

FAMILY WORSHIP AND DEVOTIONS

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In our house, we practice what is commonly called 'family worship'. This is what has also been called family discipleship, home discipleship, family devotions, family Bible study, and a host of other names over the centuries. In modern Christian culture, this practice is less common than in past centuries. For whatever reason, Christians have become too busy, too fractured, too distracted or otherwise inconvenienced to find time to establish a regular family gathering to study the Word of God together. I believe this is a sad state of affairs, and hope to encourage those brothers who are sitting on the fence about instituting this practice that it is not only good for all involved, but it is critical to the spiritual growth of all the members of our families. In fact, so vital is family devotion that in some Christian churches throughout history, fathers who neglected to bring their families together once or twice a day for devotions were considered neglectful of their duties as spiritual leaders and were risking church discipline. If some aspect of the Christian life was once considered an essential duty of fathers, it seems that we might want to investigate the benefits and see what was so important. Many families today have done just that and rediscovered the benefits of family worship. I believe that today's churches not only should be encouraging the practice of family worship, they should be equipping fathers to do so.

The testimony of church history, powerful as it may be, is only a help that supports the basis of family worship and devotions. The witness of those who came before us is easy to disregard, if we even bother to take time to see what our forefathers were doing at all. How easy it is for us to become arrogant in our modernity by proclaiming that we have different circumstances, challenges and responsibilities that our brethren did not have in the preceding centuries! Time is short in today's Christian homes, we have so much to do - soccer practice, choir, activities, events, school. And that's just the kids. With parents working mostly outside the home, there are precious few hours in the day when a family is together at all, much less with time to spend having devotions or worshipping the Lord! Friends, this must change if families are to be growing in grace and knowledge. With 70-80 per cent of Christians walking away from the faith as soon as they are out of college (depending on [whose numbers](#) you look at), it is clear that what we have been comfortable doing for decades is failing. Gladly, there are many Christians are waking up to their duties in families all across the nation and I hope that you are reading this rather long and laborious article because you are one of those people!

Is there a Biblical mandate regarding family worship and devotions?

We are given a picture of home discipleship that looks radically different than many Christian households today. If we say we are believers, we owe it to the One we claim as our Lord to see what His word tells us about discipling our family. The believer truly delights in the Word, and diligently searches its depths for the precepts of God which bring us into a greater joy in our walk with Him.

King David delighted in the law of God, claiming it to be a rich blessing and a way of preservation and vitality ([Psalm 1](#)). It is no burdensome thing for a follower of Christ to obey the precepts of God. Though it may be difficult to embrace, it should be our heart's desire to seek out the will of God. So like David, we investigate and ask "what does the Word say?"

To truly convict Christians of the importance of family worship, we look to the scriptures which do not change, the standards which do not fluctuate because they flow from the mind of Him who is the same today as yesterday and tomorrow.

I want to present a brief case to any brothers who might be on the fence about family worship and devotions. This is particularly a cry to those men who are discovering the richness of God's Word and the reforming nature of a deeper walk with God. You are being called out of old ways into new ways. Your understanding of scripture is being renewed, your desire for growing in the Word is becoming strong. This is for you, because God is at work in you and He is calling you to see freshly His will for your family. Consider then, the Psalmist's words:

Psalm 78:1-7 (ESV)

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;

We see a precept in this Psalm that re-states the commands given to the people of God. Fathers have received a command, not a suggestion or an invitation to disciple their children, but a command to teach the next generation. We see the purpose clearly as well, and can immediately relate the good

fruit of family discipleship, "...that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God," to the bad fruit of failing to do so today.

In [Ephesians 6:4](#) we have yet another direct command from Paul, "Fathers...bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord". What directive is more clear? It is the responsibility of fathers to train up a generation of believers, not the school, not the Sunday School teacher, the youth pastor or the church. Fathers. Surely you have heard arguments that these passages can be satisfied today by youth pastors and Awana organizations, but further scriptures make this position merely a convenient excuse for us to hand off our responsibility to someone else. It is especially clear in [Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#), where it is explained with no room for wiggle that fathers are the ones who have the charge.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (ESV)

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Here is a picture of constant training and a home infused with the Word of God. Now unless you bring the youth pastor to your house to sit there, and take him with you wherever you go, and give him a bed to sleep in 24/7, you cannot honestly state that this precept is being honored. It is the father who is present in the house (he 'sits' there, does he not?), who goes to and fro (he 'walks by the way') with his children, he sleeps there 24/7 (rising and lying down). It is the father who establishes his house as a place where the Word is integral (doorposts), and sees everything in light of God's Word (frontlets) and does everything with the Word governing his deeds and quickly at hand (bindings). To declare that some other person is the ideal or approved means of discipling our children is to do great harm to the plain intent of this verse.

As fathers it is plainly expressed in the Word that it is our duty to disciple our children ourselves, always and continuously. While there is a great blessing in other ordained venues and through gifted teachers such as the corporate worship and preaching of the Word, the primary duty passing on of the faith falls squarely upon the father; the father is the responsible party. This is why family worship is critical, it is a great and mighty tool in the duty of discipling children. You, dear brother, should lead out by establishing this practice in your home.

What exactly is family worship and devotions?

Let's examine why we call it worship and devotions, or one or the other, or both. Though a finer point, the practice of establishing this distinction illustrates even further the authority of scripture in governing our thinking about our walk with God. This brief exercise might even be a good point

of study for a family devotion, asking "what does the Lord say about how we should worship him?" It might offer a good illustration of searching the Word to see how we ought to change our lives to be in the Will of God. This sort of exercise is especially edifying for our children when they see father and mother actually adjust their thinking to conform to the scriptures, how rich an example they receive!

Technically speaking, 'worship' has certain aspects that make it worship or not. As a reformed Baptist church, my congregation and most other reformed churches hold to the "[regulative principle of worship](#)" that affirms what we have already established - that the Word of God governs what we ought to do. The Regulative Principle, in a very brief summary, says we should worship God according to how He wants us to worship Him, and nothing else. We ought not bring 'strange fire' or go outside of the principles established by God in our worship, to do so is to place our own wisdom above God's. Some say this is splitting hairs and burdens God's people down with rules and regulations. But we affirm that God's Word is no burden ([Matthew 11:30](#)), His ways are joyful, right, sweet and rewarding ([Psalm 19](#)).

In scripture we see that worship includes the several essential elements of which some are reserved for the gathered body in the corporate setting (The Lord's Table, for example) However, psalm singing and spiritual songs, prayer, and the hearing and reading of the Word of God are not exclusive to the corporate body and may be brought to the home. We also see the additional activities of the church that are not worship per se, but are given as gifts of God for the building up of the saints. Teaching and expounding the Word is one of these gracious gifts we can use in the context of the family to edify and instruct, and these we generally call devotions.

Family worship and devotions, then, should attempt to institute those things that God has established and given and not those things that man thinks are best. If we wanted to be completely and technically accurate, family worship would include the singing, praying and reading of the Word that make up worship, and this should be the standard. Families ought to sing together, they should pray together, and they should read the Word together. But families should consider those gifts from God that have some building-up functions as well, such as devotional studies, Bible studies, or simple discussions about the scripture reading or songs. Families ought to use this time as well to confess sins to one another, restore relationships, share concerns and give thanks. Family worship should open up avenues by which these added beneficial activities called devotions are natural outflows. The father's leadership demands that he use discernment and wisdom to prayerfully consider what family worship and devotions will look like in his house.

What are some suggestions to implement family worship and devotions?

If you have been convinced from the Word of God that you need to begin this very lucrative practice, what sort of things would work best for your family? Consider if you have little ones, or older children. Consider where your family is spiritually, and then just start meeting. Start reading the

Word and praying together, sing some songs and discuss the scripture reading. You will probably need to adjust and make changes as you go, but once your family is in the good habit of daily meetings, things will begin to become easier, natural and extremely enjoyable.

Our church helps fathers in the area of family meetings by frequently encouraging them to bring their families together daily for worship. We also help equip these families with additional resources to add devotions, Bible study and scripture memory to this family time in order to build up and sharpen our flock in the doctrines and ways of God. We assign weekly memory verses for study, and also assign a few question and answers from a reformed [Catechism](#). We've also provided a yearly Bible reading schedule to help families read through the entire Bible in a year. These tools are useful for establishing foundational doctrine and for storing up the Word of God in our hearts and are readily available online.

Family worship or devotions need not be long, complex or difficult. Some of us have small children who can't sit longer than 10 or 15 minutes before losing focus. Depending on the members of our household, we should wisely incorporate worship and devotions with ages in mind. This doesn't mean water down the meat of the Word or to color pictures of Noah's Ark, for even little ones can learn to sit for 10 or 15 minutes as the Word is read and prayers are lifted up. Some parents wonder if there is any value in devotions at all if the smaller children do not understand what is being read, but God's Word is appropriate for all ages and families are constantly reporting how much the little children actually grasp. Keep in mind that there is great benefit in the smallest children seeing their fathers lead spiritually, and great habits are formed in them from early on in life when children are included in the family devotions, even when they may not grasp the greater themes. Training the small children to learn to sit peaceably and attentively in family worship translates to children who are able to do so in the church service. Keep things reasonable in length, but bring those little ones in soon to participate and to establish good habits, they usually enjoy it right away.

What are some of the benefits of family worship and devotions?

The practice of meeting daily as a family has deep and enduring benefits to the Christian. Families are constantly rejoicing and testifying in our church about the deeper relationships formed between wives and husbands, parents and children, and between siblings. When families resolve to spend time together doing that which is good and edifying, they can't help but grow closer. Offenses are brought out to be resolved, joys and sorrows are shared, burdens are borne, and ties are strengthened. Relationships between family members are solidified as family traditions are established, people grow to actually like one another. Here are several great benefits of many that come to mind:

During the worship and devotions, the Holy Spirit often brings convictions upon family members and we are opened to profound ministry opportunities, Fathers and mothers often get that rare invitation to enter the very tender parts of their children's' hearts in the midst of family devotions, and God has used these times in many homes for deeply meaningful spiritual guidance, teaching, encouraging and correcting. These are the precious times where love can flow richly, times that are rarely encountered outside of the safe and trustworthy environment of the family.

Disciples of Christ are honed and sharpened in their knowledge of the Word through family worship and devotions. Many knowledge and doctrine challenges surface as a result of the Bible reading or the devotional tools, study tools and discussions. This is the prime opportunity for a father to bless his family in the role of spiritual leader, explaining those difficult passages and expounding the Word. If he doesn't know, how great a testimony it is for family members to hear the father honestly say "I don't have the answer for that just yet, but I'll study it and seek some counsel and we'll look into it again." The blessing of a humble, teachable father who is honest yet eager to learn, lead and study to show himself approved encourages children and wives greatly.

Affirming the leadership role of fathers is another benefit. If the father takes the initiative, his wife is blessed, his children encouraged. His love for them is demonstrated by his consistent concern for their spiritual well-being and the accuracy of what he teaches them.

By gathering daily for family worship and devotions, **family traditions, unity and identity are formed.** Scripture often speaks of God's people in terms of families, nations of families, tribes, and as the family of God. These families are commanded to pass down the faith to their sons and daughters, and those who do so are blessed. By establishing a strong family identity as a family that serves God, greater growth as individuals is sure to follow. Traditions, family idiosyncrasies, memorable seasons, unity of purpose and common experience all add to the joy of family life. There is great joy and laughter, shared tears and brokenness over the years. Such **precious times spent together bind hearts in love and devotion, and make happy homes.**

Family worship and devotions are a vital part of the thriving Christian family, making time for it should be a priority. If you have to give up some event or adjust schedules, do it! Your family's eternal souls are far more important than soccer games and careers. By establishing a consistent and daily family worship time, you are leading your family to a deeper devotion to God, the Word, His people and the generations to come.*

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* For an excellent exposition of the [Deuteronomy 6](#) passage, and further explanation of the [Psalm 78](#) passage in relation to family worship, I highly suggest the article Family Worship by David Prince at the [CBMW Blog](#).