



FAMILY WORSHIP

DONALD S. WHITNEY

“A sure-fire way to enhance family togetherness is to make worship a priority in your home. Don Whitney has laid out a practical guide for parents (especially fathers) to get from ‘we should’ to ‘we can and do.’”

Jim Daly, President, Focus on the Family

“*Family Worship* by Don Whitney is priceless. Starting with the Bible, Whitney makes a compelling case for family worship and illustrates it richly with historical examples. He even answers the frequently asked questions and responds to common objections. This book is persuasive, practical, and—most of all—doable.

Tedd Tripp, Pastor; international conference speaker; author, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*

“If I could choose anyone to write a book on family worship, it would be Don Whitney. He has years of experience and wisdom on spiritual formation. But, even more than that, he is a father who has led well and consistently in his own home. This book will equip you to lead your family in worship, without fear or awkwardness or intimidation. This book could change your home, and you will be glad for the change.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission; author, *Onward*

“I love this little book. It is clear, biblical, and practical. It gives hope and direction for anyone to read, pray, and sing. The ‘what if’ chapter is worth the price of the book. I highly recommend it!”

Martha Peace, Biblical Counselor; author, *The Excellent Wife*

“Don Whitney has written a book we truly need. This book belongs in every Christian home and in the hands of every Christian parent.”

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Family Worship* is a great introduction to a topic of great importance. I recommend it for any and all Christian families.”

Tim Challies, author, *The Next Story*; blogger, Challies.com

“As the father of five young children, family worship is a regular and indispensable component of our family time. For many years now, my family has benefited from Don Whitney’s book *Family Worship* as a helpful guide to family devotions and the spiritual formation of our children. I heartily recommend it for every family, both those new to family worship and those who have practiced family devotions for many years.”

Jason K. Allen, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and College

“Once again I am excited about a book by Don Whitney. This time he provides us with a biblical and historical foundation for family worship. In addition he gives us a practical guide to know what and how to lead your family during this time. What a unique book. Whitney knows the benefits of every spiritual discipline.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo; President, Wisdom and Integrity

“We have removed the worship of almighty God from the home and we are reaping the whirlwind. *Family Worship* is a biblical, accessible, and indispensable call to arms. It is perfect for the scores of Christian parents who want to impact their families, but have no idea where to start. Praise God for men like Don Whitney who love the Lord and the church enough to speak such truth without apology.”

Voddie Baucham Jr., Dean, African Christian University Seminary; author, *Family Driven Faith*

“This is a magnificent achievement and so very needed.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Minister of Preaching and Teaching,
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina;
Professor of Systematic Theology and Historical Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“I appreciate Whitney’s contribution to this important area, and it is my prayer that God will use this widely to strengthen families in the area of home worship.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological
Seminary

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DONALD S. WHITNEY

 **CROSSWAY**

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Family Worship

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*For my family—past, present, and future
and
For my spiritual family in Christ—local and universal*

Introduction

Some time ago, I was in England and heard a report on BBC radio about a government study there which indicated that as a result of TV, technology, and the like, families rarely spend time together. The study observed that conversation between family members has “degenerated into an indistinguishable series of monosyllabic grunts.” And what was the recommended solution to this dilemma? The government should teach a series of classes instructing families how to talk and play together.

I immediately thought of at least two responses to this report. First, things are *really* bad when the *government* believes that the family is in trouble. Second, God has a much better plan for family time together than anything presented in classes taught by the government.

I had gone to England to speak at a conference. Around the table there one evening, I heard the story of a minister’s family who had not acted as though God has a better plan until it was too late. The minister’s widow told me that the greatest regret of her life was that her late husband had not begun leading

their family in the daily worship of God together until after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Contrast that with a story sent to me by a friend describing what he and his four siblings said at their parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration. He wrote,

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 . . . family worship. My brother said, "Dad, the oldest memory I have is of tears streaming over your face as you taught us from *Pilgrim's Progress* on Sunday evenings how the Holy Spirit leads believers. [When I was only] three, God used you in family worship to convict me that Christianity was real. No matter how far I went astray in later years [though today he's an elder in his church], I could never seriously question the reality of Christianity and I want to thank you for that."¹

Various studies, as well as our own experiences in local church ministry, bear witness to the reality that a high percentage of churchgoing teenagers leave the church once they finish high school. One of the leading problems with this issue is that, unlike the siblings at the fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration, most of these young people have no early, sweet memories of family worship. Such recollections, if they had them, might help prevent their departure from the faith in the

first place. Or if they do walk away, the memories might be the means to turn their hearts to seek God again later.

The great British Baptist preacher of the 1800s Charles Spurgeon spoke to this issue, saying,

Brethren, I wish it were more common, I wish it were universal, with all [Christians] to have family prayer. We sometimes hear of children of Christian parents who do not grow up in the fear of God, and we are asked how it is that they turn out so badly. In many, very many cases, I fear there is such a neglect of family worship that it's not probable that the children are at all impressed by any piety supposed to be possessed by their parents.²

I am persuaded from my own ministry experience in hundreds of churches that so little family worship regularly exists in Christian homes today, that even in *most* of our *best* churches, *most* of our *best* men do not even pray with their wives (and children if they have them) much less lead them in ten minutes or so of worship as a family.

A survey by the Barna Research Group supports that claim. According to this report,

Eighty-five percent of parents with children under age 13 believe they have primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and spiritual matters. However, a majority of parents don't spend any time during a typical week discussing religious matters or studying religious materials with their children. . . .

Introduction

Parents generally rely upon their church to do all of the religious training their children will receive.³

Having your family in a Christ-exalting, gospel-centered, Bible-teaching local church is crucial to Christian parenting. But it is not enough for conveying to *your* family all you want to teach them about God and *your* beliefs. Moreover, it is unlikely that exposure to the church once or twice a week will impress your children enough with the greatness and glory of God that they will want to pursue him once they leave your home.

This is why family worship is so important. But even more importantly, God *deserves* to be worshiped daily in our homes by our families.⁴

As for Me and My House, We Will Serve the Lord

FAMILY WORSHIP IN THE BIBLE

While there is no direct, explicit commandment in Scripture about family worship, the Bible clearly implies that God deserves to be worshiped daily in our homes by our families. Also, its practice is evident throughout the Bible. To quote Charles Spurgeon,

I trust there are none here present, who profess to be followers of Christ who do not also practice prayer in their families. We may have no positive commandment for it, but we believe that it is so much in accord with the genius and spirit of the gospel, and that it is

so commended by the example of the saints, that the neglect thereof is a strange inconsistency.¹

Abraham

Evidence for the practice exists as far back as Genesis 18:17–19 where the Lord and two angels appeared to Abraham in the form of dusty travelers. Abraham provided hospitality for them, and in the course of the conversation it began to dawn upon Abraham who his guests were, especially when one of them said that Sarah would soon find herself expecting the child promised by the Lord to the old, barren couple years before. As the three were leaving and heading toward Sodom and Gomorrah (which the Lord was about to destroy) the Lord spoke:

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? *For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD* by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

We have no reason to believe that much true worship of the true God existed in Abraham's day. In fact, after the Tower of Babel episode in Genesis 11 when the Lord confused the languages of people and scattered them, it is difficult to identify anyone else in the world at that point in the Bible, outside of Abraham's family, who loved the true God.² But as the Lord

did centuries earlier with Noah, God graciously chose to reveal himself to Abraham. And he did so in part, we are told, “that [Abraham] may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD.”

When would Abraham have done this? He did not have others to rely upon. He could not turn for help, as we can, to the ministries of a local church. The only way Abraham could have commanded his children to keep the way of the Lord was to teach the things of God at home.

Once Abraham and Sarah’s miracle baby Isaac arrived, Abraham obviously did more than merely provide a good home education about keeping the way of the Lord. Abraham obviously led Isaac and the rest of his family in the *worship* of God.

This is plainly implied in the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. God tested Abraham by telling him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. Early the next morning, the old man obeyed by getting everything together—even splitting the wood himself—and heading for Mount Moriah. There he intended to sacrifice his only son to God because of his faith in God and his confidence that God could raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:17–19).

Those familiar with the story will know that the Lord intervened at the last moment and provided a ram to be sacrificed as a substitute for Isaac. But in Genesis 22:6–7, Abraham did not yet know that Lord would speak and spare him the agony of killing Isaac. The key element of this story in support of family worship actually happens before that dramatic climax. Isaac knew they were going to the mountain to offer a sacrifice and worship God (though not yet aware that the plan was for him to be the sacrifice). Abraham and Isaac had trav-

eled for two days and had reached the foot of Mount Moriah. As they prepared for the final leg of their journey, we read that:

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:6–7)

How did Isaac know that they did not have everything necessary for a sacrifice? How did he know that the worship of God involved fire, wood, and a lamb? Or that the lamb would be sacrificed as a burnt offering? Isaac knew these things because he must have long been familiar with sacrifices and the worship of God. Isaac must have often seen the wood split and piled for a sacrifice. He must have heard the crackle of the fire and smelled the burning flesh of a lamb offered to God before. Therefore, Isaac knew when an element of the worship of God was missing because Abraham must have frequently led his family in the worship of God.

Moses

Perhaps the best-known text in the Bible commanding families to teach their children is found in the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4–7:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might. 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.

There is much more here than family worship. But family worship can comprise an integral part of obedience to this command. Parents should teach the things of God to their children at every opportunity, as the verse says, and they should do so with their children, individually and collectively. But both in biblical times and today, the best time for parents to teach the things of God to their children on a *consistent* basis when *all* their children are present would be during a time of family worship.

Joshua

Have you ever considered how infrequently people gathered for congregational worship in the centuries comprising nearly the entire Old Testament? Even after the tabernacle and temple were built believers did not gather in large groups to worship God as often as is sometimes assumed. Only after the Babylonian exile, late in Old Testament history and hundreds of years after Solomon built the temple, did the local synagogues develop and people begin to worship God congregationally on a weekly basis. Of course, with the coming of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, most believers are now privileged to experience the riches of being in God's family through regular participation in a local church.

But God was as worthy of worship in the days before regular congregational worship as he is now. Those who believed in and loved God, people such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and others, wanted to worship God in their days as much as his people do today. Keep that thought in mind as you read the famous words of Joshua 24. This great successor of Moses had led God's people into the Promised Land and been their leader for decades. Near the end of his life, he once more exhorted the Israelites to remain faithful to God. In Joshua 24:15 he declared,

And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

How would Joshua and his house have served the Lord? Part of serving the Lord for them back then, just as it is for us now, is worshipping the Lord. But in a day when congregational worship was so infrequent—after all, for many Israelites it involved a trip of several days to travel to the tabernacle—regular family worship of some sort would have been a part of carrying out Joshua's resolve, “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

Job

The book of Job begins with a description of his devotion to God, the size of his family, and the abundance of his wealth.

Verse 4 of chapter one tells how Job's seven sons would take turns hosting feasts, events at which they would also invite their three sisters. After each feast, verse 5 explains,

When the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them [that is, his sons and daughters], and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings 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.

So whenever one of his sons had such a feast, afterward Job would send for his children, and when they were all together he would get up early the next morning and lead his family in the worship of God by offering sacrifices to the Lord on their behalf.

Asaph

In Psalm 78:1–8 we read the inspired words of a psalmist named Asaph. He was one of the three leaders of music appointed by King David in the days of the tabernacle. Asaph wrote,

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
 incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
I will open my mouth in a parable;
 I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
 that our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which *he commanded our fathers*
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

God “commanded . . . fathers” among his people (v. 5) to “tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD” (v. 4). The term *glorious deeds* is rendered “praises”³ or “praiseworthy deeds”⁴ in most other major translations. Asaph listed several examples of God’s “praises” in the rest of Psalm 78, including the miracles he performed in Egypt and during the exodus (vv. 9–53), and the “praiseworthy deeds” he performed after the Israelites arrived in the Promised Land, such as his frequent defeat of their enemies and his shepherd-ing of Israel through his choice of David as king (vv. 54–72).

Sadly, despite the many “glorious deeds” God did for his people, faithfulness to the record also required Asaph to report “how often they rebelled against him” (v. 40).

Here in Psalm 78, God commanded fathers to “tell to the coming generation” (v. 4) these things so they would not follow the rebellious example of previous generations, but instead would “set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (v. 7).

So, when would the fathers first addressed by Asaph have obeyed this command from the Lord? When would the fathers have taught the “glorious deeds” and “praises” of the Lord to their children?

I’m sure you can imagine the fathers in the days of King David telling stories of the Lord’s “praiseworthy deeds” to their children gathered around a fire or a meal. But “praises” are also something we teach in worship, similar to when we hear a worship leader at church say, “I’m going to teach a new song today for us to sing in the worship of God.”

Would the fathers have taught “the praises of the Lord” in congregational worship? Perhaps sometimes they would. But this passage seems to be speaking more on an intimate and family level (that is, fathers and children) than a congregational one. Besides, as we’ve already noted, even by the time the psalms were written there was much less congregational worship than we might imagine, and some of this probably involved segregating the fathers from the rest of the family. And even if the family members were all together, they were not inside the tabernacle (which was still in operation at the time of Psalm 78). The tabernacle was smaller than most church

buildings in America today and only priests were allowed to enter, so it was a physical impossibility for all the gathered Israelites to be inside it. When all the people in the time of David and Asaph did gather to worship God congregationally—such as at one of the major feasts—everything happened as they stood outside together by the thousands.

So the instruction Asaph spoke of in Psalm 78 almost certainly did not occur in a congregational setting. Rather, fathers taught these “praises” to their children at home. And some of that teaching happened as the fathers led their families in the most regular kind of group worship they could have experienced, family worship.

Paul

Over in the New Testament, married men find these instructions in Ephesians 5:25–26: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” As Christ cleansed his bride, the church, by the washing of the water of the Word of God,⁵ so husbands are exhorted here to love their wives in like manner. And one of the best ways that husbands can bring the pure water of the Word of God into their homes is through the spiritually cleansing and refreshing practice of family worship.

Then we read these familiar words in Ephesians 6:4: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” If you’re a dad, you do not expect others to do this for you, do you? Of

course not. God gave this command to you as your direct responsibility. So I ask you, when do you do this?

Besides providing a general Christian worldview for your family, *when*, specifically, do you bring your children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”? Yes, of course you do it when you bring your children to church. Yes, of course you do it when you converse with them about the things of God from time to time at home or in the car. Yes, of course you even do it through your personal example. But bringing children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” does not happen only unintentionally and incidentally.

Yes, it should and does happen at unplanned, teachable moments in the car, at bedtime, and so on throughout the day. That’s wonderful! But it should also happen purposefully. And without some regularity, structure, and purpose, bringing our children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” is one of those things that we can assume we are doing but never actually do as well as we might think. Consistent, father-led family worship is one of the best, steadiest, and most easily measurable ways to bring up children in the Lord’s “discipline and instruction.” Besides bringing your children to church, you can point to those regular times of family worship and say, “That’s one of the most important ways we practice—specifically, audibly, and observably—what the Lord commands in Ephesians 6:4.”

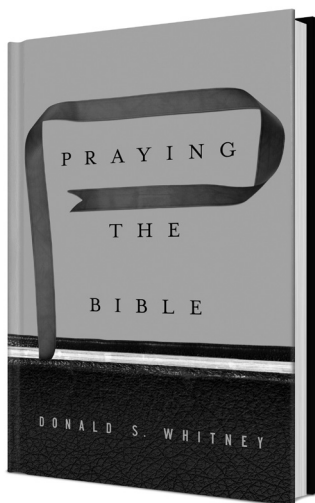
Did you realize that a proven commitment to family worship is implied as one of the qualifications for being an elder (that is, a pastor)? The apostle Paul writes about these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3. In verses 4–5 he says this about an

elder: “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” In light of this, it is fair to ask, If a man cannot manage worship in his own household, how can he manage worship in the church? If he cannot lead family worship, how can he lead church worship?

Peter

In 1 Peter 3:7, the apostle Peter assumes not only that church elders would practice family worship, but that all Christian husbands would do so: “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” Have you realized that the prayers here are those prayed *together* by husbands and wives? It is also true that the individual prayers of the husband will be hindered if he does not live with his wife in an understanding way and if he does not show honor to her. The fact that our personal sin affects our personal prayers is made plain in Psalm 66:18, “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (NASB). But here in 1 Peter 3:7 the text speaks of mutual prayer. Peter assumes that Christian couples pray together. He expected Christian husbands to conduct family worship. This is the norm for holy husbanding. Spurgeon said on this verse, “[This] text would be most appropriately used to stimulate Christians to diligence in family prayer. . . . I esteem it so highly that no language of mine can adequately express my sense of its value.”⁶

The Bible clearly implies that God deserves to be worshiped daily in our homes by our families. The beloved Bible commentator Matthew Henry knew this when he said, “The way of family worship is a good old way, no new thing, but the ancient usage of the saints.”⁷ That statement is true not only of the saints (that is, the believers) in the Bible but has been true of God’s people ever since.



“This little book
is explosive
and powerful.”

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

When you pray, does it ever feel like you're just saying *the same old things about the same old things*? Offering us the encouragement and practical advice we're all looking for, Donald S. Whitney outlines an easy-to-grasp method that has the power to transform our prayer life: praying the words of Scripture. Simple yet profound, *Praying the Bible* will prove invaluable as you seek to commune with your heavenly Father in prayer each and every day.

“Whitney offers a wonderfully practical, pastoral, and biblical approach to prayer that relieves personal boredom and unleashes spiritual power.”

BRYAN CHAPPELL, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor,
Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Peoria, Illinois

“This is a particularly helpful tool for those of us who often struggle to know what and how to pray or whose minds tend to wander during private prayer.”

NANCY LEIGH DEMOSS, author; radio host, *Revive Our Hearts*

“THIS BOOK BELONGS IN EVERY CHRISTIAN HOME
AND IN THE HANDS OF EVERY CHRISTIAN PARENT.”

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Gathering together for worship is an indispensable part of your family’s spiritual life. It is a means for God to reveal himself to you and your loved ones in a powerful way. This practical book by Donald S. Whitney will prove invaluable to families—with or without children in the home—as they practice God-glorifying, Christ-exalting worship through Bible reading, prayer, and singing. Includes a discussion guide in the back for small groups.

“Whitney has laid out a practical guide for parents (especially fathers) to get from ‘we should’ to ‘we can and do.’”

JIM DALY, President, Focus on the Family

“*Family Worship* is persuasive, practical, and—most of all—doable.”

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RUSSELL MOORE, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

DONALD S. WHITNEY (PhD, University of the Free State) serves as professor of biblical spirituality at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He has written several books related to Christian spirituality, including *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* and *Praying the Bible*. Visit Don online at BiblicalSpirituality.org.