

The Directory for Family Worship, 1647 (modernized)

The Directory for Family Worship

APPROVED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, FOR PIETY AND UNIFORMITY IN SECRET AND PRIVATE WORSHIP, AND MUTUAL EDIFICATION, WITH AN ACT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 1647 FOR OBSERVING THE SAME

DIRECTIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY, CONCERNING SECRET AND PRIVATE WORSHIP, AND MUTUAL EDIFICATION; FOR CHERISHING PIETY, FOR MAINTAINING UNITY, AND AVOIDING SCHISM AND DIVISION

By God's mercy, public worship has been established in this land in great purity. Besides this however, it is both expedient and necessary for each person to be involved in "secret worship", and for families to worship together privately as a family. By this, along with our national reformation, the profession and power of godliness, both personal and domestic, shall be advanced.

1. And first, for secret worship, it is most necessary, that everyone take part in private prayer and meditation. This practice brings benefits that are impossible to describe, and which are only fully appreciated by those who are most careful to put it into practice. This is the means whereby, in a special way, one communes with God, and is properly prepared for the Christian life. Therefore it is necessary that pastors encourage everybody to this practice, morning and evening, and at other times as well. But it is also the duty of the head of every family, to take good care that both they themselves, and those in their care are diligent in this practice every day.
2. The ordinary duties which should be part of a godly family met for family worship are these: Firstly, prayer and praise touching the life and present needs of the church at large, the nation, and of every member of the family. Secondly the reading of the Scriptures, with a plain explanation of the text so that all [children especially] may be better able to benefit from attendance at public worship, and profit from their own private reading. As well, there should be some discussion with application to all members of the family, with appropriate rebukes and corrections explained by those in authority in the home.
3. Just as the duty and office of interpreting the Scriptures is a ministerial office, and no-one regardless of their qualifications should usurp that without being properly called and set apart for that office, so too it is the specially called duty of the head of the family, to read the scriptures plainly to the family. After this, it is commendable that there be some discussion and application of what has been read. For example, if in the reading there is some sin rebuked, then the whole family should be warned against it and urged to be watchful. If there is a Divine judgement threatened, or described, then all should be cautioned lest through their complacency and lack of watchfulness, the same judgement, or even something worse, should come upon them. Finally, if there is some duty commanded, or some comfort promised, this can be used to stir up each one to seek Christ's strength to perform that duty, or to seek His gracious provision of

- that comfort. In all of this the head of the family is to give the lead, and family members should seek answers to their questions and doubts from him.
4. The head of the family is to take care that no-one in the family withdraws from family worship. Further, since the responsibility for family worship belongs to the head of the home, the minister is to stir up those who are lazy, and train those who are weak, so that all will be equipped properly. It is also quite proper for a man to engage anyone else approved by the Presbytery to train him and his family. Then too if the head of the family is unfit to lead family worship, another member of the family approved by the minister and session may be given that task. The minister and session are accountable to the presbytery for those whom they recommend in this way. If through the providence of God the minister should be present and convene family worship, he should do so with the whole family present, unless there are special reasons [eg something that should be discussed privately] for meeting only with some.
 5. No-one who is lazy, whose Christian faith is unknown, or who is unsettled in their faith should be allowed to lead family worship even if they volunteer themselves. This is the way error subtly and deceitfully enters homes, causes division, and leads the gullible and unthinking astray.
 6. Family worship should be kept a private matter, and not the opportunity for wider invitations to others, unless they are visitors in the home, or guests for meals, etc. when they should most definitely be invited to be a part.
 7. Even though God has clearly used and blessed the gathering together of different families for worship in times of great difficulty and trouble [when the usual order of things can be often overturned] yet in times of peace and stability and gospel purity, we believe that multiple gatherings of families should not be encouraged. It tends to limit the fuller participation of each family and family member; and in time can prejudice against the need for public ministry, cause divisions between families in congregations, and even split the Church. All this can be the entry point for further error, cause the ungodly to harden their hearts further, and bring great grief to the godly.
 8. On the Lord's Day, after every member of the family separately, and the whole family together have sought the Lord to prepare their hearts and fit them for worship and make that time a blessing to them, the head of the home is to take care that all under his care then attend public worship and be part of the local congregation. Then, after public worship is concluded, and a time of prayer, he is to go over what they have heard with them. The rest of the day ought to be set apart for catechising and discussing some aspect of the Word of God together. Alternatively, family members should give themselves to private reading, contemplation and prayer, so that their own fellowship with God is increased. All of this is so that the blessing and benefits of publicly gathering together will be increased and appreciated properly, and each person given a greater appreciation of Eternal Life.
 9. All those who can pray should do so remembering that prayer is a gift from God to be used, and those who are young in the faith can well begin by using set outlines for prayer. However they should not be content with that, or use it as an excuse for spiritual sluggishness. Rather, in their own private devotions they should frequently and earnestly ask God to enable them to pray, by moving their hearts to think of and their mouths to express, those things that are necessary for their family. A sample set form is outlined below:

Prayer should include:

- Confession as to their unworthiness to come before God in prayer and worship, and an earnest desire that He would grant a truly prayerful spirit.
- Confession of sin, both individual and family, and in such a way as to bring about true humiliation.

- The earnest, Spirit-led, pouring out of the soul's cry to God for forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ,
 - Thanksgiving to God for His many mercies to His people, to themselves particularly, and especially for his love in Christ, and for the light of the gospel.
 - Prayer for such particular spiritual and temporal blessings as are needed at the time [whether morning or evening] whether in health, sickness, prosperity or adversity.
 - Intercessory prayer for the church of Christ in general, for all churches where reformed doctrine and practice are evident, and for their local church in particular; for all who suffer for the sake of Christ; for all in positions of authority and government, the royal household, those in the administration of justice, ministers, the whole body of the local congregation, as well as for their neighbours.
 - Closing with an earnest desire that God would be glorified in the coming of the kingdom of His Son, and in the doing of His will; with confidence that their prayers have been heard, and that what they have asked according to His will shall be done.
10. The exercise of family worship should be sincere, and without delay, avoiding all worldly distractions, and hindrances, and in spite of any scorn from atheists and worldly men. And to better bring this about, the leading men and all the elders of the Church, should stir up themselves and their own families to this practice. Not only that, but they should also agree to try and introduce family worship into all the families they have under their spiritual care.
 11. Besides the ordinary duties in family worship as mentioned above [2], there are special duties of humiliation, repentance and thanksgiving which should be carefully attended to within families when [either in public or in private] the Lord calls them forth by His providential workings.
 12. Because the word of God requires that we should consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, every member of the Church should always be diligent to stir up themselves and others in the duty of mutual edification. This is especially necessary in these days when profanity abounds, and when mockers are amazed that we will not follow them in their lusts and excesses. This common encouragement comes by instruction, admonition, and rebuke, as each exhorts the other to show the grace of God by denying ungodliness and worldly lusts; in living godly, soberly and righteously in the world; and by comforting the faint hearted and praying with and for one another. These things will be especially necessary when others seek advice and comfort in times of calamity, or when an offender is to be reclaimed through private rebuke by one or more as set down in the Bible.
 13. Not everyone is always able to give the right counsel to one who is wearied or distressed in conscience. If in such cases, after pursuing all private and public means, there is still no peace, they should then seek out their own Pastor, or some other experienced Christian. However, if the circumstances are such that discretion, modesty, or fear of scandal require a second person present as a witness, [eg because of the sex or state of the person in trouble] this should be done.
 14. In the providence of God members of different families are often brought together away from home through employment, or other reasons. As they would want the Lord's presence with them wherever they are, so also they should want to obey God and not neglect the duties of prayer and thanksgiving. They should therefore arrange for the one best equipped among them to lead them in "family" worship. They should also take care that no corrupting speech come forth from their mouths, but only that which is good and edifying, which brings grace to their hearers.

The purpose and scope of all these directions is twofold. Firstly that the power and practice of godliness amongst all ministers and members of the Church whatever their calling, may be cherished and advanced, and that all irreligiousness and mocking of the Christian life will be stopped. And secondly, that no meetings or practices be allowed which are likely to breed error, scandal, schism, contempt or disregard for public worship

and the ministry, the neglect of one's Christian duty, or any other evils which are the works, not of the Spirit of God, but of the flesh, and contrary to truth and peace.

The wording of the act which the Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed in relation to the above Directory is given verbatim below. You will see how seriously the Church leaders then perceived this matter of Family Worship, and how it was to be strongly pressed upon everyone as a simple matter of Christian obedience, from which there could be no reasonable excuse.

"The General Assembly, after mature deliberation, doth approve the following Rules and Directions for cherishing piety, and for preventing division and schism; and doth appoint ministers and ruling elders in each congregation to take special care that these Directions be observed and followed; as likewise, that presbyteries and provincial synods enquire and make trial whether the said Directions be duly observed in their bounds; and to reprove or censure [according to the quality of the offence], such as shall be found reprobable or censurable therein. And, to the end that these directions may not be rendered ineffectual and unprofitable among some, through the usual neglect of the very substance of the duty of Family-worship, the Assembly doth further require and appoint ministers and ruling elders to make diligent search and enquiry, in the congregations committed to their charge respectively, whether there be among them any family or families which use to neglect this necessary duty; and if any such family be found, the head of the family is to be first admonished privately to amend his fault; and in the case of his continuing therein, he is to be gravely and sadly reprov'd by the session; after which reproof, if he be still found to neglect Family-worship, let him be, for his obstinacy in such an offence, suspended and debarred from the Lord's Supper, as being justly esteemed unworthy to communicate therein, until he amend."

Now, after thinking about such things, what are we going to do about it? There are many helps [some good, others not so good] available today, but even these are not absolutely necessary. There were no Daily Bible Reading Notes around in 1647!! but thanks to the Reformation there were Bibles. All a godly father needs is his Bible and a desire to honour God through reading it to his family. The Bible is its own teacher today as it always has been, and if we begin with the Psalms, or one of the Gospels, then go to Genesis, then to one of the Epistles, and so on, we will soon be amazed at what God has taught us, and wonder why we ever thought spiritual understanding was so difficult. There is nothing to stop a godly father using the same passages read in family worship, as the basis for his own devotions, [perhaps a day or so in advance] so that he has had ample time to reflect on the passage before it is opened up to the family.

We would do well to consider how far short of this ideal we have come in the 20th century, and how this has contributed to the weakness and double-mindedness in the Church today.

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