

The Family Devotional Table, Part One¹

Last month I talked at length about the importance of eating dinner together as a family. Building upon that, then, is *doing family devotions² at the table*. Let me address what I mean by “family”. It is the people you primarily live with. In the so-called “modern age” there are a number of family configurations. For the purposes of this article, your “family” can be just yourself! What is chiefly in view, though, is **a unit comprised of parents, husbands and wives, and anyone in the role of rearing children**.

So, let’s say that you are now trying to eat together. The hardest part has been finding the time to do so. But after some stops and starts, it’s happening. Now comes the family devotion. And upon hearing these words...”family devotion”...your heart starts to quicken, and you start thinking about how hard it is just to get everyone to the dinner table, and now you want me to do a devotion!³ You have lost your mind Pastor! We don’t have time for that...we are barely making it as it is...

Look. I get it. I’ve been there. But allow me to make an obvious point: you are *already* together. The hard part is done. All you need is to figure out the “what” and the “how”; the “when” and “where” is accomplished.⁴ But here is where the “why” starts creeping in. “*Why* exactly is it *so important* that we do devotions at home?” Because it is your duty. It is your responsibility. And you need it. For you and your family. That’s why. And since you are Lutheran...cause Martin Luther said to teach the faith at home.

There is a disclaimer in the Small Catechism that strikes dread in the heart of every parent.⁵ It is at the beginning, sometimes in smaller print. The line is: **As the head of the family⁶ should teach them in a simple way to his household**. A couple questions arise, like, “Who, me?” and “What are you talking about Pastor! Teaching the faith is your job!” Here is the reality—*I have and will have very limited exposure and impact on your children*. At the most, I might be around them an hour or two a week. For too long, the idea has been fomented that somehow through vehicles like Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, kids would learn the faith. If only we could get back to doing those things...but better! But the truth is, if you are not instructing your own children or grandchildren in the faith, day in, day out, AT HOME, they are not going to be

¹ If you are reading this and haven’t read the February article, stop, go and read that one and then come back!

² Some of you will tell me that you already do your own private devotions on your own and you’re quite happy with it. Keep doing them! I would also say that I am talking about doing devotions with those who you live with. It’s not always about you!

³ Don’t discount the power of the sinful self who just basically says, “I don’t want to!” I have personal acquaintance with this!

⁴ That is, if you are eating together! If not, work toward it.

⁵ If not ignored all together.

⁶ In our day and age, the term “head of the family” might seem strange, or even misogynistic. But this is God’s good plan—that there is a mother and father and the father is the one responsible for instruction. The Latin gives this duty to the *paterfamilias* or, “father of the family”. We should embrace this!

firmly rooted in the teachings of the Church and in Scripture...no matter how great the VBS program was this year!

“Wait!” you say. “That’s how I was brought up, and it worked for me!” Fair enough. You are at least reading this, so I grant you that. But that’s not going to cut it now (and it probably never really did). The key was always *what was done at home*...even with VBS and Sunday School.⁷ This was what Luther so brilliantly realized. If the faith was going to be handed down, it was crucial that the parents, particularly the father was going to have to be responsible and active in it.⁸

This doesn’t mean that the congregation and the pastor are inconsequential in this task.⁹ The pastor’s responsibility is to teach and care for his flock. But back to the point—he has very little time with the children! So, the pastor must come *alongside* the family, bless the children, and **teach** the parents.¹⁰ One of the most basic places to start is the simple (but difficult at times!) task of going to worship.¹¹ That will be the subject of next month’s article, how worship teaches us and informs us to live in the world, as well as delivering the goods of God’s grace! Back, then, to the task at hand—devotions at the dinner table.

I want to give three main principles in doing devotions at home. **CONSISTENCY**. **CONSISTENCY**. **CONSISTENCY**. I call it “boring consistency”. Not boring as in mindless, tedious, or not interesting. Boring as in *boring into the brain*...and leaving an impression or mark. Starting with children of very young ages up to the ancient among us, we are all wired for routine. Variety may be the spice of life, but routine is the sustenance.¹² So, your routine at home should take place **at the same time (CONSISTENCY 1), in the same place (CONSISTENCY 2), using the same format (CONSISTENCY 3)**. This is why a dinner, breakfast, or lunch table is great. It serves as the locus and anchor...and I guess that you are eating every day. The consistent time, place, and form gives you an opportunity for success.

Back to the “how” and the format. One of the stumbling blocks is, “I don’t know what to say, what to read, what to do...” All you need to begin is something simple. Something that can be done by all and any. That is why I designed *The Congregation at Prayer*.¹³ It is a simple format that can be repeated and followed daily. The leader of the devotion just facilitates. It’s Scripture, the Lord’s Prayer, the Small Catechism, and even a hymn. It can be modified, shortened and adjusted. For more information, go to the St. Paul’s Fulton website or click on the link:

⁷ This is not to denigrate either, just to point out that they by themselves are not sufficient.

⁸ This is also a thoroughly biblical concept and practice. See Deuteronomy 6 and Exodus 12:24-27.

⁹ If one wanted to take a deeper dive into this, in the Large Catechism Luther puts the onus of instruction on **both** “lazy preachers” and father and mothers. Read the Preface and the Conclusion to get the flavor of this.

¹⁰ There is a lot more to say on this. The above sentence can be seen as a mission statement for doing “family ministry”.

¹¹ All of this is predicated on going to church! That is to be discussed in Part Two in April.

¹² Thank you Robert Kolb of Concordia Seminary for this gem!

¹³ Totally adapted from Rev. Peter Bender of *The Concordia Catechetical Academy* in Sussex, WI!

<https://stpaulsfulton.org/congregation-at-prayer/> The upshot of using something like this is it takes the pressure off of a father having to come up with something on his own to say or do.

All of this can be *supplemented* to capture the imagination of the family...or even just yourself. Invest in some artwork. Or a liturgical calendar, or candles to light, or a nice family bible. Get creative within the routine. Let young readers read aloud. Let little ones look at pictures. Have them draw their own pictures that tie into the devotions. Get hymnals that have names embossed on them. **But be consistent!** Soon, your own children will hold you accountable. “Aren’t we doing devotion tonight?”

Wherever you are in your journey...maybe you are an empty nester, or a grandparent, or engaged, or newly married without children, or someone living alone, these principles and practices can be of help and service to you and others around you. The bottom line is: *we live in an age that increasingly knows less and less about God’s truth and His Scriptures*. If we want our children to grow in their faith and hand that down to their children, we need to get busy! Know that I am here to help and to pray and to consult. Know also that I have made many of the mistakes that you have, and have learned in the hardest of ways. Know that we are to never stop growing in the fear and knowledge of the Lord and His Son Jesus Christ. And it’s not too late to start. Ever.

If you are reading this and feel completely overwhelmed, also know that I am not trying to heap burden upon burden on you. I am not trying to guilt you, or shame you or make you feel like you aren’t doing enough. This is all predicated in the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus and His forgiveness. He restores and reconciles us to do this work—to grow in the faith and even teach it. Let me leave you with a question: what do you want your children (and grandchildren) to be when they grow up? **Who** do you want them to be?

And, if you are reading this...and don’t even know where to start...come see me! Let’s talk. I am here to help and serve you.