigger quickly moves on to a new topic.

Among Wigger's most provocative and urgent contributions are his redefinition of power and beauty in families, his assessment of the biblical story as a source of courage and identity for children, his queries into the life of God, his consistent display of the partnership between the physical and the spiritual, his application of the precepts of prophetic justice to family life, and his contemporary definitions of sin (consumerism, the passion for technology, escapism, idolatry, manipulation) as they relate to the well-being of families. Of special appeal and profound moral implication is his interpretation of family and children as sacred mysteries. They are holy entities worthy of respect, awe, wonder and "radical amazement."

If children or families are viewed as problems to be solved, then the "framework of controlling power" and its morality dominate family life, but if one approaches children and families as mysteries, as sacred entities, then a different moral framework is required. Family sin diminishes the presence of the transcendent in its members; it "dims the reflection of the Creator God . . . in us. Sin flattens and empties the fullness of mystery." What freshness might be infused into the parent-child relationship, what changes in the practices of discipline might occur, if parents perceived the child as a sacred mystery in their midst.

Wigger concludes the book with a chapter in which he suggests domestic "rituals, disciplines, and practices that are explicitly religious." He offers ideas for parents on how to use scripture, prayer, celebrations, service and talk of God in appealing ways for children. Characterizing family life as worship, he adapts the different activities of worship to the rhythms of families. He makes connections between the Word of worship and thank-you notes, the Eucharist and 2:00 a.m. feedings, services of healing and the evening bath, the music of worship and lullabies, the benediction and the bed time prayer. Perhaps most important for the fragile and vulnerable life of the family is Wigger's connection of the rite of confession and forgiveness in worship and the free, unrestricted power of apologies and pardons in families.