



SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

THE FAMILY

MY SON, BE STRONG

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Southwestern Journal of Theology • Volume 49 • Number 1 • Fall 2006

“My Son, Be Strong in the Grace That Is in Christ Jesus”: The Baptist Family at Worship

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Let us approach the issue of the Baptist family at worship from its biblical basis, its historical manifestations, and a systematic but practical implementation today.

The Biblical Basis

Perhaps the single most important passage with regard to the family at worship may be found in the fifth book of Moses, in the same passage in which the basic confession of the Old Testament is contained. The *Shema* is at the core of the Old Testament faith, and it is very interesting how the *Shema* and the commandments of God, the two tables of which were just reviewed in the previous chapter of Deuteronomy, form the context in which we have the command of God to conduct family worship.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words, which I command you, today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 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 (Deut 6:4–9; NKJV).

I would be less than honest with you if I told you that my family started its devotionals only because we were convicted by this passage. Our concern did start when I proclaimed this passage to a Baptist congregation that I shepherded when our oldest child was very small. But, over time,

through on-again, off-again efforts, I have become convicted of the need for this practice due to overwhelming convictions regarding two components of a theology of family worship. First, I have come to believe that the Word of God is the only hope that I or my wife or our children have for following Jesus Christ as Lord in true discipleship. Second, my God-given love for my wife has over time turned into a deep passion for the welfare of our five children—three boys and two girls.

The Word and the Spirit in the *Shema*

“The Word,” a theological term indicative of the Second Person of the Trinity, and “Love,” a theological term traditionally indicative of the Third Person of the Trinity, are the personal and thus doctrinal and practical motivations behind this theologian’s desire to engage in family devotionals. A man is compelled and enabled by Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit to lead his beloved to the throne, where together they might worship the First Person of the Trinity. Let me throw an Augustinian wrinkle into the gracious Trinitarian work upon this human family. Augustine, the father of Western theology, said, “The text *Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God is one Lord* (Deut 6:4) is not to be understood as excluding the Son or excluding the Holy Spirit, and this one Lord we rightly call our Father as well because he regenerates us by his grace.”¹

I would take Augustine one step further, however. While, negatively, the *Shema* certainly does not mitigate against the Trinity, I believe, positively, that you can hear echoes of the Trinity at work in the Old Testament text that are made clear in the New Testament. The Word and Love, the two missionary persons of the Trinity, are sent by the Father to redeem the world, and they are at work in redeeming the family. The Word of God is the source of the Love that Karen, my wife, and I have for the conducting of family worship (John 15:26). The Spirit, the very Love of God, truly proceeds from the Son, just as the Spirit and the Son also proceed from the Father. And the Spirit, in turn, compels us to look to the Word so that we might in turn look to the Father (John 15:26). According to Ephesians 2:18, through Christ Jesus we have access by one Spirit to the Father.

This subtle and sublime Trinitarian truth recorded in the New Testament has its earlier Old Testament basis in the monotheistic confession of Israel. “Hear, O Israel, The Lord your God, the Lord is one!” Oh, how can we hear God, but only by the intentional revelation of God through his Word? In this text, we have the Word and the Spirit, too.

Here is the Word. In the Old Testament, we repeatedly hear that God speaks and he calls us into a relationship of grace and obedience,

¹Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*, 5.12, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 197.

and in the New Testament, we learn that this Word by whom he speaks is Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son (John 1:1, 14). For instance, in Isaiah 6:6–10, God speaks and he calls his people into a relationship of grace and obedience. However, due to the hardness of our rebellion, we are unable to respond unless God opens our ears and breaks up the hard ground of our stubborn hearts.

And here is the Spirit. In the Old Testament, we learn that our lifelessness and resultant inability to hear is overcome only by the Holy Spirit of God, whom we learn in the New Testament proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). According to the testimony of the prophets, it is only by the Word of God that God speaks to us. And according to Ezekiel 36:26–27, it is only by the Spirit of God that our hearts are renewed to hear and obey God's Word. Cardinal Ouellet, moreover, correctly notes that, "To the extent to which spiritual creatures allow themselves to be indwelt by the Spirit of Love, they are elevated to the incomparable dignity of being servants of God's glory."²

In the Deuteronomy passage, can we not hear the echoes of the Son and the Spirit? We are called to "love" God with all of our heart, soul, and strength (v. 5). And how can we love except by the gift of the One who is the Love between the Father and the Son, that is, the Holy Spirit? Moreover, we are called to place "these words" in our hearts (v. 6), and how do we know God's words unless he speaks to us by his Word, the Messiah Jesus? So, by his Spirit and by his Son, the Father graciously calls us into a relationship of loving obedience. The Three call us to witness to the One who is God, by love and by words.

Oh, how do I give my children the love that God has for them? By speaking to them the very words of God! How do I love my children whom I seem so inadequate in loving? By speaking to them the very words of God! Oh, how do I find the strength to know God in my own heart? By speaking and hearing, that is, obeying, the very words of God! How do I overcome the inconsistencies and sins that wrack my own soul so that I might speak a word of true love to my wife and to my children? By speaking and by hearing the very words of the almighty three-in-one God—He is powerful enough to overcome all of my weaknesses by means of sending his Son and his Spirit. He is merciful enough to forgive all of the sins of my soul by means of Christ's cross that atones by blood. He is gracious enough to renew this wicked heart of stone into a heart of obedient flesh.

The *Shema*, when properly perceived as actively catechetical, is not a rigidly monotheistic statement but a dynamically Trinitarian confession. In the dynamic activity of revelation and redemption, God manifests himself

²Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, trans. Philip Milligan and Linda M. Cicone (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 17.

as the God who shows and saves. By means of the very actions of confession or teaching and of reception or renewal, the God who is ultimately One reveals Himself to be ultimately Three. God, give us the biblical confession and give us the spiritual confession. Help us to know and to proclaim your Word and help us to live and offer life by your Spirit. God the Father, by the Word of God and by the Spirit of God, superintends and permeates the very process of Christian confession and regeneration.

The Father of the Home as the Agent of Catechesis

As the fathers of Israel gathered around to hear the words of God through the lips of the prophet Moses, they must have trembled. They had seen the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and had heard the loud voice from Mount Sinai. They had seen the idolatry led by Aaron during the absence of Moses on that holy mountain evocative of the *mysterium tremendum*.³ They had seen the judgment of God come upon the golden calf and its worshippers. They had heard the Ten Commandments of God located in the two tables (Deut 5:1–22). And now, they had heard the saving confession of the people of God in the *Shema*.

But their trembling must have turned to confusion when they heard what was demanded of them. Those, pointedly the men, who had been taught the Word of God by his prophet were now being called to become teachers of the Word of God themselves. From Deuteronomy 5:22, it appears that the Ten Commandments were directed first to the male heads of household: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” And in Deuteronomy 6:2–3, we learn that teaching was focused upon the fathers and their sons and, in turn, their grandsons. This certainly does not mean that women and girls were excluded from hearing the public proclamation, for “all Israel” was gathered to hear the covenant of the Lord (Deut 5:1). However, the responsibility for repeating the confession and commands given by God through Moses was laid upon the male heads of the household, essentially upon the fathers. Let those who wish some more egalitarian method take up the matter with God, for this was his revealed method, and we must accept the revelation the way it is by grace and obey it by grace.

And what is the father’s responsibility? The father’s responsibility is to present the Word of God with every avenue possible at every moment possible to everyone possible, but especially to his children! According to Duane Christensen, “Whether understood literally or metaphorically, vv 8–9 show that the individual person, his home, and his community (*sbryd*, ‘your gates’) were to be distinguished as the focus of obedience to the commandments as a response of love for God.” Christensen recognizes the

³Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 12–13.

universal nature of the witness to God's words, but then notes the textual stress on witness to the family. "The focus [is] on teaching your children 'these words' diligently within the context of the family—at all conceivable times and places. . . ."⁴

This text prescribes the proclamation of the biblical Word everywhere, at all times, in private, and in public. First, this text demands that the believer teach his children diligently in every place, literally when relaxing in the home and when walking down the road. Second, it demands that the believer teach his children diligently at all times, literally when going to bed and when getting up in the morning. Third, it then demands that the believing father keep the commands visible upon his person, literally binding them to his hand and to his forehead. Finally, it demands that the believing father keep God's words visible in public, literally writing them on the house and on the gates at the approach to the house.

Although some orthodox Jews have turned this text into a formality and thereby perhaps brought some trivialization to it, the intent is for the text to be visibly and continuously displayed and read and discussed and exhorted. You cannot just display the Bible like a pretty coffee table showpiece; you must actually read this book. You cannot just read the Bible in rote practice; you must discuss its meaning. You cannot just discuss the Bible's meaning; you must teach your children to obey it. And we all know that our children will follow our example before they will follow our words!

Let this responsibility burn deep into the heart: The father of the family is responsible for bringing his family to the text to read it, to discuss it, and to live according to it. In order to correctly raise our families, we must read the text. In order to correctly read the text, we must discuss its meaning with our families. In order to correctly teach the text to our families, we must live our lives out of the text. Truth is more often caught than taught, and it is taught by our stated and active beliefs and ethics, not just in public, but also in private.

The Historical Manifestations

We know from biblical history that the Jews were careful, especially after the exile and return, to require instruction in the Word of God. See, for instance, Ezra's catechetical efforts in Nehemiah 8, which included not only instruction by the clerical leadership of the people (vv. 1–12), but also close examination of the text by the heads of the families with the priests, so that they might interpret the text and then implement it (vv. 13–18).

⁴Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, Word Biblical Commentary 6A (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 144–45.

In the New Testament, we read of how young Timothy was raised by his mother and grandmother to know the Scriptures (2 Tim 1:5, 3:14–15). We also read that Paul served as a surrogate father to him, a spiritual father (1:2). One wonders, however, where was Timothy's real father? Why was he not teaching Timothy the Bible? How long did Timothy suffer because of his father's inability or unwillingness to obey God and teach the Word to his son?

Augustine's Wasted Years

In the early church, Augustine of Hippo, who would later become perhaps the greatest theologian in all Christendom, frankly discloses that he struggled for many years with his theology and his sexual morality. One wonders whether Augustine might have been an even more fruitful preacher and theologian if his father had taken proper spiritual interest in his son. One wonders whether Augustine would have avoided not only personal spiritual blunders but also some fundamental theological blunders that have plagued and continue to plague the Western churches if his father had spent the time to teach his son the Word of God. Could the persecution that Augustine encouraged of dissident Christian groups have been avoided if he had had a father that showed him God's love rather than being the distant figure for whom Augustine did not care?

Augustine lamented his father, who had a fine public reputation, but failed to teach his son. And the problem was not that Augustine's father did not provide for his son's education; the problem was that his father did not himself teach his son. In his famous *Confessions*, Augustine says,

No one had anything but praise for my father who, despite his slender resources, was ready to provide for his son with all that was needed to enable him to travel so far for the purpose of study. Many of our townsmen, far richer than my father, went to no such trouble for their children's sake. Yet this same father of mine took no trouble at all to see how I was growing in your sight or whether I was chaste or not. He cared only that I should have a fertile tongue, leaving my heart to bear none of your fruits, my God, though you are the only Master, true and good, of its husbandry.⁵

Can you not hear the cry of this child? Although I appreciate my father providing for me financially in such a sacrificial manner, where was he when I needed moral guidance? Does he not care about me enough

⁵Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 2.3, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 45.

to see me saved and sanctified? Am I unworthy of being discipled? Augustine, fortunately, had a mother who taught him God's Word and even sent preachers to come talk to him. Monica, Augustine's godly mother, wept and prayed for him, but it was only when she was near her death that he was finally converted, and he looked upon the years of his wasted life with utter regret. How many Christian fathers do we have today who are neglecting their families? How many are insuring their own children's fall into wasted lives because they refuse to obey God's Word and teach the text? How many will weep over a child headed to hell because they would not take the time to share the Word?

The Reformation Witness to Family Worship

Among the sixteenth-century Reformers, it was commonly known that the father was responsible for his children's spiritual welfare. Martin Luther advised those who lived in areas where the Gospel was not properly proclaimed in the churches that the fathers must be responsible for their households. Although the family could not share the Lord's Supper in such a situation, the father was both empowered by his Christian priesthood and held responsible by God for ministering salvation to his family by proclaiming the Word to them. The world around may be going to hell, but the Christian father has the resources to lead his family to glory. "The father in the home, on the other hand, can provide his own with the necessities through the Word and in pious humility do without the nonessentials as long as he is in captivity."⁶ In other words, what we need more than anything is the Word of God. We simply cannot do without it, and it is in the end the father's responsibility to make sure his children hear the Word.

Among the free churches, Menno Simons encouraged the sixteenth-century Anabaptists to look at their own children as the special object of their Great Commission efforts, for every child is born into sin and requires instruction and training in righteousness.

[T]he nature of man is completely corrupted in Adam and is rebellious against the Word of the Lord from childhood, therefore let us be mindful and solicitous of our own children, and let us display unto them a still greater degree of spiritual love than with others; for they are by nature born of us, of our flesh and blood, and are so solemnly committed to our special care by God. Therefore be sure that you instruct them from their youth in the way of the Lord, that they fear and love God, walk

⁶Martin Luther, *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 40: 10.

in all decency and discipline, are well mannered, quiet, obedient to their father and mother, reverent where that is proper, after their speech honest, not loud, not stubborn, nor self-willed; for such is not becoming to children of saints.⁷

Menno set a high bar, because Scripture sets a high bar. The question that comes to mind is, “How do we meet this standard of turning out such wonderful children?” Many will throw their arms in the air and surrender the responsibility as impossible to fulfill. And yet, Menno knew from the Word of God and from long experience that the only way to raise such children is by biblical catechesis. As a New Testament Christian, Menno neither propagated the coercive error of infant baptism nor believed in catechizing in the sense of having his children memorize the Westminster Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism, as fine as those flawed catechisms are. Rather, the key to raising such children is simply by the Word of God. “My beloved brethren and sisters in Christ, you who sincerely love the Word of the Lord, instruct your children thus, from youth up, and daily admonish them with the Word of the Lord, setting a good example.”⁸

This was not a facile reading of the Word of God, but a deep searching of its meaning and then consistent implementation of its teaching. “Study to the utmost of your power, to lead your children on the way of life and to keep them from the way of death, as much as in you is. . . . Watch over their salvation as over your own souls. Teach them, and instruct them, admonish them, threaten, correct, and chastise them, as circumstances require.”⁹ The advice given by Menno Simons was theologically pristine and anthropologically sensitive, a sometimes difficult balance to strike.

We thus learn through Menno Simons that the sixteenth-century free churches understood that the Bible is the proper basis of catechesis, for the words of men will fail while the Word of God is living and powerful. Our sixteenth-century forefathers understood that the teaching of one’s own children is very important, and that such teaching is best carried out through exemplary discipleship. They displayed an intense concern for familial welfare and refused to engage in the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed errors of human tradition and infant baptism.

The Baptist Witness to Family Worship

The Baptist witness to family worship has its roots in our early modern beginnings in the seventeenth century and among both of the major

⁷Menno Simons, *The Nurture of Children* (1557), in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496–1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 950.

⁸Ibid., 951.

⁹Ibid.

branches of the English Baptist family, that is, among the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. The surviving witness to this movement of family worship may be found in the popular catechisms of that period. A catechism is a written teaching tool usually in the form of a dialogue. The teacher is expected to memorize the question and the student the answer. Rather than emphasize the Particular Baptist catechisms, as is all the rage these days, let us give the General Baptists their proper due.

In his popular compilation of Baptist confessions, covenants, and catechisms, Timothy George offers a catechism by a Particular Baptist, Benjamin Keach, and by an Open Communion Particular Baptist, Henry Jessey. The General Baptist catechisms are never considered, even in the introduction, leaving the impression with the uninformed that only the Particular Baptists made any substantial contribution to the matter.¹⁰ This is unfortunate at a number of levels, both historically and theologically. For, to their advantage, a General Baptist catechism is structurally biblical, while the Particular Baptist catechisms are typically thematic. (On the other hand, perhaps seeking to overcome the deficiencies of the Particular Baptist thematic approach, Jessey's *A Catechism for Babes, or, Little Ones* constantly refers the teacher and student to the biblical text, although retaining a thematic structure.)¹¹

Thomas Grantham was one of the leading theologians in the General Baptist tradition, and he has left us a catechism that is very helpful. Following the expository structure of Hebrews 6:1–2, he wrote the catechism because he understood that some parents needed help to fulfill the commission to evangelize their own children. Grantham began, “As you are expressly bound by Gospel-Rules, to do that which is right unto your Servants, and to bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; so I am very sensible, that the capacity of many well-meaning Christians is very low, to methodize their Instructions in this behalf.”¹² Grantham, a General Baptist Messenger and the author of the monumental *Christianismus Primitivus*, was no doctrinal slouch. Indeed, he is perhaps the first major systematic theologian in the Baptist tradition, preceding the popular Calvinist Baptist John Gill by a half-century.¹³

¹⁰Timothy George, “Introduction,” in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms: John A. Broadus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 16–18.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 227–37.

¹²Thomas Grantham, *St. Paul's Catechism: Or, A brief and plain Explication of the Six Principles of the Christian Religion, as recorded Heb. 6.1,2* (London, 1687), 3.

¹³Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus: Or, The Ancient Christian Religion In Its Nature, Certainty, Excellency, and Beauty, (Internal and External) particularly Considered, Asserted, and Vindicated, From The Many Abuses which have Invaded that Sacred Profession, By Humane Innovation, or pretended Revelation* (London, 1678).

Yet, Grantham understood that catechesis was not the preserve of the specialist. Indeed, in education, the key is getting on the level of the student and raising them to a new level of thought. Grantham, therefore, experimentally verified his catechism by using it with his children. “And having a desire to serve you in what I may; I have here presented you with some Brief Rules (from the good Word of God, which is able, through Faith and Love, to make our Children wise to Salvation) which, by the Blessing of God, I have found to be useful in my own Family.”¹⁴ As a theologian-father, I can verify that children will not suffer high-flying words, so useful in summarizing difficult concepts. They will simply stare at you quizzically and ask, “Dad, what exactly is ‘supralapsarianism?’” Grantham, as a wise father, understood that theology at its best is a child’s theology.

Grantham also understood that children need us to teach them the theology of the Bible in order to extend them the means of divine grace. “Be exhorted to tender the Salvation of all that are under your care, above all other Considerations, lest their Blood be required of you.”¹⁵ Did you notice the qualifying clause there—“above all other considerations”? Let it be clearly heard: the father’s duties to teach his children the Word of God is of the highest consideration and may require some major sacrifices of time and money on his part. However, it is worth it, for your children are intended by God to be the greatest blessing to you. The soul of a child is worth the loss of a large salary or a shorter commute or the taking of a less-prestigious post or the loss of a fancy vacation far from home.

Catechetical instruction of children can be found in the earliest Baptist churches in the southern United States, too. Richard Furman, revolutionary-era pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, utilized catechisms with the children in his church, rejoicing in the instructions provided by godly parents. One child, Eliza Tupper, late in life, remembered when Furman baptized her. It was a tearful occasion: on the one hand, her father had passed away; on the other hand, she had hope as the result of his love and witness that she would see God and her daddy again. At her baptism, she wrote down what Furman told her, “My dear child, how happy your sainted father would have been could he have witnessed this scene.” Soon after, she recorded the wonderful way in which Furman regularly came down out of the pulpit and inquired publicly of the children whether they had learned their catechism at home, querying them on what they had learned in the family catechetical period.¹⁶

¹⁴Grantham, *St. Paul’s Catechism*, 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶James A. Rogers, *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 206–7.

Catechesis was not only a common Baptist practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also in the nineteenth century. The famous Southern Baptist theologian and preacher John A. Broadus took time from his heavy preaching and teaching and writing and administrative schedule to author *A Catechism of Bible Teaching* in 1892.¹⁷ Unfortunately, although family worship and Bible teaching continued well into the twentieth century, it seems to have become something of a rare phenomenon of late. At the popular level, some modern Baptist fathers have begun to rediscover the old concept of “the family altar.” Indeed, the practice of family worship has been called “the abandoned discipline.”¹⁸

The family in the latter part of the twentieth century came under assault by the liberal American culture. (For instance, the selfishness of “the Me Generation” issued forth in “free love” and the long-term result has been an increase in divorce, the legalization of abortion, and the growing acceptance of the abomination of homosexuality.) Fortunately, Southern Baptists revised the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1998 by adding an eighteenth article, on the family. The second-to-last sentence in our confession alludes to the need for family Bible study: “Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth.” The article then cites our focal biblical text in Deuteronomy 6.¹⁹

The Systematic Response

How then do we bring these truths into practice? What are the problems that we face in obeying the will of God with regard to teaching the Word of God to our children constantly? What are some possible solutions? Let us speak of the modern obstacles that must be surmounted first, and then please allow this academic to share his personal experiences thus far in seeking a solution. Before proceeding, however, please know this. I do not have a bulleted list that provides the final solution and do not believe that such exists except in the fevered mind of the enthusiast. The Word of God is relational and calls us into a dynamic state of dependence through the Spirit. True theology is not a list of doctrines, as helpful as such a list may be. True theology comes out of a submissive relationship with a living God who reveals himself in a saving way only through the Bible, and calls us into responsive words and acts.

¹⁷*Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, 257–82.

¹⁸<http://www.sbcimpact.net/2007/09/12/the-abandoned-discipline-of-family-worship> (accessed 12 September 2007).

¹⁹*The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 2000), 22.

The Problems We Face

There seem to be four major problems facing modern families as they seek to institute family worship centered upon the Word of God: time, fatigue, various needs, and individual insufficiency. In theological terms, we could classify these problems as coming about as the result of problems in ktisiology, anthropology, and hamartiology. (For the sake of clarity, we will focus on the popular terms.)

Time. First, modern families are bombarded by the world with demands for their time. The fact is, however, that God has provided human beings with limited time in a day and limited time in this life. Time is a precious and fleeting element that requires wise stewardship. And yet, there are many things—some necessary, some good, some pleasurable, some frivolous—that make demands upon a family’s time.

In our family, the father requires much time for work, and his job is not easy. It is fulfilling and fascinating, because it is according to the will of God, but it is difficult to make the schedule work. Moreover, there is the periodic temptation of taking on even more responsibility from the employer, or from colleagues, or from related ministries.

Not only are there temporal demands upon the father, but upon the mother. She teaches four children in homeschool, fortunately aided by a homeschool cooperative and periodic Christian schools, while providing for one infant. And when, exactly, is mom supposed to have downtime, away from the children? After all, not only is there school, but there are sports, extended family, and a women’s Sunday School class to teach, and a piano to play at church, meals to prepare, and a house to clean, and diapers to change, and spills to wipe. And when dad is away on one of his work trips, there is the need to take the lead in discipline.

And not only are there temporal demands upon father and mother, but upon the children. They each have need of time for play as well as school and for social activities as well as church and exercise. They each need to learn responsible stewardship over their finances and time. And what about the major interruptions of sickness and the minor but disturbing interruptions of the medical emergency or the temper tantrum, or the occasional disputes which come from the inevitable sibling rivalry, or the tragedy of a broken heart?

The fact is that our families are under incredible pressures due to time. And we have not even mentioned those incredible time wasters that are part of modern family life: the television, the internet, the electronic games. . . . The modern family is squeezed for time, and God wants his slice, too? Yes, but he wants more than a slice: God wants all of our time.

Fatigue. The second problem that the modern family faces is fatigue. It is incredible, but when we first began to sit down for our family worship,

it was apparent that we were all tired. This was especially true after a long night at church or at a sporting event, and so on. The temptation was there just quickly to bathe the kids, put them in bed, and go to bed oneself. And that was before we felt convicted to make sure that the children as well as the parents received regular exercise! Who can read the Word of God and worship when you are so tired?

Various Needs. A third problem that the modern family faces, especially with multiple children, is that every child is facing a different crisis in some way, based upon their stage in the growth cycle, the quality of their relationships with others, and their (in)ability to sit still for longer than two seconds. The children need different attention based upon their various needs, and their ages determine much about their ability to participate in structured family worship.

Inability to Do It on Our Own. A final problem that the modern family faces results from both human limitation and human sinfulness. From the standpoint of human limitation, Scripture teaches that all flesh is like grass and is quickly consumed. Isaiah 39:6–7 says, “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it.”

And not only are we bound by created limitations, but by willful sinfulness. From the standpoint of human depravity, man proved himself incapable of fulfilling the demands of proclaiming God’s law, just as he proved himself incapable of fulfilling the sum and substance of God’s law. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Such sinfulness extends to the refusal to witness as God intends. Need we mention such fine examples of this as Jonah?

With such problems of time, fatigue, various needs, and the inability to do it on our own, one might succumb to despair. However, that is not necessary, for we have a gracious God who has provided the solution through his Word and his Love, that is, his Son and his Spirit.

The Solutions the Yarnell Family Has Learned

Scheduling the Times. Before deciding to throw in the towel and give up on family worship and Bible study, please just try to obey God’s Word. He tells us that he never asks something from us that he does not provide a way for us to fulfill it (1 Cor 10:13). Experientially, the Yarnell family has learned that we must prioritize our time. A few years ago, I turned down a major promotion (in spite of press accounts to the opposite) in order to focus upon my family. Moreover, I have learned over time to avoid overcrowding my schedule in order to make time for my family. And the best way to do that is to set your own calendar by putting the family times in the appointments category and making sure that they have the

priority above the competition. Our family times are electronically wired into my calendar and attitudinally wired into each one of us.

Furthermore, we have stumbled into realization that a known regular schedule is necessary for the children. Children thrive when provided with a structured life. And they need the removal of clutter, not only in their living space, but in their daily and weekly activities. Cable television and any other unnecessary or distracting activity from their day's precious schedule must be ejected from the home. (By the way, we have learned that strictly limiting television is beneficial, not only for increasing attention spans, but for the development of reading skills. Moreover, the periods in which we did not own a television taught us that its use significantly retards the necessary growth of the child's imagination. Children are happier without the television, especially when their parents play with them. The problem is that too many parents use the television for a babysitter, allowing their precious minds to be shaped by the godless attitudes of Hollywood.)

As for structured worship, we have found it best to have two worship times per day, a shorter one and a longer one. In the mornings during spring and summer and fall, father and the three boys head out the door around 7:00 a.m. for a 20-minute walk around the neighborhood. Afterwards, we gather at the top of the driveway and read the Bible and pray. By the time we arrive back, clued in by one of her brothers running ahead to get the Bible, my little girl will come running out to stand by daddy and hear the Word along with her father and brothers. That usually takes about 5–7 minutes, but it is phenomenal for our lives. We start the day by hearing the Word of God. The texts we use in the morning will come from the epistles or from the proverbs. I then explain the text in short and then we pray: short, simple, and oh so sweet.

In the evening, all of us gather in the living room or one of the bedrooms and hear the Word of God at more length. Usually, we will take a short pericope from the Pentateuch or the gospels or the psalms, as we are working through whole books. After reading the text, I will explain it to the family, and then ask pointed questions as to its meaning and importance, and allow them to ask questions, too. Then, we will ask for prayer requests, and after prayer, mom will lead us to sing. These are glorious times for us, for it is a time for teaching as well as for repentance and forgiveness, not only by the children but also by mom and dad.

Commitment. The answer to the problem of fatigue is the persistence of commitment. Love is, after all, a commitment to put the other before oneself. When tired, we keep pressing on. When distracted, we keep pressing on. When guilty, rather than trying to cover over our sin, we admit it to one another, and we show the children how to keep pressing on. Love is commitment, the continual pressing on to better the life of the other, no

matter what the personal cost is. “There is no greater love than this: that a man lay down his life for another” (John 15:13).

Loving the Children. The problem of understanding and helping to meet the multiple and various needs of children is solved by an unending and deep love for them. I love my children and I love them more as we spend time in the Word together. And by the Word, the Spirit draws closer to our hearts. As the Spirit, whom Augustine identified as the loving bond between the Father and the Son, reaches out through the Word, God’s love is shed abroad in our hearts. Moreover, we know that the Word itself is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing down into us and examining our hearts, rendering judgment with regard to our sins, showing us our need and the way of forgiveness.

As I have allowed the Word to move about in my head by devotion, I have seen him transform me and make me the man I cannot be on my own. The Spirit and the Word are living and active (cf. Heb 4:11–13). Will you trust God and let him loose in your household by letting the Word out of its closed covers? By the way, when I say the Word, I mean the Bible alone. You really do not need other books to read to your children in worship. Indeed, it would be good for both you and your children to learn that the Word of God is sufficient to accomplish that for which God sent it (Isa 55:10–11). Lay down the human books and pick up the divine-human book.

Christ and His Church. Finally, we mentioned the problem of our insufficiency to lead family worship out of our own strength. Who gives us strength to prevail when we cannot? Christ, by His Word. Christ, by the proclamation of his Word in the church. The family and the church are necessarily intertwined, in a fashion similar to that of the perichotic relationship of the Trinity, a beautiful movement of love. The family and the church are equally necessary partners in the propagation of a pious people.

Conclusion

I realize that I cannot love my children adequately, but God can love them fully by his Spirit through me. I also know that I cannot sufficiently help my children whom I love, for I am weak, but God is strong by his Word. Recently, I spoke at a conference at Southwestern Seminary. The next day, as I was returning to the conference, a man ran his car into mine. As a result of being pushed into the path of a truck, the accident gave me a debilitating concussion. That metaphorical expression—about feeling like one has been hit by a truck—took on a literal meaning for me. The gracious providence of God and the fleetingness of life also took on new meaning.

This man, a man who has striven to be strong for his wife and his family, could be taken away any moment. I have never felt so vulnerable and so helpless; this 6'4" frame covered with 280 lbs. of flesh is weak. I am weak, and I am strong only through Christ. Out of personal weakness in Christ comes strength.

I look at my sons and I want them to be strong and courageous, for if anything happens to their earthly father, they must be strong and courageous in his place. I want my sons to provide for and rescue their mother and their sisters in crisis. I once had this waking dream, a very haunting one, both beautiful and terrible at the same time. I love the strength of my boys: Truett, our oldest son, is so tall and strong and is a warrior at heart, a warrior for God; Graham is going to be a man of matchless strength who knows only that he wants to be a blessing. I thank God for my boys and I pray for them to be everything that God wants them to be.

Anyways, I dreamed that my middle son, Matthew, who will probably be the smallest son, displayed by sacrifice an extraordinary physical strength and emotional courage. Our beautiful daughter, Kathryn, by now older, was being abducted or worse. I cannot remember now, and do not want to remember, for the terror frightened me and scarred my memory. Anyways, as Kathryn faced this personal crisis, when all hope seemed lost, Matthew came with his small body and with inhuman speed threw himself into the way. I feared and I exulted. I feared that in setting his sister free that my son would die. I exulted that out of a love borne of the Spirit by the reading of God's Word my son had become a real man. Just a dream, perhaps, but dreams are often the fabric from which the substance of life is constructed.

What kind of husbands and fathers and men of action and speech will my sons be? What kind of wives and mothers and women of chaste and wise actions and speech will my daughters be? I pray that they will be godly and self-sacrificial people. I pray that my sons will be like Michael Sattler, boldly pointing people to the love of God in His Word right to his very death. I pray that my daughters will be loved by husbands who are like my sons. I want our boys to be like the husband of Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."

I know this to be true: These boys can be strong only by grace (i.e. by God's Spirit) and that grace comes only by His Word (i.e. by Jesus Christ). So my living and dying message to each one of my boys is this: "You, therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."²⁰ Lord, Karen and I beg of you: Let our sons and our daughters live from your Word.

²⁰2 Tim 2:1.