



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF FAMILY DEVOTIONS

No one has to tell me how busy they are as parents in this cyber/new millennium age. Two income homes are now the acceptable and necessary economic structure of Christian homes. This leaves the idea of family devotions an anachronism from another "little house on the prairie" era of fireside family discussions. However, if one goes back to Bible believing pastors who were concerned by the lack of "family worship" in their congregations in the mid-19th century, here is what you would hear:

"Along with Sabbath observance and the catechizing of children, family worship has lost ground. There are many heads of families, communicants in our churches, and according to a scarcely credible report, some ruling elders and deacons, who maintain no stated daily service of God in their dwellings...Let other heirlooms perish, but let us not deny to our offspring the worship of that God who has been our dwelling place in all generations."

"THOUGHTS ON FAMILY WORSHIP" by James W. Alexander, 1847

Pastor Alexander saw in a day much simpler than our own the need for family devotion time, yet lamented that fewer and fewer households were taking it seriously. In his classic book quoted from above, Pastor Alexander wrote lovingly of the benefits of family devotions on the individual preparing the devotions, the parents, the children, the church, relatives, the commonwealth (state or nation, and our posterity. I would commend this quick read, classic to anyone who needs to be persuaded that family worship or devotions is as needed today as it has been anytime in the history of the church.

The reasons we don't and won't do family devotions is as long and full as each day we have filled with lesser things. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXI Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day, paragraph VI states "...but God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself...."

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"In addition to public worship it is the duty of each person in secret and of every family in private, to worship God....Family worship, which should be observed by every family consists in prayer, reading the Scriptures and singing praises or in some briefer form of outspoken recognition of God....Parents should instruct their children in the Word of God and in the principles of our holy religion. The reading of devotional literature should be encouraged and every proper opportunity should be embraced for religious instruction."

Our church's fathers of the faith have recognized for years the necessity to build the family around devotions or family worship time. The great Presbyterian preacher of the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards, called each Christian home a "little church" as each father is a pastor to that small congregation within the greater church. To ensure our children see living examples of vibrant faith from the parents they must see it more than once a week on Sunday. As a part of elder visits to homes, one of the most probing (and embarrassing) questions to help determine if a family is growing in faith and in knowledge of Christ is to ask the parents about their private (quiet time) and family devotions. If there is nothing from Monday morning to Saturday night, the church is left with precious little time in Sunday School and worship to fill the spiritual void of a week of confrontation with the fallen world and our fallen natures.

So how does one become motivated to have (as Charles Spurgeon would say) "the want to, to want to". I remember as a younger Ruling Elder in church in southern California, telling people on my elder shepherding list, that they should make family devotions a "real priority" in their families. If a member had the courage and perception to ask me how I did it for my young and growing family, they would hear a convoluted, "do what I say rather than what I do". Yes, it was a high priority in my family that never got

done. Of course, I could jog, read mountains of magazines (this was pre-internet days) and have lots of other mediocre excuses for not doing what I was trying to tell them was foundational to Christian living in the home.

PRIORITIES ARE WHAT WE DO. If we have time to check the weather report off Madagascar everyday on our internet (or other important news) don't we have time to take our families before the Throne of Grace? Don't say something is a priority in your life and yet let the lesser things crowd it out. Maybe for most of us a five minute time of family prayer is all the time we have, but that is a start to something great.

Think about how quickly our covenant children come and go out of our lives. My children are now getting married and one by one they are leaving the home. It seems like yesterday that I was changing their diapers! Yet, if for around 40 weeks out of the year (taking time off for summer, vacations and other unforeseen events) we have a brief family devotion then in the 20-odd years that God has placed them in my home and charge they would have had approximately 4000 opportunities to open the Word of God, to sing God's praises and pray for their and other's needs. But most important of all, my children would have an inheritance of daily communion with God and all the benefits that flow from it. They would have a family tradition that would come much easier than it did to me, who had no family tradition of growing up daily in the Scriptures and prayer.

A goal for family worship would be prayer, reading the Word of God and a song of praise or thanksgiving. Depending upon the age of the children, the materials can go deeper or be quite simplistic.

Now the difficult question of "how can this be done". Fathers, you must take the lead. As in most spiritual leadership questions, your wife is hoping you will become motivated to take the lead. When you give up and give it to her to accomplish it will be much less profitable and your children will get the message, loud and clear, that family devotions are a low and expendable priority.

As I said above, start with something achievable. Decide if morning or evening would be better; before or after breakfast or supper. There are lots of helps available to guide us. Children's Ministry International (CMI, www.childministry.com) of which I am the Director has published

comprehensive devotional guides to take busy parents through the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith with prayers, hymns/songs, Bible lessons, practical suggestions and other helps to allow one to go through the basics of our faith at their own pace. There are three small booklets that easily fit into the Bible.

Of course, there are lots other guides to family devotions and maybe you would want to start by reading a Proverb or Psalm daily. God has given us 31 chapters in Proverbs so you have a chapter a day and you will never get lost. If its the 21st of the month then read the 21st Proverb (or Psalm). See how God meets your efforts with real insights and practical advice for the day ahead. Listen as your wife and children share prayer requests. Write them down so you have a testimony of answered prayer. The big issue is rather or not this is really going to be a priority or let it be crowded out by good but less eternal things.

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