

2

The Case for Family Worship

How are we to make the case for family worship? The classic authors help us. They recognize that there isn't a single passage or command that requires it. Instead, it is from the whole tenor of Scripture that the case is to be made. Hamond in particular rebuffs those who in connection with the duty of family worship demand 'the express words of Scripture' and like the Sadducees, in connection with the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:32-32), fail to draw proper deductions from Scripture, thereby missing what 'by sound and necessary consequences' can be known from Scripture.¹ The champions of family worship argue on the basis of the biblical examples of parental responsibility for the religious disposition of the family, as well as on the basis of right deductions rooted in the nature of things.

1. Hamond, *Family Worship*, 94, 93. His language echoes that of *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6.

BIBLICAL CASE: OLD TESTAMENT

We may begin with the Old Testament examples of family religion. ‘Religion was first hatched in families,’ says Manton, ‘and there the devil seeketh to crush it.’ There was a time, he argues, when ‘the families of the Patriarchs were all the Churches God had in the world.’² Abel offered a sacrifice that pleased God (Gen. 4:4). Where did he learn to do so? Such knowledge would have to have been passed on to him by his father Adam (cf. Gen. 3:21). True religion was passed from Adam to Seth to Enosh. From father to son the knowledge of what it meant to ‘call upon the name of the Lord’ was transmitted (Gen. 4:25, 26). We are told Enoch ‘walked with God’ (Gen. 5:24). Where did he learn to do so? From his father Jared. Enoch fathered Methuselah, Methuselah fathered Lamech, and Lamech fathered Noah, who also ‘walked with God’ (Gen. 6:9). From father to son, the knowledge of a godly walk was passed along.

Abraham was commended as one who ‘command(ed) his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice,’ a text featured prominently in the classic literature (Gen 18:19).³ As head of the household, he commanded

2. Manton, ‘Epistle,’ 7.

3. E.g. Perkins, *Oeconomie*, 669, 698; Arthur Hildersham, ‘Disciplining Children,’ *The Godly Family: A Series of Essays on the Duties of Parents and Children* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 108, 116, 132; Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, 392; Lee, ‘Conversion,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 1:152; Doolittle, ‘Family Prayer,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 226; Whitefield, ‘Family Religion,’ 39, 42; Doddridge, ‘Religious Education,’ 64; Davies,

his children to ‘keep the way of the Lord.’ Does this not assume that he knows ‘the way of the Lord?’ Would the ‘way of the Lord’ not include comprehensive instruction in the attributes, nature, commands, requirements, and worship of the Lord? He adds, ‘by doing righteousness and justice.’ Does this not require that Abraham teach his children what is meant by ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice?’ ‘Abraham will not leave his children ... to their own genius, counsels, lusts, ignorance, idleness, superstitions, idolatry, but “command” them,’ says Thomas Lye in his sermon on ‘Profitable Catechizing.’⁴ He must teach his children comprehensively the things of God. The responsibility is Abraham’s. There is no school to which he may turn. There is no church to which he may delegate the responsibility. There is no Sunday School to which he may send his children.

Isaac and Jacob built altars wherever their families pitched their tents, the altar being ‘a necessary utensil for divine worship’ (Gen. 26:25; 28:18; 33:20; 35:1-3), says Davies.⁵ The latter of these texts was the basis upon which Oliver Heywood (1624-1702) wrote his 133-page treatise, *A Family Altar*, (1693), where he demonstrates that Jacob, ‘as a householder’ (Gen. 35: 2, 3), by teaching his family its duty (v. 3), by building an altar and making an offering (v. 14), and by commanding his family to put away idols (v. 4), ‘acts the part of a prophet, priest,

‘Family Religion,’ 17.

4. Lye, ‘Profitable Catechizing,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 2:107.

5. Davies, ‘Family Religion,’ 18.

and king.’⁶ This Jacob did wherever he went, as did Abraham and Israel before him. This leads Heywood to the conclusion ‘that governors of families must as priests erect family-altars for God’s worship.’⁷ Lye summarizes the pattern of religious instruction from Adam to Moses: ‘how was the true religion communicated, but by oral tradition from parents to their children.’⁸

As we move from the Abrahamic to the Mosaic covenant, we read this exhortation from Moses to parents:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 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. 6:6, 7; 11:19, etc).

‘Means are here prescribed for the maintaining and keeping up of religion in our hearts and houses,’ says Henry.⁹ Both the heart and the house are in view. ‘Diligently’ parents are to teach the children to love (Deut. 6:4) and obey God (6:7). They are constantly to teach them to do so. Hebrew expresses comprehensiveness through contrasts. When we ‘sit’ and when we ‘walk,’ when

6. Heywood, ‘Family Altar’ *Works*, IV:285-418.

7. *Ibid.*, 297; see Doolittle, ‘Family Prayer,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 2:238.

8. Lye, ‘Profitable Catechizing,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 2:106.

9. Henry, *Exposition*, on Deuteronomy 6:6-7; also Perkins, *Oeconomie*, 670, 698; Hildersham, ‘Disciplining Children,’ 110, 113, 125; Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, 392, 395, 401; Doolittle, ‘Family Prayer,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 2:217; Lee, ‘Conversion,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 1:150, 151, 155; Doddridge, ‘Religious Education,’ 126; Davies, ‘Family Religion,’ 18.

we ‘lie down’ and when we ‘rise’ represent all of life and all the time. It means, says Matthew Poole (1624-1679), that this instruction is to be done ‘diligently, earnestly, frequently, discreetly, and dexterously.’¹⁰

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:8, 9).

Bibles were uncommon then. So they made do. They compensated by writing verses on their doorposts and gates, constantly reminding them of God’s Word (cf. Exod. 13:9). The things of God are to be the theme of our households, constantly before our eyes, constantly in our conversations, going with us wherever we go. We who have completed Bibles in our hands may draw the necessary implications. The Scriptures are to be in the center of our homes, dominating family life.

This command to parents to teach their children is repeated three times in Deuteronomy, so important is their doing so for the future of the people of God (4:9, 10; 6:6, 7; 11:19; cf. 32:46).

Passover instruction was particularly the duty of families. ‘When your children say to you, “What do you mean by this service?” you shall say, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover”’ (Exod. 12:26, 27a). The children ask, the parents explain. Parents were to tell their sons and grandsons of the mighty signs wrought by God in

10. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Volumes I-III (1683-85, 1865; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963), I:350.

the exodus (Exod. 10;1, 2). Parents were to teach their children the Ten Commandments (Deut. 4:9, 10ff). Parents were to teach their children of the parting of the waters of the Red Sea and then the Jordan River as the people of Israel passed into the Promised Land (Josh. 4:6, 7, 21, 22). If Old Testament parents were required to explain the work of redemption, the Ten Commandments, and the sacraments (circumcision and Passover) to their children, it is doubtful that Christian parents are expected to do any less. 'The good ruler of his family,' says Hamond, 'must then be a diligent and constant teacher of his household.'¹¹

Joshua, though 'very much in public affairs,' though a very busy man leading a whole nation's military and religious affairs, yet neglects not his family,' Gouge points out. He thereby 'setteth himself first as a guide to the rest.'¹² Joshua modeled the priorities of godly men. He committed his family to God saying, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' (Josh. 24:15), the seminal text upon which Thomas Doolittle based his sermon, 'The Duty of Family Prayer,' and George Whitefield (1714-1770) his sermon, 'The Great Duty of Family Religion.'¹³ Doolittle points out with multiple references

11. Heywood, 'Family Altar,' *Works*, IV:313; Davies, 'Family Religion,' 20, 21; Hamond, *Family Worship*, 29; cf. Doolittle, 'Family Prayer,' *Puritan Sermons*, 2:217.

12. Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, 395.

13. Whitefield, 'Family Religion,' 30-47; see also Perkins, *Oeconomie*, 669, 698; Hildersham, 'Disciplining Children,' 108, 111, 132; Lee, 'Conversion,' *Puritan Sermons*, 1:155; Philip Doddridge, 'A Plain and Serious Address on the Important Subject of Family Religion,' in *The Godly Family: A Series of Essays on the Duties of Parents and Children*

that the term 'to serve' is 'so comprehensive as to take in the whole worship of God' (e.g. Exod. 3:12; Deut. 6:12; 1 Sam. 7:3; Ps. 2:11; etc; and Matt. 4:10; Luke 1:74; Acts 7:7, etc.).¹⁴ Whitefield argues from this text that 'every governor of a family ought to look upon himself as obliged to act in three capacities: as a prophet to instruct; as a priest to pray for and with; as a king to govern, direct and provide for them.' Further, 'every house is, as it were, a little parish... every family a flock.'¹⁵ Davies builds his case on 1 Timothy 5:8.

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

The provision for the family which the Apostle requires surely may not be restricted to that which is merely physical or material. If one who fails to provide physical necessities of life is worse than an unbeliever, 'What shall we say of him that restricts their souls?' he asks.¹⁶

We may point to the example of Job, of whom we read,

And when the days of the feast had run their course,
Job would send and consecrate them, and he would
rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings

(Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992)], 64; Davies, 'Family Religion,' 5; Heywood, 'Family Altar,' *Works*, IV:316; Gouge, *Domestic Duties*, 13, 395.

14. Doolittle, 'Family Prayer,' *Puritan Sermons*, 200. He also points out that the Hebrew word 'to save' in Joshua 24:15 (*abad*) is translated in the LXX by the word *latreuō*, 'to worship.'

15. *Ibid.*, 32, 33; cf. Hamond, *Family Worship*, 103.

16. Davies, 'Family Religion,' 5; also Perkins, *Oeconomie*, 670.

according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually (Job 1:5).

Job 'would send' a message to them, to 'consecrate' themselves, a term used of preparing for the holy work of offering sacrifices (see Exod. 19:22; 1 Sam. 6:15; John 11:55).¹⁷ 'We find Job so intent upon family devotion that he rises up early in the morning and offers burnt offerings' (Job 1:5), Davies notes.¹⁸

David, after restoring the ark to Jerusalem with a grand celebration, returned home to 'bless his family,' for what Davies calls 'his hour for family devotion' (2 Sam. 6:20).¹⁹ Daniel 'went to his house' and 'got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously' as was his custom (Dan. 6:10b). 'He had always observed a stated course of devotion in his family,' says Davies.²⁰

Parents are urged in Proverbs, the Bible's ageless book of wisdom,

Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it
(Prov. 22:6).

17. See Lye, 'Profitable Catechizing,' *Puritan Sermons*, 2:107.

18. *Ibid.*, 18; see also Perkins, *Oeconomie*, 699; Hildersham, 'Disciplining Children,' 136; Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, 396; Lee, 'Conversion,' *Puritan Sermons*, 1:155, 166; Whitefield, 'Family Religion,' 34; Doddridge, 'Family Religion,' 64; Heywood, 'Family Altar,' *Works*, IV:317.

19. *Ibid.*; see also Doddridge, 'Family Religion,' 64; Heywood, 'Family Altar,' *Works*, IV:317.

20. *Ibid.*; see also Doolittle, 'Family Prayer,' *Works*, 2:230; Whitefield, 'Family Religion,' 35, 39.

‘Train up,’ ‘or catechize,’ says Thomas Lye; ‘piously and prudently instruct and educate.’²¹ Upon this text Lye based his sermon ‘Profitable Catechizing.’ The ‘way’ is literally ‘the mouth of his way,’ meaning early, from the beginning. A form of the word ‘train’ is used in Genesis 14:14 of Abram’s ‘trained’ men, that is, men trained for warfare. The analogy of military training is useful. One trained for combat would have undergone extended instruction and repeated practice in the use of slings, shields, knives, spears, bows and arrows, as well as tactics and strategy. David says, ‘Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle’ (Ps. 144:1).

A child is to be trained in the way he should go, not the way he would go, but the way his parents would have him go. What is the ‘way’ that the child ‘should go?’ Would this not have to be explained? Would the child not have to be ‘trained’ in the way of truth? Would that not have to be contrasted with error? Would the child not have to be trained in the way of what is morally right, and would that not have to be contrasted with moral error? All this must be done early and constantly. This is what the Bible expects of parents while it promises that children will not ‘easily and ordinarily’ depart from that way, as Poole explains.²²

Listen to the psalmist:

21. Ibid. See also Lee, ‘Conversion,’ *Puritan Sermons*, 1:151.

22. Poole, *Commentary*, II:257.