

As for Me and My House: A Call to Family Worship

Dear CPC family,

I would like to share with you a means of grace that my family stumbled upon recently. It is proving to be especially valuable to us during this pandemic when we are homebound for weeks at a time. It is the practice called *family worship*. A few weeks ago, we started worshiping together as a family after breakfast. We usually open with a short prayer, sing a hymn, and read to Samuel (8 months old) from his children's Bible. Then my wife, Namhui, and I take turns reading aloud portions of a chapter from the Bible. Occasionally, I share a short reflection and then we close our time in ACTS prayer (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication).

Our initial goal was to train Samuel to worship God – to sing praises, to pray, and to get used to the idea of opening the Bible and reading it. We were so delighted to hear Samuel squeal when we sing! But what was meant to grow him, began to grow and bless us, too. In just a few weeks, this practice has brought more of God's grace and peace into our family life. So, I am writing to commend it to your families.

Someone called the coronavirus pandemic God's "severe mercy" to us – both a sabbath and an exile. For Christians, perhaps the biggest loss is our freedom to gather together for worship and fellowship. The grace we need the most is providentially hindered. I believe that out of love for our neighbors and obedience to the government, it is right for us to temporarily and voluntarily give up our freedom to meet. How then can we experience the grace of worship, "the one thing that is necessary," in such a time as this? Perhaps a more pressing question would be: how can we offer God the worship he deserves? This is where family worship comes in. Though it is not mandated in Scripture, it is based on biblical principles, as we shall see, and has been practiced in the history of the church.

Before we dive in, I would like to echo Pastor Eric's caution here. The *reason* we want our families spiritually healthy is so we are unencumbered in serving the Lord. The evangelicalism of our day tends to use the principles of God to enhance the family – the center of most people's lives. Whereas God intends to use our families to further his Kingdom – the actual center of people's lives. In the remainder of this article, I would like to share a few reasons to consider family worship; biblical indications and illustrations of family worship; evidence of family worship in the history of the church; and finally, some helpful tips on starting and sustaining family worship. In writing this, I am drawing from two short volumes, both titled *Family Worship*, by Donald S. Whitney (Crossway, 2016) and Joel R. Beeke (Reformation Heritage, 2009).

A. Reasons to Consider Family Worship

Our families are God's gift to us, but we can easily turn them into idols. How then can we love and serve our families without making them God-substitutes? I think family worship is a powerful way of re-ordering our loves by letting God's grace flow into our hearts and homes. It is also a wonderful expression of devotion to God as a covenant unit – the household. Worship has both a corporate and a private dimension. Family worship is a sweet overlap of the two. Similarly, worship has a both a ceremonial and a whole-life dimension to it, since all of life is worship, too. Family worship begins to connect these two more intimately in our very homes – the place to which we are confined now.

We have family meals, family movie nights, family outings, and family vacations. Then why not family worship? Family worship is somewhat overlooked in today's church, largely because of our busy and overcommitted schedules, as well as the lack of fatherly leadership (I will confess I am guilty of it). In some cases, family worship may truly be a struggle because of challenging family dynamics. And so, it ends up being confined to special occasions, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. But now, when we are sequestered in our homes and perhaps finding it hard to be patient with one another, it is a good time to consider this practice seriously for the glory of God and the good of our families.

Family worship can be quite influential in our homes, not only because it includes biblical instruction, but also because of imitation and liturgy. What do I mean? So often our children imitate us in our faith and worship practices; family worship is one beautiful way to lead by example, showing them our devotion to God. Second, as Jamie Smith says, we are "liturgical beings," i.e. creatures of habit. Routines of worship at home function as regular tunings of our hearts toward God. There will inevitably be times when you don't feel like worshipping God, but the grace of the routine ushers us into the presence of God, a lot like Sunday morning.

B. Biblical Arguments for Family Worship

There are several indications and illustrations of family worship in the Bible. Though there are no explicit commands in Scripture to conduct family worship, there are other exhortations which can be duly fulfilled by it.

The first example of family worship in Scripture is found in the first human family – Adam, Eve, and their two sons bringing an offering to God in Genesis 4. One could argue that Adam failed to lead his family in pure worship to God. Noah, on the other hand, "did all that God commanded him" (Gen. 6:22) in the days before the flood by

making and entering into the ark with his entire household of eight persons – an act of family worship. Among the patriarchs, consider the boy Isaac’s innocent question to his father, Abraham, on the way up to Mount Moriah, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7) – a testimony to the fact that Abraham’s led his family in worship of Yahweh.

Perhaps the most vivid picture of family worship is the Passover instituted by God among the people of Israel before he sent the final plague in Egypt. God instructed “every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household” (Exod. 12:2). The families of Israel were supposed to observe specific stipulations of worship – to sacrifice the lamb at twilight, apply the blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses, and stay inside their homes eating the lamb and unleavened bread in haste. This was the way to escape the judgment of the passing angel.

Forty years later, standing on the verge of the Promised Land, Moses retells the law to the second generation of Israelites as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. In it, immediately following the great Shema (“Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one”) and the greatest commandment, Moses writes God’s command to the parents: “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:7). Family worship can be a great aid in fulfilling this command. Joshua, the successor of Moses says the famous words after the Canaanite conquest, “...fear the LORD and serve him... Put away [all other] gods... choose this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:14-15). The repeated word “serve” has an inclusive sense and is often translated as “worship.” Joshua recognizes the pull of pagan deities on the people of Israel and is setting for them an example by leading his own family in worship of the living God.

Turning now briefly to the New Testament, it is entirely plausible to say that we receive both the Lord’s Prayer and the Lord’s Supper from our Lord Jesus while he was leading his family of disciples in worship. He prayed with them, he instructed them, and he led them in worship. In like manner, Paul writes to the heads of covenant families in Ephesus saying, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, *but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*” (Eph. 6:4). Family worship can be a great way to fulfill this command, at least in part. In circumstances where the father is not leading in the home, women can also pass on their faith, as illustrated in the life of Timothy, who pastored in the Ephesian church. Paul, his mentor, writes to him, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Tim. 1:5). Timothy was imitating the faith of his believing family members – even though his father was a Greek.

C. Family Worship in the History of the Church

The commendation and practice of family worship have been well-attested in the life of the church for centuries. Here are just a few examples, some of which are drawn from Whitney's volume. In the early church, 2nd-century church father Tertullian speaks of family worship as an integral part of the Christian's home: "They pray together, they worship together...instructing one another...Psalms and hymns they sing to one another...". The example on my mind is that of the great Augustine of Hippo, the 5th-century bishop. Augustine, who grew up with a Christian mother and a pagan father and came to Christ later in life, spoke powerfully of the prayers and devotions of his mother, Monica, who prayed unceasingly for his conversion. This serves to remind us that our children inherit our spiritual legacy.

The famous 5th-century preacher, John Chrysostom, taught that every house should be like a church and every head of a family a spiritual shepherd. Fast-forward to the Reformation era; Martin Luther similarly viewed the family to be "a school and church, and the head of the household is a bishop and priest in his house." Our own beloved statement of doctrine, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* from the 17th century reads, "... God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and in truth; as, *in private families daily*, and in secret, each one by himself" (WCF 21.6). Among the Puritans, 17th-century English pastor Richard Baxter commends family worship for its benefits, "in which grace and heavenly-mindedness prosper" in "holy families."

Perhaps the greatest fruits of family worship in the history of the church are the Wesley brothers from 18th-century England. The revivalist John Wesley and the hymn writer Charles Wesley grew up under their mother, Susanna – a woman of strong faith and character who was known for leading her children in methodical biblical instruction and discipline at home. The prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, encourages us, "If we want to bring up a godly family... let us seek to train them up in the fear of God by meeting together as a family for worship." I'd like to end this section by quoting my own professor, Dr. D.A. Carson, who confesses, "Like most families, we have found that sustained time for prayer together is not easy to maintain...still, we have tried to follow a set pattern. Quite apart from grace at meals...and quite apart from individual times for prayer and Bible reading, as a family we daily seek God's face."

D. Suggestions on Starting and Sustaining Family Worship

I'd like to reiterate that family worship is not so much a requirement or mandate in Scripture. Rather, it is to be seen as a grace, a treasure that we can recover, especially as we are home during this pandemic. So instead of seeing this as a "have to do," I encourage you to give it a try as "something we could do." Note also that family worship

is neither a substitute for corporate worship of the church nor for private devotions. Rather, it serves as a bridge between the two. Family worship works well when the fathers lead, mothers support, and children participate. Here are some suggestions on practicing family worship:

- **Read, Pray, Sing:** These are the 3 basics of family worship: to read Scripture, pray together, and sing hymns or songs of praise in some order. Don't be too rigid about developing a liturgy; it will naturally emerge as you go.
- **Place and Time:** Select a place and time of the day that works best for everyone; for example, in the living room after dinner. Or read and discuss Scripture during a meal to take advantage of children's focus, especially when they are young, and follow the meal with song and prayer.
- **Prepare:** Prepare for family worship by gathering the materials needed – Bibles, hymnals, song books, etc.
- **Reading Plan:** Have a plan for selecting the Scripture portion. It could be one of the readings from your daily Bible reading, a family devotional, or something else.
- **Reflect:** Let someone briefly comment on the Scripture portion that is read. Others may chime in for a brief discussion or application.
- **Sing:** Singing is an inevitable part of worship. Don't skip it. I have never received any training in singing, but songs open my heart to God like nothing else. I love to sing to God! If possible, encourage your children to play an instrument and "make a joyful noise."
- **Engage:** As much as possible, give everyone a chance to participate in reading or praying.
- **Keep it real:** Let prayers be simple and from the heart. Let the reflections be applicable to the family members, especially children. Explore creative ways to pray for people. For example, write the names of family members, friends, pastors, missionaries, etc. on slips of paper and have each family member draw a slip and pray for that person.
- **Keep it short:** Keeping it short ensures that children are not exasperated. Aiming for 20 minutes of regular worship is better than an intermittent hour-long practice that may feel like a burden.
- **Be patient:** Establishing new habits and traditions in a family are hard; so be patient. Family worship times and practices will likely change as children age and schedules change, so be flexible.

In conclusion, dear family of God, I wholeheartedly commend family worship to you. I pray that you will be encouraged to give it a hearty try and that many of you will find it spiritually profitable. The LORD be with you all!

*Things that we have heard and known,
That our fathers have told us.
We will not hide from their children,
But tell to the coming generation
The glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
And the wonders he has done.
(Psalm 78:3-4)*

Pastor Shiv
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