

# Hope for the Christian family

## Family Worship<sup>1</sup>

By M. Goheen

There is some sweet irony in the fact that I have been asked to come to this Burlington Reformed Study Centre to speak to you about "Family Worship." Not many of you might know that I grew up in a Baptist Church. In 1980 I went to Westminster Seminary. While studying there I took a course on infant baptism. During this course my mind on the issue changed. I read as much as I could on both sides of the issue, on infant baptism and on believers' baptism, and gradually I came to the conclusion that infant baptism was biblical.

It was precisely because of that understanding of God's covenant of grace and baptism that my wife and I made a very radical commitment toward family worship. A commitment that we have been able to hang on to for about seventeen years together with what are now four teenagers. I am going to be sharing primarily my experience with you on family worship as we have done it in our family.

Right at the beginning I will warn you that our commitment to family worship has been rather *radical*. I don't expect most families to follow the kind of pattern we have. I don't believe that every family *has* to follow exactly what we have done. But maybe some of what we have done can challenge you.

### Opening words of the Westminster Confession of Faith

Let me begin with these opening words taken from the introduction of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is addressed, "TO THE CHRISTIAN READER, ESPECIALLY HEADS OF FAMILIES" and signed by the members of the Westminster Assembly 1643-1647.

As we cannot but with grief of soul lament those multitudes of errors, blasphemies, and all kinds of profaneness, which have in this last age,

like a mighty deluge, overflown this nation; so among several other sins which have helped to open the flood-gates of all these impieties, we cannot but esteem the disuse of family-instruction one of the greatest.

Singing is extremely important for family worship.

There are according to the members of the Westminster Assembly all kinds of errors overflowing this nation. I wonder what they would have said today. There are all kinds of blasphemies like a deluge overflowing the nation. But of all these sins according to them probably the worst is – *the disuse of family instruction*. They end with these words:

If, therefore, there be any spark in you of love to God, be not content that any of yours should be ignorant of him whom you so much admire – If there be any compassion to

the souls of them who are under your care, – if any respect to future generations, labour to sow these seeds of knowledge, which may grow up in after-times.

Those are strong words. And they are addressed to the heads of families. All the members of this assembly call upon those heads to use the Catechism they are providing to instruct their families in the faith.

### Importance of family worship

There are more reasons, but allow me to just mention two reasons why family worship is so important.

#### 1. Family worship builds the faith-life of the entire family and especially the children

Now we are familiar in our tradition with the term "means of grace"; that is, God provides various instruments for us to use to nourish and build the faith-life of our families. God in giving these means expects us to use them, and to use them wisely and to use them often. But sometimes I believe we



Dr. Michael Goheen



take these means for granted and we are not wise in their use of them.

There are *two dangers* that have afflicted the church of the twentieth century that may call for our attention here. The one danger is what I call *pietism*. It reduces Christian obedience to faithful exercises of devotional activities; that is, it reduces the Christian life to prayer and Bible reading and worship, and it focuses on the inward. There is another danger that we may refer to as the *social gospel*. That reduces Christian obedience to social, political and economic activism which diminishes, if not eclipses, the important faith nourishing exercises.

Now the tradition that you and I are committed to is able to hold these things well in balance. Nevertheless I have often noticed among Reformed people that it is easy to fall to one of these sides. If we understand the nature and the scope of the Good News of Jesus Christ it *will* enable us to avoid both of these dangers. Our faith in the gospel of Christ must be nourished if we are to be enabled to practice the obedience of the gospel in the whole of our lives. It must be nourished not only in the fellowship of the congregation but also in our families.

So the first reason why I think family worship is important is that it is the way God has given us to nourish faith-life. It is in the book of Deuteronomy that this task is pressed upon the fathers of the home to instruct and to teach their children. See Chapter 6.

## 2. Family worship builds family unity

In our home we have been able to pray together and repent together. Often

if there has been a bad day and we have been fighting during the day, we spend time together on our knees as family repenting over the way we have treated one another. We have been able to rejoice together and talk about issues together, to think together and at times to cry together. All this has built a family unity for which I thank God. It has enabled my children at this point – hopefully for the rest of their lives – to be best friends with each other. This family worship enables us to enjoy life together.

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One tremendously important thing is the establishing of a particular time for this family worship. And then not allowing anything to move that time. Don't let anything budge you but make it a top priority. Now in our home we have seen all kinds of distractions. Let me mention some of them. The kids of the neighbourhood come over during the summer after supper knocking at the door to ask our kids to come outside to play, or it is homework they have to do for school, or various extra-curricular activities. The phone is always very intrusive. But in all these cases we have attempted to make worship a top priority and not allow any of these things to upset the routine. This has meant that our kids at times cannot participate in various activities. It has meant that we

do not answer the phone in this time period. It has meant that at times I have gone to teachers of the school my children attend to say, look the kids could not finish their homework, so do what is just and fair. So we have attempted to make that time period something that is settled and cannot be moved.

Now the way we have done it – and again I do not call upon each person to follow this pattern – but here is what we have attempted to do in our family. We have set aside from six o'clock in the evening till eight-thirty, on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday for family worship; that is, two and a half hours. The first hour we eat supper together and we do not do anything else except eat supper. I always come home from the office at that time and at that time the kids are also expected to be home. Then we clean up together and by 7:00 p.m. we are usually ready for family worship. And as a rule we are together until 8:30. Often it will go later, sometimes we quit early, but our normal time is to spend that hour and a half in family worship. We attempt to make that something that cannot be budged.

Let me now talk about worship. A contemporary testimony used by a Reformed church says about worship:

Our life in Christ is celebrated and nourished in the fellowship of congregations where God's Name is praised, his Word proclaimed, his way taught, where sins are confessed, prayers and gifts are offered and sacraments are celebrated.

The two key words in that basic statement are *celebration* and *nourishment*. And indeed the word celebration takes hold of what worship is and especially as it is unfolded in the book of Psalms. Seventy-five times in the Psalms it tells us to worship the Lord with joy and exultation. Rejoice in the Lord! To celebrate his mighty acts and his mighty deeds. But worship also nourishes and builds our new life in Jesus Christ. Through the Word and through singing, prayer, and confession of sin, God's ways are taught.

## Elements of family worship

Let me also say something about *the elements of our family worship*.

### 1. Singing

Singing is extremely important for family worship. Luther said somewhere: give me the preaching of the Word and the music of the church and I will

change that church. He goes on to talk about the importance of music, how it very powerfully nourishes and builds us in one of the songs. He had never been taught that idea. As a matter of fact he had been taught the opposite. Yet that song had driven something into his little mind. Music nourishes and shapes young children. And that is why good music, singable music, music with good words is a top priority for family worship. I will often change the words of the songs for our family to make sure that they are in keeping with our Reformed tradition. Normally we sing for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Very often it is hard to get the family to stop singing.

I remember one time as we were praying my son prayed something which was out of keeping with what we had been teaching him from the Word. I wondered where he got it. Then I thought, what songs have we been singing? And sure enough, there it was in one of the songs. He had never been taught that idea. As a matter of fact he had been taught the opposite. Yet that song had driven something into his little mind. Music nourishes and shapes young children. And that is why good music, singable music, music with good words is a top priority for family worship. I will often change the words of the songs for our family to make sure that they are in keeping with our Reformed tradition. Normally we sing for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Very often it is hard to get the family to stop singing.

What is normative music for family worship? I am not talking about corporate worship, or worshipping together as a congregation in church, but family worship. It must be music that enables us to express our joy, to express our thanksgiving, to express our penitence, and to express our commitment. I am not moved by music experts that tell me, normative music must be classical, or from this or that era. If music in the family does not allow us to express our joy, our thanksgiving, express our commitment, it is not normative. Cultural styles must be taken into account. And we sing many kinds of musical pieces. Psalms, hymns, choruses. We have many kinds of different song books.

One of the questions which always come up at this point is, what if we don't have a musician in the family, or what if we do not have a family that is as musical as yours. I don't have good answers, but what I have done with families is to go and look for various kinds of recordings and tapes that have instrumental music and they'll have a selection of 30 different hymns or choruses that they can put on their stereo and use for singing. Or if there is no musician you can also sing "a cappella." But I do believe that music is essential for good family worship.

## 2. Prayer

I am speaking here of *Scriptural* prayer and not perfunctory (done merely

as a duty) prayer. Often I have found prayer in families to be perfunctory, mechanical, repetitive, very predictable.

What is biblical prayer? I think one of the best images comes from Calvin's *Institutes*. He speaks of prayer as the shovel that digs up the treasures and blessings of the Kingdom. In other words in Christ who is in heaven there are many benefits and treasures to be enjoyed by us. However, they as it were remain buried until we take the shovel of prayer and begin to dig them up. In this context it is important to understand the biblical aspects of prayer, like its urgency, its perseverance, its specificity (asking for specific things), reverence, thanksgiving, praying in faith. We usually pray for about twenty to twenty five minutes. We often divide that up into sections. Ten minutes for thanksgiving, ten minutes for praying for various parts of the world, ten minutes for praying for their friends. We divide it up so that we have a particular focus.

Now that we are moving into a post-Christian era, Christians need to be much more intentional, and much more radical in their family worship.

When I speak of prayer for the world we make grateful use of a book called *Operation World*, by Patrick Johnstone (1995). It talks about the church in literally every country of the world. When my kids were younger, I often summarized a section for them, telling them what was happening there, and pointing the country out on the globe, and then we would pray for that part of the world.

One of my children's favourite times in prayer has been when I took each of them on my knee – when they were young – and prayed for them for three or four minutes. We called that the father's prayer for the children. I believe it is a very important part of family worship.

A last thing I want to say about prayer is that it is important to give instruction to your children about prayer, to listen to how they pray and to help them to learn to pray more biblically. It is interesting that when we teach our children music or the various subjects in school or sports, we do not assume



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that they just are going to learn how to do it. We teach them, and we teach them bit by bit. Sometimes we expect that the prayer life of our children is going to grow automatically. It doesn't! It needs instruction!

## 3. Scripture

The first important thing is to understand the proper nature of Scripture. One of the things you should be thankful for is the particular tradition you have in understanding the nature of Scripture. I did not grow up with that. I am very thankful that I have come to understand that *Scripture is one redemptive historical story*. The Bible is not an assorted collection of stories and doctrines and laws. It tells one unfolding account of redemption.

We will always be shaped by some understanding of history, some world view. If it is not Scripture that is shaping and gripping our lives, it will be another story. It will likely be the story that is shaping our present culture and society. I believe that it is critical that children learn very early to read the Bible as one unfolding account of redemption – not reading the Bible as little pieces that don't seem to fit together very well but that they hear one panorama, that they hear one drama of God's mighty acts in history. If you look at Deuteronomy 6 you will see the way the Old Testament people of God confessed and passed on their faith – by telling a story. While their father was a wandering Aramean (Deuteronomy 26:5) God chose him, made him into a great nation, took them into Egypt, redeemed them from slavery. They tell a story. And that shaped their identity. In those stories God is the Hero. The mighty acts of God. We are not trying to moralize the account and find human heroes but letting the account of Scripture speak for itself with God's power or

faithfulness or wrath or love. We read about that in Psalm 78.

It is also important to wrestle with the contemporary significance of the Scripture. The Bible must not become a book about the past but it must shed light upon our path *today*. We don't look for simplistic applications but we want to know how God is acting in history and how He acts today. What has He done? What does this tell us about Him? What does this tell us about his purposes and what does that mean for us in seeking first the Kingdom of God. We have done many things to make this more meaningful. I would tell the story and involve them in acting it out. Now that the children are older we read the Bible together. We all participate, all having our own Bible of course. Then we give opportunity for discussion at the end.

#### 4. *Confessing our faith*

We have some marvelous and wonderful confessions, the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism. In our home we have read from various of those but

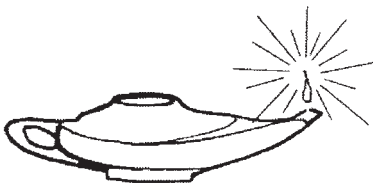
we also made use of the Contemporary Testimony (CRC Publications, 1988), as a confession of faith that has been written to address the current issues of today. It deals with the issues of our time and it tries to bring the Gospel to bear on secularism today. We have memorized portions of it and often we have done it together with actions. This opens an opportunity to talk about contemporary issues. It deals with evolution, human rights, earth keeping, money, scientism, feminism and so forth. It tries to give you a biblical perspective on these issues.

#### Concluding comments

1. *Family worship is only one component of a healthy family life.* That means that another thing is important, namely:
2. *Early discipline.* Our children learned to obey when they were young, before they were three or four years old. I believe that that was critical. For if they did not learn it early they would most probably never learn it.

3. *Affection.* It is important to give a lot of affection to children. Another thing is:
4. *Play.* Kids need to understand that we not only worship and pray together but that we also can play together. It is important for a father to spend time playing with his children.
5. The last one, which is getting increasingly important when children grow older is *communication*. Talking with the children and listening to them about the particular issues they are struggling with.
6. In all this you have to keep especially two things in mind:
  - One is that *all families are different*. Each family needs to use the gifts and creativity that God has given them. It is essential for our children to grow and to be nourished in the faith but *how that is worked out will be different from family to family*. All of us have to ask, how does God want us to work it out in our own family.
  - Another is: *it will take time, effort, work – especially for the father –*

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*discipline and sacrifice.* We had to give up things that we wish we didn't have to! But if we want our children to walk in the way of the covenant, we had better be very intentional about nourishing them in their faith. It may make us uncomfortable if we as parents ourselves struggle with praying and reading the Bible. If that is the case let there be an humble openness and confession: parents saying, we have not been doing this, we are not good at it, but we should, and so let's learn together as a family.

We live in a post-modern world. A world without God. Our children are being fed the story of this world every day, by advertising, television, rock music and many other things. Present day technology is very powerful in shaping the lives of our children. They are told a story about man and his world, and we as Christians don't believe that story. We know it to be a lie. Now that we are moving into a post-Christian era Christians need to be much more intentional, and much more radical in their family worship. There may have been times when our society was more Christian, and where it would have been possible to have a shorter time for family worship. That time is over.

When I was teaching in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, I asked people, "How is it that only one percent of the population in Amsterdam goes to church?" How could this secularization of a Christian nation happen so quickly? I do not have all the answers. But I do wonder if things would have been different if there had been a more vital worship-life in the homes of that nation. We are facing the same kind of postmodern currents in Canada. We need to be very firm and intentional if our next generation is to rise up committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I pray that we will not lose our children to the idols technology produces. I pray that there will be families that are intentionally committed to train their children in the Word of God, teaching them to pray, and determined to worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>1</sup>An abbreviated version of the lecture presented for the Burlington Reformed Study Centre on November 12, 1999. Dr. Michael Goheen, is Assistant Professor of Religion and Theology at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario. 

## CLOSING REFLECTIONS

by C. Van Dam

In bringing this series on "Hope for the Family" to a close, let us reflect for a moment on some of the topics raised and pull various issues together.

We heard that God has given to us our children, but at the same time the Lord our God indicated that they are *his* children. After all they have the sign and seal of baptism on their foreheads. Our children, teenagers, young adults, belong to the living God! We must never forget that.

It is this claim of the Lord that makes Christian parenting so awesome! The living God has a claim on our family! Him we must worship, adore and serve – also in the family circle!

As we approach a new millennium it may be good to think back on those words of God spoken near the dawn of history – the words which echoed through a very distressed paradise. After the fall into sin, the Creator in his great mercy did not give up on his creation, but he said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers."

Those words of mercy and love set the basic parameters for the agenda of the lives of Adam and Eve, but also for our lives, also for our families. God's love, shown in the beginning in his not giving up on his creation but claiming it for himself, is the love that we should show to our children and pass on to them. How? By maintaining and showing them clearly the present ongoing war that God declared in the beginning between Satan and the seed of the woman, the people of God. This is a war we are also engaged in and we must guide our children accordingly.

Yes, make no mistake about it. It is a war!! It's a battle against the spirit of unbelief and derision of the living God in which we find ourselves today. We live in the midst of a modern Sodom and Gomorrah which, if we are not careful, can even confuse us as to the lasting norms for our own lives.

Let us be on the alert and heed those words of old: I will establish enmity and hatred, between Satan and the woman, God's children. Let us keep that battle cry alive, also for our pre-schoolers, youth and teenagers. Let us make it a family project, a life-long project! Why – so that we take on a purely negative stance in life? No, but so that we can move onwards, by ridding ourselves of the sin of this age which also seeks to cling to us and so that we can positively equip ourselves, also through family worship, to serve the living God who is holy, holy, holy!

Awesome is our responsibility, but joyful is also the reality of what is happening. For look, the living God has had mercy on us and in a world which decays and fades away into judgement, in this world, the Lord raises us for himself a new creation, a new beginning. That's what a Christian family is all about!! It is a place of new beginnings where the Spirit of God raises to new life! It is a place of celebration and worship. After all, the victory has been won in Christ. The old serpent's head will be completely crushed.

And therefore let us heed the call of Scripture, to be different from the world, radically different in our priorities, entertainment and goals – holy in an unholy world. We don't belong to this fallen world but to the living God! And therefore, as the apostle John admonished: We are not to love the world, nor the things of this world, for the lust of this world and its sin passes away! It's the old creation! There's no future there! The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God lives for ever!

What joy to know that with us is our God – Father, Son and Spirit! God is moulding us, raising us up as a new creation, new mankind, for a new world!! So, let's encourage each other with that prospect. In Christ, there is hope for the family! Also as we approach a new millennium!!