

Family Worship: What does God Say?

By Dr. Joel Beebe

Every church desires growth. Surprisingly few churches, however, seek to promote internal church growth by stressing the need to raise children in covenantal truth. 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.” 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 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.

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 office-bearers 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.

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