

THE CHRISTIAN HOME

by

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CHAPTER TEN

THE FAMILY ALTAR, THE CHIEF MEANS OF INSTRUCTION

Matthew 18:20

MALTBIE BABCOCK has challenged: “Dare we let children grow up with no vital contact with the Saviour, never intentionally and consciously put into His arms? Not to bring them to Him, not to teach them to walk toward Him, as soon as they can walk toward anyone, is wronging a child beyond words. The terrible indictment uttered by the Lord—‘**Them that were entering in ye hindered,**’ and the millstone warning for offending little ones, are close akin to the deserts of them who ruin a man’s whole day of life by wronging his morning hours. Not to help a child to know the saving power of Christ is to hold back a man from salvation.”

Read and ponder Mark 9:36-37.

Children must be taught. Start early. Let God’s Word fall upon their minds and hearts from the earliest day. Trust the Holy Spirit to root it there by His wisdom, even though the child himself has as yet no thinking powers to hold it. The rod will not be needed so much as some might fear if faithful, daily instruction of the young from the earliest days is attended to! Only divine wisdom can give the fear and knowledge of God (Proverbs 2:5), a principle of practical godliness (Proverbs 2:7-9), a preservation from besetting temptations (Proverbs 2:10-19), and guidance into the right and safe path (Proverbs 2:20).

It is first of all the word in the heart (not head) that is effective. Babies may have the Word dropped into their hearts long before they can secure it in their heads. God instructs us that His Word sown in the heart does work to mold the whole life (Proverbs 24: 13-14; Job 23:12; Psalm 119:103; Jeremiah 15:16).

Rather than the head then passing the Word on to the heart (as we are so prone to believe in this shallow age), may not the true direction be the other way—the heart passing the Word on up to the head with such living power through the Holy Spirit as to strike all the faculties of the mind with burning conviction? We definitely think so!

Long before a child begins to think, he has been in daily association with sights and sounds. These daily associations form the background against which he later begins to form thoughts. Let us be wise and take a cue here. Let the child’s heart, ears, and eyes be filled with the Word of God before he is able to think.

Then as the process of thinking begins to function, his thoughts will have these impressions, hearings, sights, heart-movings there to guide his thinking and to mark its tone and direction! A mother heard her little baby say a curse word before he ever had much of an idea if any what it meant! The thinking was not there, but the sense impression was! Naturally, as he begins to think, his thoughts will follow these words, the sound-and sense-impressions he has heard. In other words he will draw the meaning out of what he already has by way of sense and emotional impression. Most babies are full of the world from the beginning; no wonder they start thinking that way, so far away from God!

We feed baby before he has the least idea what food is for. But his body is so made that it takes the food and turns it into energy which can be later turned into brain power. Why not feed him God's Word before he has any idea what it's all about? His impressionable little soul will take it, and that little heart somehow by God's power holds the sights, sounds, and impressions of His Word and turns it into divine energizings that can later be turned into thoughts and ideas.

The truth of the matter is this: a child may be impressed long before he has the power to express. He has the power to receive impressions long before he has the power of thinking and understanding. From the moment of birth he is a little bundle of life that is receiving impressions, through the eye-gate, ear-gate, and heart-gate; what he hears, sees, and feels is stored up in his heart; and as he begins to think, his expressions will draw up and out of his impressions. His impressions provide the mold into which his thoughts and interests will be cast.

The whole point of the early training (in the pre-thinking state) is to prepare the mold, to prepare him for thinking and understanding, so that when this stage comes he will from the beginning think the thoughts of God after Him. Remember Jesus said, **"Out of the heart are the issues of life."**

We pour God's Word into our babies for the same reason the builder brings his tools and materials to the site of a building project: so that they will be there when he is ready to begin work.

Talk about impressions! Doctors tell us that a baby for nine months before he is born is being impressed and influenced for good or ill by the actions, moods, thoughts and feelings of the mother. The life is being influenced and the mold for later thoughts, actions, and decisions is being laid by the mother even before birth! In the Word of God this is confirmed: **"And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost"** (Luke 1:41).

Now the real question is not, Can he receive the impressions of God's Word, but, Will we give it? When the Word is poured into the baby it works on him, in him, and through him. In Hebrews 4:12-13 we read, **"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."**

The Word is a sword, and it can cut and pierce before the age of reason; cutting and piercing have no need to wait upon reason. How this should enlighten and encourage every parent in his faithful labor in the Word of God to his children. The greatest tragedy in Christendom and to the cause of Christ is the utter waste of the first four golden years of opportunity.

The child in the tender, plastic, impressionable state he is in from one day to four years is the golden opportunity for every parent to lay the Word of God deep in his life as a firm foundation for all else that shall follow. Be a missionary of this wonderful truth to young married couples and those contemplating marriage. There are very few parents who realize the importance of these years.

We recall a little lad of two years in Waterloo, Iowa. He had been trained as we are advocating here, “from birth on,” around the family altar. Result? One day he was asked to say grace at the table. While he was praying, verse after verse of Scripture flowed from his lips. His parents had impressed these verses at family worship during the preceding two years. They had little idea but that most of the verses had gone in one ear and out the other. But that day they found out that their little boy had heard them and retained them. Two years old and saved—full of Scripture and evidencing a real burden and desire for the salvation of his unsaved relatives. Is this a miracle? It is, but not one that cannot be repeated by every other born-again parent in the lives of his children! How? By faithful planting of the Word of God from the very beginning of the child’s life. Not only believe this, reader, but practice it and see God honor you and your child beyond your greatest expectations!

The family altar is the great instrument of “instruction” in the Word of God. Philip Henry was zealous and earnest in his practice of family devotion. Besides the regular plan of reading and expounding the Scriptures morning and evening, he used strongly to recommend singing, saying that it was a way of exhibiting godliness, like Rahab’s scarlet thread, to such as pass by our windows (Joshua 2:18; Psalm 118:15). His children and servants used to take notes of his family altar expositions; and the foundation of Matthew Henry’s commentary was laid from these notes. On Thursday evening, instead of reading, he used to catechize his children and servants upon the Assembly’s Catechism; or else they read and he examined them in the Word of God. On Saturday evening they gave him an account of what they could remember of the chapters they had read through during the week, each a portion in order.

Philip Henry advised his children that they should take a verse of Psalm 119 every morning to meditate upon, and so go over the psalm twice in a year. “And that” said he, “will bring you to be in love with all the rest of Scripture.”

Besides this he also had days of humiliation with his family. The consequence was that, in addition to the blessings resulting to his own children, many who came to live with them dated their first impressions from these services and gave God thanks that they ever came under his roof.

No one has written with more conviction regarding the need of Christian nurture and home-training in the knowledge of God than has J. Edgar Hoover.

More and more children are being led toward crime as parents throw away responsibility. Selfishness is often the keynote of the day, and materialism the inspiration for living. God, in many instances, is not accepted in the home, and concepts of morality have been relegated to the junk heap.

Can a nation exist void of all religious thought and action? Can we have internal peace without morality? Can we build homes without God, or have worthy parents who do not know and practice His teachings?

The key to these problems—to life itself—is God. He is man's first need, his final goal.

Our nation is sadly in need of a rebirth of the simple life—a return to the days when God was part of each household, when families arose in the morning with a prayer on their lips, and ended the day by gathering together to place themselves in His care.

If there is hope for the future of America; if there is to be peace and happiness in our homes, then we as a nation must return to God and to the practice of daily family prayer.

Our generation, it seems, has allowed old, faithful religious practices to slip into oblivion. As a result, family life has been weakened. The nation has suffered, and many of its children have become like the man whose house is built upon sand; it is an inviting ground for moral decay and crime.

My hope for the future of this nation is predicated upon the faith in God which is nurtured in the family. No outside influence of a constructive nature can overcome the lack of a guiding light in the home, and the spark of this light must be the knowledge of God; the fuel must be the strength of prayer.

The greatest thing we as individuals can do for ourselves and for our country will be to keep our families together in peace and happiness. There is no better way of doing our part for home-life in America than by establishing the daily practice of family prayer in our homes; because families that pray together stay together.

The power of the daily family altar to tie a family together in love and holiness is well illustrated by a testimony recently read.

"I was a guest in the house of comparative strangers, and as we came out to the dining room I noticed there was some confusion and slight embarrassment; but I was asked to return thanks and the breakfast went on.

"The next morning the father said, 'We have made you one of the family now, and before we sit down I am going to tell you just how things are. You see, we do not have much time for our family worship, but it is a rule that there must be an unbroken circle at the breakfast table. Before we sit down, each one of the family, commencing with four-year-old Jimmy, repeats a verse of Scripture, after which we join hands around the table and repeat the Lord's Prayer; then I say a few words of prayer.'

"After this explanation Jimmy started off with, '**Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.**'

"I learned later that the four-year-old was allowed to say the same verse for a month; that the ones under eight (Oh, yes, they had them all ages, as there were ten) must have a new verse every week; over twelve there must be a new verse every morning and it must not be repeated within thirty days.

“A few months after that I was in a university town, and there I met the oldest son of the family. I said to him, ‘A fine family you have back in the old home town.’

“‘Yes, sir,’ and his eyes lighted with pleasure.

“After talking with him a few minutes I said, ‘Would you mind telling me what you miss most now that you are away from home?’

“The boy hesitated a moment. It is not easy for a boy of that age to unveil the deepest feelings of his heart. Then, though a deep flush showed beneath his tan and freckles, he looked straight into my eyes and replied, ‘It is the handclasp at the breakfast table. I could feel my father’s warm clasp, and repeat with them the Lord’s Prayer, it would start the day off right, and nothing would matter then!’

“Again he hesitated but finished manfully, with a trace of huskiness in his voice, ‘The memory of those mornings at home stand between me and many a temptation; it keeps me going straight.’”

CHRISTIAN’S CLOCK

And Christian made a shrine for the hours the Lord had given him; and from the shrine a golden chain was linked to the great bell at the prayer-gate, and when the bell struck, the angel opened the gate and gave back the answer.

John Bunyan
Pilgrim’s Progress

The bell tolls one—
Teach me to say,
“Thy will be done.”

The bell tolls two—
Help me each day Thy will to do.

The bell tolls three—
I ask in faith
To follow Thee.

The bell tolls four—
I pray for trust
Forevermore.

The bell tolls five—
For Christian speech
Help me to strive.

The bell tolls six—
Teach me my hope
On Thee to fix.

The bell tolls seven—
Oh, make my life
A way to heaven.

The bell tolls eight—
May I in peace
And patience wait.

The bell tolls nine—
Let Charity
Be ever mine.

The bell tolls ten—
I pray for love
To God and men.

It tolls eleven—
Let me each hour
Be nearer heaven.

Twelve strokes I hear!
Now perfect love
Hath cast out fear.

~ end of book ~

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