



Family devotions

When we consider the topic of *family devotions* or even *personal devotions*, we need to make one thing clear from the start. These devotions may never replace the worship services which we attend every Sunday and whenever the consistory calls the congregation together for that purpose. We need the corporate experience of worship, the weekly preaching of the Gospel, and the communal prayers to form a basis for the family devotions.

The worship services are the prime source of blessing and encouragement.

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

(Hebrews 10:25)

There is probably a correlation here. Those who do not regularly and seriously attend the church of God, will not be inclined to engage in personal or family worship. The whole matter of worship, together or personally, will be far from their minds. The family devotions need to rest on and be built up from the corporate devotions.

What are devotions?

It is important for us to determine what is meant by the word *devotion*. Understanding this word properly sets the scene for what we must do. The root of this word is an old verb to make a vow. You see this still in the letters “vo.” In our devotion, then, we commit ourselves again to the Lord and renew our vow of faithfulness to Him. There is an element of consecrating or hallowing oneself to the Lord. This is to be a very conscious recommitment.

A devotion differs from a worship service in that it is done in the family circle, or alone, at home. A good dictionary defined it as private worship rather than the public gatherings of a congregation. This is a very necessary complementation of the worship services. What began in church, we continue at home. As we dedicated the entire week on Sunday to the Lord, so we dedicate each and every day to his service and personally pledge our commitment to Christ.

This commitment must be made every day again. Every day anew we must devote ourselves to the Lord. First we need to praise his Name, for it is great and wonderful. The Psalms, for example, tell that the Lord is to be praised and we must give Him the honour that is due to Him. We also draw near unto Him for forgiveness and strength. We need to confess our sins concretely, be cleansed and renewed, and receive the strength that is needed to continue as God’s children, fighting the good fight of faith (Ephesians 6).

Time and frequency

The Bible does not prescribe a certain time or frequency when and how often we must conduct our devotions.

We know from Daniel that he was accustomed three times a day to get down on his knees to pray, giving thanks to God (Daniel 6:10). In Psalm 119:164 we read, *“Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.”* In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, we find this admonition, *“Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

The word “continually” here has the meaning of praying *regularly*. We cannot pray all the time, but prayer must be a constant and regular feature of our daily life.

As the apostle Paul in many places assures the churches that they are constantly in his prayers, so he also exhorts the members of the churches to “*always keep on praying for the saints*” (Galatians 6:18). They must also pray for Paul and his fellow workers. Daily prayer played an important role in the lives of the saints.

It is safe to say that devotions need to take place on a daily basis, at regular times, and that in these devotions we consider not only our own needs but also intercede for Christ’s church all over this world. This ministry of constant prayer is crucial for the spiritual wellbeing of the churches and their members.

Structure and spontaneity

Devotions do not need to be structured so that they are always done in a certain way and in a certain manner. It is good to strive for some variation. There are those who have memorized a certain prayer, and who will not or cannot deviate from the same form(at). I fully understand that for some who are not eloquent and cannot think fast, it is difficult to change the daily prayers. But we also need to grow in our prayers to touch on the things that are important from day to day. Our petitions need to be *specific*.

There must be structure, but within that structure there must also be spontaneity. As an introduction to a prayer, a father or whoever will speak the prayer, may ask if there are any special concerns or prayer requests. While at first there may be hesitation and even some discomfort about this approach, in due time the involvement of all in the prayer will increase and deepen.

The greatest hindrance to family or personal devotions is a *perceived lack of time*. I use the word “perceived,” because I am convinced that we can make time. We make time for all kinds of other things which we consider important, but when it comes to devotion, it is often said, “Hurry up, I have to do...” Everyone must be committed to taking time for devotions, for it is the best time spent during any day.

Another hindrance to structured devotions is the inability to coordinate. Everyone leaves home at a different time, and therefore communal meals are becoming less frequent. Breakfast is often chaotic, lunch is fragmented, and even at supper not everyone is always online. The family must therefore designate a time that is always reserved for devotions. Whoever misses the family devotion must be committed to making a personal devotion covering the same material.

It may be next to impossible to have everyone in a busy family together present for devotions three times a day. Therefore, personal devotions must fill that void. And the family devotion must be set for one time per day, at least, when everyone pledges and tries to be at home. This time is best found after supper or in the early evening, before everyone has scattered.

The components of devotion

A devotion suggests that a certain pattern is followed. So we may speak of certain components which should be found in a devotion. These are as follows, also in the order presented: reading of Scripture, meditation, prayer, and singing. When this structure is followed, it is clear that a devotion must be carefully *prepared*. It is the lack of proper preparation which renders a devotion superficial and ineffective.

There is first the *reading* of a passage of Scripture. This is mostly done chapter by chapter, going through the whole Bible. It is not advisable to stick at all costs to the notion that one whole chapter must be read. Sometimes a chapter is too long or difficult for one sitting. Then it is better to divide this portion into smaller passages so that each unit can be carefully considered. This is especially important when there are little children present. If the children cause too much noise or are disruptive, as they tend to be during supper, it is best to close the meal with a brief reading and prayer, and then later to proceed with the longer devotion.

An element that is often lacking is the *meditation*. To meditate means to think about or to reflect upon something. In this case it is the passage read. One person will give some thoughts, and others may ask questions. It is important to ask: what does this passage mean for us and require of us? A simple summary of the message of the passage may lead as an introduction to the prayer.

Prayer needs to be based on Scripture. When we properly meditate, we open ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word, and our prayer will take flight. We can begin with thanking the Lord for his Word and the riches granted us through and in that Word. Prayer must always be combined with thanksgiving, and we need to be directed in this by God himself through his Word. Meditation also helps us to discern what is needed most, so that we may prioritize our petitions properly.

A devotion should include the *singing* of a psalm or hymn. Singing is important because it allows everyone to participate together. There is not one person speaking, but all are vocalizing their gratitude and love. We may praise the Lord together with our song. Some families have the custom that each member picks a song. This also increases the involvement of everyone in the family.

I know that all this is almost too much to ask. A devotion based on these four components is not generally followed anymore. We have little time to prepare the family devotions, and to study the passage that will be read. But failure to conduct proper devotions will lead to superficiality in faith and secularism in lifestyle. This may be one of the greater problems which we must face in our churches today.

Devotionals

There is one matter left about which I have been asked to say a few words. Many find it difficult to conduct a meditation on their own, or by themselves. We easily feel incapable and insecure, afraid to say something wrong. Family members especially can be strong critics. In order to get more out of the devotions, devotionals are used, books written specifically for personal or family worship.

There are many kinds of devotionals. Some are written for a specific target group, like children, teens, singles, or the elderly. Others are more general and can be used personally or in the family setting. Some churches produce their own devotionals for the use of the members; that is, then a devotional written by ministers of the churches. I can mention as far as our own churches are concerned the books *Lasting Food* and *Mercies New Every Morning*. In our sister-churches in Australia, a devotional has been published titled *Every Day, Daily Readings with the Bible*.

These devotionals differ from most in that they were not written by one person, but by many. The advantage is variation in selections and style; the disadvantage is that a clear line is lacking. Here and there the editing also leaves something to be desired.

Scriptural or anecdotal?

Some devotionals give a direct and clear explanation of Scripture passages. These are the ones which are to be preferred. Many devotionals are typical in this sense: they are thematic or topical, filled with anecdotes rather than exegesis. Anecdotes should not replace Scripture.

Of course, it is good to have fitting *examples*. Many well-known writers have also published devotionals with a crisp, compelling style, and the contents of their books are professionally edited and carefully compacted. These devotionals can be helpful, as long as they focus in on Scripture reading and not on storytelling.

Some devotionals are outrightly ingenious, such as Charles Stanley's *Enter His Gates*, a daily devotional based on the twelve gates of the city of Jerusalem. As each gate has a special meaning, so each month is cast in a certain mould which mirrors the meaning of that gate. We have to be careful for exemplaristic works, which see everything as an example but neglect the crucial line of Scripture to Christ.

Sometimes older devotionals are edited and republished. James C. Schaap has adapted daily meditations written by Abraham Kuyper, titled *Near Unto God*. These meditations are not always easy to understand. Daily readings from John Calvin on the Psalms have been published under the title *Hearts Aflame*. This book is typical of Calvin's powerful and pastoral style. A contemporary version of Charles Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening* still carries the evangelistic stamp of Methodism. The well-known book of Oswald Chambers, a student of Spurgeon, *My Utmost for His Highest*, largely follows the style of Spurgeon, be it that some unique and deep insights are offered.

Devotionals which in my understanding are to be preferred are those which stick to a Bible passage and explain it with clarity, in simple but powerful terms. Among these I found to be very helpful *Be Still and Know* by Millie Stamm and *Drawing Near* by John F. MacArthur Jr. MacArthur also offers suggestion for prayer and refers to passages for further study, a feature which appealed to me because there is much improvement required in these areas.

Devotionals for children

Unfortunately I have not found a devotional for children which I considered to be of excellent quality. Some children's Bibles are worth using, but these are not in a strict sense a devotional. These Bibles use an abundance of pictures, and not all of the illustrations are equally fitting.

Attempts to be simple are sometimes dangerous and can quickly become simplistic. It is not easy to get and keep children's attention during the family devotions. Sometimes it is best to summarize the Bible portion that was read, and have the children react to this personally by asking pointed questions. These questions should lead the focus to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We are blessed that we may have schools where our children are taught the contents of the Bible each year in a manner that grows with their understanding. Living contact with Christian teachers who use good resource material should never be underestimated.

CL Stam

© 2012
www.christianstudylibrary.org