

# MODERN REFORMATION

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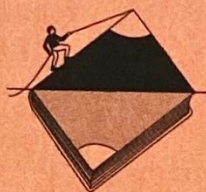


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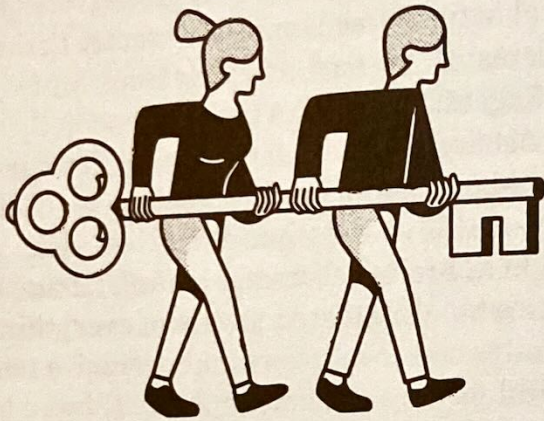
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info@modernreformation.org | modernreformation.org

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## When We Fail at Family Worship

by Nicholas Davis

**W**hile family worship may be one of the easiest biblical concepts to talk about, it's also one of the most difficult things to do. Some of us were raised in broken homes where we didn't have both mom and dad around—and our single parent had so much to juggle, it would have been a heavy burden to throw catechesis on top of trying to survive and putting food on the table. Pew Research informs us that less than half (46 percent) of children in the United States grow up in a traditional family dynamic.<sup>1</sup> Those who did grow up in a traditional family dynamic didn't always have Christian parents, and even those who did didn't necessarily grow up with regular family worship. In fact, it

may seem strange for us to even talk about family worship, much less try to implement it!

### CATECHISM IN A FALLEN, BUSY, POSTMODERN WORLD

I am in no way stating that catechetical instruction is unimportant. As a minister of the gospel in Christ's church and a father, I am called to catechize every member, starting with my children. But I'm confessing here that I've often failed at family devotions.

It's not that I never do devotions—my wife and I have developed habits that help us teach our children in intentional ways. Before we put

the kids to bed, we read, pray, sing, and recite together for about fifteen minutes. But as a whole, I fall far short of where I want to be and the kind of husband and father I want to be for my wife and children.

Family devotions are not difficult when we think about it—it's really just praying and reading the Bible together (and if you have time, throw in a catechism question-and-answer). So who would argue with doing more of that, even if it cuts into some leisure time? Nevertheless, getting together as a family to read the Bible and pray together is one of the hardest things to do. There's the ongoing battle with the world—work, school, socializing, sports, and entertainment all compete for our attention. There's the ongoing battle with our flesh—sometimes I just don't *want* to do it. Then there's the ongoing spiritual battle with the devil—the devil definitely doesn't want us to worship God, and he especially doesn't want us to pass our faith on to our children!

The increasing pressures and responsibilities of modern life mean that families have a hard enough time just eating together at the dinner table. Throw in the obligation to spiritually feed your family through corporate devotions and you have something that—for most people in the society in which we are called to labor—is going to be nearly impossible. And in some cases, it is impossible. The yoke can be too heavy. The goal can be too unrealistic given the circumstances some of us face. The failure to do it can make us feel like we are failures before God, our churches, and our children.

#### **GRACE FOR BURNED-OUT PARENTS**

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There's good news, however, for family devotional failures. Yes, *good news*. I want to tell you something that is going to remove the millstone around your neck: *It's okay if you fail at family devotions*. Having your kids watch you live the Christian life with integrity is what makes the difference. Going to church weekly, asking for

**“Family devotions are not difficult when we think about it—it’s really just praying and reading the Bible together.... Nevertheless, getting together as a family to read the Bible and pray together is one of the hardest things to do.”**

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forgiveness from your children, and confessing your sins with them in the room will go further and reach them more deeply than simply running through the catechism or weekly Bible memorization. But don't take my word for it. According to a study published in the *British Journal of Political Science*, parents who insist that their children adopt their political views may actually be encouraging them to abandon those beliefs once they become adults.<sup>2</sup> I don't think it's a stretch to say that if this is true in the realm of politics, the same can be true in the realm of religion.

If we treat rote memorization and doing the right things as the be-all and end-all of raising our children in the “fear and admonition of the

Lord,” then we may end up alienating them from the Lord. But if we live the Christian life in a way that shows them we actually believe what we’re trying to teach them, we may more naturally pass on our faith to our children because *we* actually have it. In *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton writes, “Ordinary things are more valuable than extraordinary things; nay, they are more extraordinary.” It’s those overlooked actions and a consistent manner of living that have the greatest impact.

The day-to-day practice of confession and absolution makes as much of an impression as your faithfulness in catechesis. The Christian faith is most often caught, not taught. As the Latin maxim goes: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (“the law of praying is the law of believing”). The grammar and logic of Christianity is passed onto us and to our children through the liturgical formation that takes place from Sunday to Sunday.

#### A PRACTICAL WAY FORWARD FOR TIRED AND ANXIOUS PARENTS

I’m a bi-vocational pastor, so I work a normal day job. Then after work, I go on to care for the needs of my family and that of a local church. I have church meetings to attend, sermons to prepare, calls and e-mails to take care of, and so on. This means we don’t have a lot of free time in our household. So how do we still have family worship throughout all the busyness?

We’ve made it really simple, and here are a few ways you can include family worship through your day—no matter how busy and chaotic it is.

*Find a time when the whole family is together.* Before I go to my first job, I spend some time with my oldest boys. We also have a bedtime routine with our young children, so we carve out a short time for family worship before putting them to bed. Some families may find mealtime to be more appropriate. But since I’m not home at the same time every night, this ruined our consistency. More often than not, our desire to have family worship together would never turn into a habit.

*Simplify what you do in those daily moments.* In the morning, I read a short Bible story with my kids. We briefly talk about it, and then I’m off to work. In the evening before bedtime, we use the *Gloria Patri*, the Doxology, and the Trisagion for our routine songs, and then we finish with the Lord’s Prayer. If we have time, we pray for other needs and have our kids pray too—but sometimes we’re just in survival mode. Being a parent and working multiple jobs is hard work.

It’s those ordinary practices informed by the truths of Scripture and cultivated as a gathered people that stick with us and with our children the most. In her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Tish Harrison Warren writes:

For most of history the majority of believers could not read, so Christian worship intentionally taught the gospel in preliterate ways. But even now, each of us, whether first

**“It’s those ordinary practices informed by the truths of Scripture and cultivated as a gathered people that stick with us and with our children the most.”**

**“It’s the smallest things that matter in the long run. All of the knowledge in the world won’t make a difference if we have not love.”**

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graders or physics professors, still learn the gospel in preliterate ways. We absorb it. We learn what we believe, as James K. A. Smith says, from our “body up.” We have to taste and see that God is good if we are ever going to really believe it.<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully, God provides us with food and drink for both body and soul by bringing us into the divine service of word and sacrament, of hearing the gospel preached from the pulpit and feasting on a sacred meal that nourishes us; we truly taste and see that God is indeed good. When we sing in the public assembly, when we recite those old words found in the Apostles’ Creed, when we pray “Our Father, who art in heaven...,” we enter into a kind of discipleship in which we are sprinkled from head to toe in a covenant renewal ceremony of re-enchantment, where our belief is renewed and the Lord answers the

prayers of his people, “Lord, help our unbelief!”

While family worship is an important aspect of the Christian life, it is not the only aspect. God has promised to give us grace through the ordained, objective means he has provided for us through word and sacrament. It’s through those means that he enables parents to raise their children up in the faith, offering them the same “grace and peace” (Gal. 1:3) they have received from God the Father. That is essential. If we do not readily extend forgiveness and regularly show our children our own need for forgiveness in the home, then we will fail to pass on to them anything more than just words.

What I’m arguing for here is more than rote memorization. Raise your children in a safe place where they are exposed to parents who love and care—and who forgive and ask for forgiveness. Don’t be overly concerned with “getting it right” or running through a daily spiritual checklist. That would be to miss the freedom you have in Christ and the power we have in trusting in the very promise of God for us and our children (Acts 2:39).

Now, of course, if you are able to have the best of both worlds, by all means press on in catechizing and reading the Bible with your children. But if this makes it so that you are unable to love and forgive your children (and yourself), and if you feel like you just can’t keep up with the Joneses, then maybe it would be better for you to simply focus on being a Christian with your children. It’s the smallest things that matter in the long run. All of the knowledge in the world won’t make a difference if we have not love. **MR**

**NICHOLAS DAVIS** is editor of content and curation at White Horse Inn and serves as pastor of Redemption Church (PCA) in San Diego, California. Nick and his wife, Gina, have three children and live in San Diego.

- 1 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family>.
- 2 E. Dinas, “Why Does the Apple Fall Far from the Tree? How Early Political Socialization Prompts Parent-Child Dissimilarity,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44:4 (2014): 827–52.
- 3 Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 133–34.