

The Directory for Family-Worship

Updated language and footnotes by William H. Gross – Colorado Springs CO 2008

ASSEMBLY AT EDINBURGH, August 24, 1647, Sess. 10.

ACT for observing the Directions of the GENERAL ASSEMBLY for secret and private Worship, and mutual Edification; and censuring those who neglect Family-worship.

THE General Assembly, after mature deliberation, approves the following *Rules and Directions* for cherishing piety, and preventing division and schism; and appoints ministers and ruling elders in each congregation to take special care that these Directions are observed and followed; as likewise, that presbyteries and provincial synods enquire and test whether the Directions are duly observed in their bounds; and to reprove or censure (according to the quality of the offense), those who are found to be reprobable or censurable in this. 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 further requires and appoints ministers and ruling elders to make diligent search and enquiry, in the congregations committed to their charge respectively, whether any family or families are among them which neglect this necessary duty; and if any such family is found, the head of the family is to be first admonished privately to amend his fault; and, in case of his continuing in this, he is to be gravely and sadly reprovved by the session; after this reproof, if he is still found to neglect Family-worship, let him be, for his obstinacy in such an offense, suspended and debarred from the Lord's supper, as being justly considered unworthy to communicate in it until he amends his ways.

DIRECTIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY,

CONCERNING SECRET AND PRIVATE WORSHIP, AND MUTUAL EDIFICATION; FOR CHERISHING PIETY, FOR MAINTAINING UNITY, AND AVOIDING SCHISM AND DIVISION.

BESIDES the public worship in congregations, mercifully established in this land in great purity, it is expedient and necessary that secret worship of each person alone, and private worship of families, be pressed and set up; so that, along with national reformation, the profession and power of godliness, both personal and domestic, is advanced.

I. And first, for secret worship, it is most necessary that everyone apart and by themselves is given to prayer and meditation; the unspeakable benefit of these is best known to those who are most exercised in them; this is the means whereby, in a special way, communion with God is entertained, and right preparation for all other duties is obtained. And therefore it becomes not only pastors, within their several charges, to press persons of all sorts to perform this duty morning and evening and on other occasions; but it is also incumbent upon the head of every family to have a care that both themselves, and all those within their charge, are diligent in this duty daily.

II. The ordinary duties comprehended under the exercise of piety which should be found in families when they are convened for these purposes are these: First, prayer and praises performed with a special reference to the public condition of the Church of God and this kingdom, as well as to the present condition of the family and all its members. Next, reading the scriptures, with catechizing in a plain way,

so that the understanding of the simpler may be better enabled to profit under the public ordinances, and so they are made more capable of understanding the scriptures when they are read; together with godly discussions tending to edify all the members in the most holy faith; and also admonition and rebuke, for just reasons, from those who have authority in the family.

III. Because the charge and office of interpreting the holy scriptures is part of the ministerial calling, no one (however otherwise qualified) should take this charge upon himself in any place, unless he is duly called to it by God and his Church; so in every family where there is anyone who can read, the holy scriptures should be read ordinarily to the family; and it is commendable that they confer afterward, and by way of discussion, make good use of what has been read and heard.¹ For example, if any sin is reproved in the word that is read, then use may be made of this to make the entire family circumspect and watchful against that sin; or if any judgment is threatened or mentioned as having been inflicted in that portion of scripture, then it may be used to make the entire family fear and beware the sin that procured it, lest the same or a worse judgment befall them. And finally, if any duty is required, or if any comfort is presented in a promise, then it may be used to stir themselves up to employ Christ for strength to enable them to do the commanded duty, and to apply the offered comfort. In all of this, the master of the family is to have the chief hand; and any member of the family may propose a question or doubt for resolution.

IV. The head of the family is to take care that none of the family withdraws himself from any part of family-worship: and, because the ordinary performance of all the parts of family-worship properly belongs to the head of the family, the minister is to stir up those heads who are lazy, and train up those who are weak, so they are fit for these exercises. It is always open to persons of quality to entertain someone approved by the presbytery to perform this family-exercise. And in other families where the head of the family is unfit, another who constantly resides in the family, who is approved by the minister and session, may be employed in that service in which the minister and session are to be accountable to the presbytery. And if a minister, by divine Providence, is brought to any family, at no time may he convene part of the family for worship while excluding the rest, except in singular cases specifically concerning things which (in Christian prudence) need not or should not be imparted to others.

V. Let no idler who has no particular calling, nor any vagrant person under the pretence of a calling, be allowed to perform worship in families, seeing that persons tainted with errors, or aiming at division, may be ready (in that way) to creep into houses, and lead captive silly and unstable souls.

VI. At family-worship, special care is to be taken that each family keeps to themselves; neither requiring, inviting, nor admitting persons from other families, unless it is those who are lodged with them, or at meals, or if they are otherwise with them on some lawful occasion.

VII. Whatever the effects and fruits of meetings of persons from different families may have been in times of corruption or trouble (in which cases many things are commendable which otherwise are not tolerable), yet, when God has blessed us with peace and purity of the gospel, such meetings are to be disapproved (except in cases mentioned in these Directions); they tend to hinder the religious exercise of each family by itself, prejudice the public ministry, rend families of particular congregations, and (in progress of time) rend families throughout the Church. Besides which, many offenses may come of this, hardening the hearts of carnal men, and grieving the godly.

VIII. On the Lord's day, after each one in the family separately, and the whole family together, have sought the Lord (in whose hands are the preparation of men's hearts) to prepare them for public worship, and to bless the public ordinances to them, the master of the family ought to take care that everyone in his charge goes to public worship, so that he and they may join with the rest of the congregation. After the

¹ That is, Scripture should simply be read for personal application, without unnecessary commentary or interpretation.

public worship has finished, after prayer, he should take an account of what they have heard. After that, they should spend the rest of the time they may spare in catechizing, and in spiritual discussions about the word of God: or else (if they go separately) they ought to apply themselves to reading, meditation, and secret prayer, so they may confirm and increase their communion with God, so the profit they found in the public ordinances may be cherished and promoted, and so they may be more edified unto eternal life.

IX. Those who can freely conceive prayer, ought to make use of that gift of God; those who are more rudimentary and weaker at prayer may begin with a set form of prayer; but they should not be sluggish in stirring up in themselves (according to their daily needs) the spirit of prayer, which is given to all the children of God in some measure. To this end, they ought to be more fervent and frequent in secret prayer to God, enabling their hearts to conceive, and their tongues to express, convenient desires to God for their family. In the meantime, for their greater encouragement, let the following materials of prayer be meditated on and made use of:

"Let them confess to God how unworthy they are to come into his presence, and how unfit they are to worship his Majesty; and therefore let them earnestly ask God for the spirit of prayer.

"They are to confess their sins, and the sins of the family; accusing, judging, and condemning themselves for them, till they bring their souls to some measure of true humiliation.

"They are to pour out their souls to God, in the name of Christ, by the Spirit, for the forgiveness of sins; and for the grace to repent, to believe, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly; and that they may serve God with joy and delight, walking before him.

"They are to give thanks to God for his many mercies to his people, and to themselves, and especially for his love in Christ, and for the light of the gospel.

"They are to pray for particular benefits, both spiritual and temporal, they need at that time (whether it is morning or evening,) such as health or sickness, prosperity or adversity.

"They ought to pray for the Church of Christ in general, for all the reformed Churches, and for this Church in particular, and for all those who suffer for the name of Christ; for all our superiors, the king's majesty, the queen, and their children; for the magistrates, ministers, and the whole body of the congregation of which they are members, as well as for their neighbors who are absent in their lawful affairs, and those who are at home.

"The prayer may be closed with an earnest desire that God may be glorified in the coming of the kingdom of his Son, and in doing his will, and with assurance that they are accepted, and that what they have asked for, according to his will, shall be done."

X. These exercises ought to be performed in great sincerity, without delay, laying aside all exercises of worldly business or hindrances, despite the mocking of atheists and profane men in respect to the great mercies of God on this land, and of his severe corrections with which he has exercised us lately. And to this end, persons of eminence (and all the elders of the Church) should not only stir up themselves and their families to diligence in this, but they should also concur effectually, so that in all other families where they have power and charge, these exercises are conscionably performed.

XI. Besides the ordinary duties in families which are mentioned above, extraordinary duties, both of humiliation and thanksgiving, are to be carefully performed in families when the Lord, on extraordinary occasions (private or public), calls for them.

XII. The word of God requires us to consider one another, and to provoke one another to love and good works.² Therefore, at all times, and especially in this time, in which profanity abounds, and mockers who walk after their own lusts think it strange that others do not run with them to the same excess of riot³ – every member of this Church should stir up themselves, and one another, to the duties of mutual edification by instruction, admonition, and rebuke; they should exhort one another to manifest the grace of God in denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and in living godly, soberly, and righteously in this present world;⁴ and to do so by comforting the weak-minded, and praying with or for one another. These duties respectively are to be performed on special occasions offered by Divine Providence; such as when any calamity, cross, or great difficulty causes us to seek counsel or comfort; or when an offender is to be reclaimed by private admonition, and if that is not effectual, by joining one or two more in the admonition, according to the rule of Christ, so that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.⁵

XIII. And, because it is not given to everyone to speak a word in season to a wearied or distressed conscience,⁶ if a person in this condition finds no ease after the use of all ordinary means, both private and public, then it is expedient for him to address his own pastor or some experienced Christian. But if the person who is troubled in conscience is in that condition, or of that sex, for which discretion, modesty, or fear of scandal requires a godly, grave, and secret friend to be present with him in his address, it is expedient that such a friend be present.

XIV. When persons of different families are brought together by Divine Providence, travelling because of their particular vocations, or any necessary occasion – because they would have the Lord their God with them wherever they go – they ought to walk with God, and not neglect the duties of prayer and thanksgiving; they should take care that they perform these duties with those whose company they judge fittest. And likewise they should take heed that no corrupt communication proceeds out of their mouths, but only what is good, useful for edifying, so that it may minister grace to the hearers.⁷

The drift and scope of all these Directions is only that, on the one hand, the power and practice of godliness, among all the ministers and members of this Church, according to their various places and vocations, may be cherished and advanced, and all impiety and mocking of religious exercises may be suppressed: and, on the other hand, that under the name and pretext of religious exercises, no such meetings or practices are to be allowed that are apt to breed error, scandal, schism, contempt, or disregard of the public ordinances and ministers; or neglect of the duties of particular callings, or such other evils that are not the works of the Spirit, but of the flesh, and are contrary to truth and peace.

A. Ker.

² [Heb 10:24](#)

³ [1Pet 4:4](#)

⁴ [Tit 2:12](#)

⁵ [Mt 18:16](#)

⁶ [Isa 50:4](#)

⁷ [Eph 4:29](#)