

AN OPEN LETTER

Dear Bill:

Our family needs help. It seems that we bicker and argue with each other over everything. Even the smallest thing can easily turn into an all our conflict. We don't seem to be able to settle anything without tension and flared tempers. I can't count the times that things have ended badly. It seems we just fight and withdraw until the next go-around. I'm tired of it and I know my family is too. The problem is that we don't know what to do to stop it. Is there anything that we can begin to do as a family that would get us going in the right direction? Is there any hope for us?

Discouraged

Dear 'Discouraged':

Take heart! There is hope and help for your family. I do appreciate your openness and honest about your family's struggles. Far too many families are unwilling to admit that they are coming apart at the seams. My experience has shown that this is probably the most important step a family can take in getting itself on track. Just admitting that here are problems and that you don't know how to solve them is crucial. I commend you for taking that big step. The problem that you have mentioned is a common one among American families today. I find that there are few families, Christian, or non-Christian, who are in the habit of solving interpersonal problems on a daily basis. I am equally convinced that this is one of the key factors behind the disintegration of the family. Without question, unresolved problems become the seeds that grow into the weeds that choke out the garden of family relationships. They ultimately lead to grudges, resentment, mistrust, and bitter conflict if left unaddressed. The good news is that families, especially Christian families, do not have to continue living this way. In His Word, the Bible, God has clearly established the pattern for developing and maintaining a healthy and happy home.

I would like to share with you one practical method that has drawn out of His revealed wisdom. I have observed that when it is applied wholeheartedly and consistently, wonderful results are produced even in the most conflictual homes. Christian counselors have called the method to which I am referring to the family conference table. Very simply, the family is asked to set aside a definite time toward the end of every day to meet together and talk over that day's problems. Everyone is asked to sit at a table, preferably one that is not used regularly for other purposes. Some families set up a game table each evening for their family conference. A table is important for several reasons. First, it is an established fact that tables tend to draw people together. If a problem is being discussed while standing, it makes is too easy to walk away if one or more of the parties become upset. Secondly, writing can be done easily at a table. Any brainstorming or decisions can be easily written during the course of the family dialogue. Thirdly, the time that it takes to set to the table allows for flared tempers to cool (cf. Prov. 15:28, 14: 17,29). Fourthly, a table can

become a symbol of hope for the family, a place where previous problems were discussed and resolved in a biblical manner. I have found that implementing this method offers fighting families a viable structure for breaking old patterns and establishing new ones.

In setting up a family conference table, it is important to remember that regularity is key. It is preferable to meet at the same table and, if possible, at the same time every evening. The family conference should become the place where that family meets to solve problems by Christian communication. I have found that if a family will practice this consistently for three to four weeks they will discover that simply sitting down automatically helps bring a proper frame of mind for discussion.

The rules for the family conference table should be kept simple. The father calls the conference and, as the head of the home, is in charge of the meeting (1 Tm 3:5). The conference is to be opened and closed with prayer, and the Bible is used to discover God's will concerning the question(s) being discussed. The conference begins by having every family member discuss the problems of the day in terms of his own responses to them. He must set right his own failures in order to preempt possible accusations by others around the table (Mt. 7:3-5). If he has wrongly responded to them or toward others outside of the family, he is to confess it and ask for forgiveness. By beginning with his own failures, fears, and sins rather than confronting another family member about what they have done wrong, communication opens up. Conversely, beginning with confrontation may precipitate a clash and block significant communication. Generally speaking, when one focuses on his own problems first, it helps others to respond by doing the same.

When a family member admits that he has a problem and doesn't know how to resolve it, he may ask the others for advice. The request for help is important in that it may help that person avoid similar problems in the future. The family should discuss the problem(s) and make suggestions as to how to deal with the temptation, and avoid it the next time it presents itself. I have found that when a family is willing to confess their sin to one another and ask for forgiveness, it allows them to shift the focus from persons to problems. Getting rid of the personality aspect of the problem enables the family to get on with the business of discussing solutions to the problem itself.

When someone forgets the rules and tempers begin to flare, something must be done to prevent communication from breaking down. One simple way to handle this is to adopt a prearranged signal. The minute anyone at the table realizes that something is going wrong, he stands up. He does not have to say a word but quietly rises in his place. This is the signal to notify everyone at the table that, in the opinion of one member, someone has stopped conferring; someone has gone back to the old pattern of communicating. Whenever someone stands up, it should indicate that one of them has violated the rules of Christian behavior found in Ephesians 4. If someone who is seated finds himself in the wrong, or even misinterpreted as violating the rules of the conference table, he should immediately respond by saying something like the following: "OK, I understand what you are saying,

Please sit down and let's talk about the problem without arguing or getting upset." Of course, if he thinks that he has violated the conference table rules, he will want to apologize. Bare in mind, the conference table does not exist to tell someone off. Only after each one has handled his own failures are other issues raised. If another family member is to be confronted, it should be done in accordance with Ephesians 4:15. He is to speak the truth in love and always with the intention of helping.

So, 'Discouraged,' I want to encourage you to follow through with what I have shared concerning the family conference table. Talk it over with your spouse and make plans to implement it in your home. I'm convinced that if you will, your home will no longer be a war zone but a haven of love, joy and peace.

God bless you and your family.