

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Theological Foundations of<br>Family Worship ..... | 1  |
| 2. The Duty of Family Worship .....                   | 7  |
| 3. Implementing Family Worship .....                  | 17 |
| 4. Objections Against Family Worship .....            | 35 |
| 5. Motivations for Family Worship .....               | 41 |
| Appendix 1: The Directory for Family Worship ..       | 49 |
| Appendix 2: John Paton Leaving Home .....             | 61 |
| Scripture Index .....                                 | 65 |

# Theological Foundations of Family Worship

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Every church desires growth. Surprisingly few churches, however, seek to promote internal church growth by stressing the need to raise children in covenantal truth. Few seriously grapple with why many adolescents become nominal members with mere notional faith or abandon evangelical truth for unbiblical doctrine and modes of worship.

I believe one major reason for this failure is the lack of stress upon family worship. In many churches and homes family worship is an optional thing, or at most a superficial exercise such as a brief table grace before meals. Consequently, many children grow up with no experience or impression of Christian faith and worship as a daily reality. When my parents commemorated their fiftieth anniversary, all five of us children decided to express thanks to our father and mother for one thing without consulting each other. Remarkably, all five of us thanked our mother for her prayers and all five of us thanked our father for his leadership of our Sunday evening family worship.

My brother said, “Dad, the oldest memory I have is of tears streaming down your face as you taught us from *Pilgrim’s Progress* on Sunday evenings how the Holy Spirit leads believers. At the age of three God used you in family worship to convict me that Christianity was real. No matter how far I went astray in later years, I could never seriously question the reality of Christianity, and I want to thank you for that.”

Would we see revival among our children? Let us remember that God often uses the restoration of family worship to usher in church revival. For example, the 1677 church covenant of the Puritan congregation in Dorchester, Massachusetts, included the commitment “to reform our families, engaging ourselves to a conscientious care to set before us and to maintain the worship of God in them; and to walk in our houses with perfect hearts in a faithful discharge of all domestic duties, educating, instructing, and charging our children and households to keep the ways of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

As goes the home, so goes the church, so goes the nation. Family worship is a most decisive factor in how the home goes.

Family worship is not the only factor, of course. Family worship is not a substitute for other parental

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1. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 80. Cf. Horton Davies, “Puritan Family Worship,” in *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Glasgow: Dacre Press, 1948), pp. 278–85; Jerry Marcellino, *Rediscovering the Lost Treasure of Family Worship* (Laurel, Miss.: Audubon Press, 1996), pp. 1–3.

duties. Family worship without parental example is futile. Spontaneous teaching that arises throughout a typical day is crucial, yet set times of family worship are also important. Family worship is the foundation of biblical child-rearing.

In this booklet, we will examine family worship under five headings: (1) theological foundations, (2) duty; (3) implementation; (4) objections; (5) motivation.

The theological foundations of family worship are rooted in the very being of God. The apostle John tells us that God's love is inseparable from His triune life. God's love is outgoing and overflowing. It shares its blessedness from one Person of the Trinity to the others. God has never been a solitary individual lacking something in Himself. The fullness of light and love is eternally shared among the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The majestic triune God didn't model Himself after our families; rather, He modeled the earthly concept of family after Himself. Our family life faintly reflects the life of the Holy Trinity. That's why Paul speaks of "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the family in heaven and earth is named" (Eph. 3:14–15). The love among the persons of the Trinity was so great from eternity that the Father determined to create a world of people who, though finite, would have personalities that reflected the Son. Being conformed to the Son, people could then share in the blessed holiness and joy of the Trinity's family life.

God created Adam in His own image, and Eve from Adam. From them came the entire human family so that mankind might have covenantal fellowship with God. As a two-person family, our first parents reverently worshiped God as He walked with them in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8).

Adam disobeyed God, however, turning the joy of worship and fellowship with God into fear, dread, guilt, and alienation. As our representative, Adam severed the relationship between the family of God and the family of mankind. But God's purpose could not be thwarted. While they yet stood before Him in Paradise, God held forth a new covenant, the covenant of grace, and told Adam and Eve about His Son, who as the Seed of the woman would break the power of Satan over them, and secure to them the blessings of this covenant of grace (Gen. 3:15). Through Christ's obedience to the law and His sacrifice for sin, God opened the way to save sinners while satisfying His perfect justice. The Lamb would be slain on Golgotha to take away the sin of the world, so that poor sinners like us could be restored to our true purpose: to glorify, worship, and have fellowship with the triune God. As 1 John 1:3 says, "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."

God deals with the human race through covenant and headship, or representation. In daily life, parents represent children, a father represents his wife and children, church officebearers represent church members, and legislators represent citizens. In spiritual

life, every person is represented by either the first or the last Adam (see Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15). This principle of representation surfaces everywhere in Scripture. For example, we read of the godly line of Seth, and of Noah and Job offering sacrifices on their children's behalf (Gen. 8:20–21; Job 1:5). God organized the human race through families and tribes, and dealt largely with them through the headship of the father. As God said to Abraham, “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

The Mosaic economy continued the principle of the father representing the family in worship and fellowship with God. The book of Numbers particularly focuses on God's dealing with His people in terms of families and their heads. The father was to lead the family in Passover worship and instruct his children in its meaning.

The father's leadership role in worship continued throughout the monarchy in Israel and in the days of the Old Testament prophets. For example, Zechariah predicted that as the Holy Spirit was poured out in a future age, the people would experience Him as the Spirit of grace and supplication, moving them, family by family, to bitter and heartfelt lamentation. Particular families are named according to their heads and fathers, the house of David, of Levi, and of Shimei (Zech. 12:10–14).

The relationship between worship and family life continued in New Testament times. Peter reaffirmed the promise to Abraham, the father

of the faithful (Rom. 4:11), when he declared to the Jews in his Pentecost sermon that “the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off” (Acts 2:39). And Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the faith of a parent establishes the covenant status of holiness, privilege, and responsibility for his or her children. The New Testament church, which included children with their parents as members of the body (Eph. 6:1–4), and the experience of individual believers such as Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15), affirm the importance of faith and worship within families.

As Douglas Kelly concludes, “Family religion, which depends not a little on the household head daily leading the family before God in worship, is one of the most powerful structures that the covenant-keeping God has given for the expansion of redemption through the generations, so that countless multitudes may be brought into communion with and worship” of the living God in the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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2. “Family Worship: Biblical, Reformed, and Viable for Today,” in *Worship in the Presence of God*, ed. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman (Greenville, S.C.: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), p. 110. Most of this last section is a condensed version of Douglas Kelly’s excellent summary.

## The Duty of Family Worship 2

Given the importance of family worship as a potent force in winning untold millions to gospel truth throughout the ages, we ought not be surprised that God requires heads of households do all they can to lead their families in worshiping the living God. Joshua 24:14–15 says, “Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood [i.e. back in Ur of Chaldees], or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell [i.e. here in Canaan]: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

Notice three things in this text: First, Joshua did not make worship or service to the living God optional. In verse 14, he has just commanded Israel to fear the Lord. In verse 15 he now stresses that the



Lord wills to be worshiped and served voluntarily and deliberately in our families.

Second, in verse 15, Joshua enforces the service of God in families with his own example. Verse 1 makes plain that he is addressing the heads of households. Verse 15 declares that Joshua is going to do what he wants every other household in Israel to do: “serve the LORD.” Joshua has such command over his family that he speaks for the entire household: “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD,” he says. Several factors reinforce this bold declaration:

- ◆ When Joshua makes this declaration, he is more than 100 years old. He has remarkable zeal as an aged man.
- ◆ Joshua knows that his direct control over his family will soon end. God has told him he will soon die. Yet Joshua is confident that his influence will continue in his family and that they will not abandon worship after he dies.
- ◆ Joshua knows that much idolatry remains in Israel. He has just told the people to put away false gods (v. 14). He knows his family will be swimming against the stream in continuing to serve the Lord—yet he emphatically declares that his family will do that anyway.
- ◆ The historical record shows that Joshua’s influence was so pervasive that most of the nation followed his example for at least one generation.

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Joshua 24:31 says, “And Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that overlived Joshua [i.e. for the next generation], and which had known all the works of the LORD, that he had done for Israel.” What an encouragement to God-fearing parents to know that the worship they set up in the home may last generations after them!

Third, the word *serve* in verse 15 is an inclusive word. It is translated as *worship* many times in Scripture. The original word not only includes serving God in every sphere of our lives, but also in *special acts of worship*. Those who interpret Joshua’s words in vague, ambiguous terms miss that critical teaching. Joshua had several things in mind, including obedience to all the ceremonial laws involving the sacrificing of animals and pointing to the coming Messiah, whose blood sacrifice would be effectual for sinners, once and for all.<sup>1</sup>

Surely every God-fearing husband, father, and pastor must say with Joshua: “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. We will seek the Lord, worship Him, and pray to Him as a family. We will read His Word, replete with instructions, and reinforce its teachings in our family.” Every representative father must realize, as Kelly says, “The

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1. James Hufstetler, *Family Worship: Practical Directives for Heads of Families* (Grand Rapids: Truth for Eternity Ministries, 1995), pp. 4–7.

representative principle inherent in God's covenant dealings with our race indicates that the head of each family is to represent his family before God in divine worship and that the spiritual atmosphere and long term personal welfare of that family will be affected in large measure by the fidelity—or failure—of the family head in this area.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Scripture, God should be served in special acts of worship in families today in the following three ways:

(1) *Daily instruction in the Word of God.* God should be worshiped by daily reading and instruction from His Word. Through questions, answers, and instructions, parents and children are to daily interact with each other about sacred truth. As Deuteronomy 6:6–7 says, “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (cf. Deut. 11:18–19).

The activities this text commands are *daily* activities that accompany lying down at night, rising up in the morning, sitting in the house, and walking by the way. In an orderly home, these activities are done at specific times of the day. They offer opportunities for regular, consistent, and daily times of instruction.

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2. *Worship in the Presence of God*, p. 112.

Moses wasn't suggesting a little talk, but diligent conversation and diligent instruction that flow from the burning heart of a parent. Moses says that words from God should be in a father's *heart*. Fathers must *diligently* teach these words to their children.

A parallel text in the New Testament is Ephesians 6:4, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition [i.e. instruction] of the Lord." When fathers cannot fulfil this duty in person, they should encourage their wives to carry out this precept. For example, Timothy benefited greatly from the daily instruction of a God-fearing mother and a God-fearing grandmother.

(2) *Daily prayer to the throne of God.* Jeremiah 10:25 says, "Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy name." While it is true that in the context of Jeremiah 10:25, the word *families* refers to clans, this word also applies to individual families. We may reason from larger units to smaller units. If God's wrath falls upon clans or groups of families that neglect communal prayer, how much more will not His wrath fall upon individual families that refuse to call on His name? All families must call upon God's name or else subject themselves to the displeasure of God.

Families must daily pray together unless providentially hindered. Consider Psalm 128:3, "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house:

thy children like olive plants round about thy table.” Families eat and drink the daily provision of a gracious God at their tables. To do that in a Christian way, a family must follow 1 Timothy 4:4–5, “For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.” If you want to eat and drink to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), and the food you are about to eat is to be set apart for that purpose, you must sanctify it by prayer, Paul says. And just as we pray the food and drink may be sanctified and blessed to the nourishment of our bodies, so we should pray for God’s blessing of His Word to the nourishment of our souls. “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God” (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).

Furthermore, don’t families commit daily sins? Shouldn’t they daily seek forgiveness? Does not God bless them in many ways every day? Should not these blessings be acknowledged with daily thanksgiving? Shouldn’t they daily acknowledge God in all their ways, begging Him to direct their paths? Shouldn’t they daily commend themselves to His care and protection? As Thomas Brooks said, “A family without prayer is like a house without a roof, open and exposed to all the storms of heaven.”

(3) *Daily singing the praise of God.* Psalm 118:15 says, “The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous: the right hand of the

LORD doeth valiantly.” That is a clear reference to singing. The psalmist says this sound *is* (not simply *ought to be*) in the tents of the righteous. Philip Henry, father of the famed Matthew Henry, believed this text provided a biblical basis for the singing of psalms in families. He argued that joyful singing comes from the individual tents of the righteous. It involves family singing as well as temple singing. Therefore, the sound of rejoicing and salvation should rise from family homes on a daily basis.

Psalm 66:1–2 speaks similarly, “Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: Sing forth the honour of his name: make his praise glorious.” Here the duty of praising God in song is laid upon all lands, all nations, all families, all persons. Secondly, our songs are to be the psalms given by inspiration of God which show forth the honor of His Name—the verb “sing forth” (*zamar*) being the root of the word “psalm” (*mizmor*), and elsewhere translated, “sing psalms” (Ps. 105:2; cf. Jas. 5:13). Thirdly, we are to praise Him in a worthy manner, with a loud voice (2 Chron. 20:19), and with grace in the heart (Col. 3:16), so making His praise glorious.

The Lord is to be worshiped daily by the singing of psalms. God is glorified, and families are edified. Because these songs are God’s Word, singing them is a means of instruction, enlightening the understanding. Singing promotes devotion as it warms the heart. The graces of the Spirit are stirred up in us, and our growth in grace is stimulated. “Let the word of Christ dwell in

you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16).

Heads of households, we must implement family worship in the home. God requires that we worship Him not only privately as individuals, but publicly as members of the covenant body and community, and socially, as families. The Lord Jesus is worthy of it, God’s Word commands it, and conscience affirms it as our duty.

Our families owe their allegiance to God. God has placed us in a position of authority to guide our children in the way of the Lord. We are more than friends and advisors to our children; as their teacher and ruler in the home, our example and leadership are crucial. Clothed with holy authority, we owe to our children prophetic teaching, priestly intercession, and royal guidance (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 32). We must direct family worship by way of Scripture, prayer, and song.<sup>3</sup>

Those of us who are pastors, must lovingly inform the heads of families in our churches that they must command their household to worship God as Abraham did. “For I know him,” God said, “that he will *command* his children and his household after him, and

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3. Oliver Heywood, “Family Worship A Commanded Duty: An Exhortation of Heads of Families,” *The Banner of Truth*, No. 5 (Apr. 1957):36–40, and “The Family Altar,” in *The Works of Oliver Heywood* (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 4:294–418.

they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Gen. 18:19).