

FEATURE

When was the last time you paused to examine your family life style? When you did, were you pleased with what you saw? And if not, did you wonder how things ever got where they are now? More often than not, being practical-minded people, we make allowances for those activities in our lives which appear to be practical necessities, and then fall into a pattern of living which provides room for the "needs" of the family. Perceived needs, for example, may dictate that father be at work during the evening hours when his children are at home. Mother may be busy with housework in the evening. . . because family finances require that she be employed during the day in order to make budgetary ends meet. Teenage children hold down after-school, part-time jobs to help pay for tuition. . . or to earn money to buy wheels. And if it isn't an after-school job, it's often an after-school or early-evening sport. A pattern of family life then develops out of the circumstances in the lives of family members. It may be that a particular dimension of family life gets short shrift in the process, but that just has to happen, sometimes, when family members do what they have to do — doesn't it?

In a "Reformed Conference on the Christian Family," held last fall in South Holland, Illinois, Rev. Slopsema argued persuasively that that isn't the case — i.e., he argued that we may not simply settle for any pattern of family life which emerges as a consequence of pursuing what is "good" for the family, or "good" for individual family members. In fact, Rev. Slopsema approaches this matter from an interesting point of view. His assigned task in the Conference was to address the matter of family worship. In doing that, he was careful to make clear that we must indeed be sensitive to what God requires. Not only that, we also do well to remember that family worship is a part of thankfulness to God for His great work of salvation for sinners. But he says also, in effect, that we may very legitimately look at the question of what is good for the family. Facing that question, we are involved immediately in the matter of setting priorities. What is good for our family? Is it that Dad be busy every night with school and/or church work? Is it a second income? Is it entertainment? Is it athletics? Or is it family devotions. . . regularly, i.e., daily, twice a day even? Rev. Slopsema

proceeded to outline for his audience the great benefits of family worship properly and regularly conducted, and concluded with this advice, that, if our family worship has been crowded by all kinds of pressing needs, it is imperative that we give this matter "our immediate attention." The spiritual welfare of our families requires it. We thank Rev. Slopsema for providing us with a manuscript of that worthwhile speech, in order that we might share it with you our readers.

The Role of Family Worship

Rev. James Slopsema

In general, family worship is on the decline today in the Christian home.

By family worship we mean the family gathering together in the home to sing God's praises, to come to God in prayer, and to study God's Word. This is often called family devotions. Perhaps a better term is family worship.

All too often our worship of God as families in our homes is not what it ought to be or what it could be. In some homes the family is seldom home together. Father is perhaps working. The older children are busy with school or other activities. Mother may be involved with projects outside the home. Perhaps she has a job outside the home. Meals are seldom eaten together. And the result is that God is seldom worshiped by the family.

In those homes where the family is together, time is often

so limited and matters so rushed that family worship is rushed, abbreviated, or even eliminated. Even when the family finds time to worship, it often finds family worship difficult, frustrating, and unprofitable, so that family worship is not always given the place it ought to have in the home.

We must understand just how serious this decline of family worship is. The spiritual welfare of our homes and families depends on worshiping God together in our homes as families on a daily basis. If we allow our family worship to decline, we can expect to see a spiritual decline also in our homes and families. We must maintain a strong family worship in the home!

THE NECESSITY OF FAMILY WORSHIP

To appreciate the true

necessity of family worship we need to understand exactly what true worship is.

There are essentially two elements in worship.

The first element is praise. Worship is praise which the thankful Christian renders to God for His great salvation in Jesus Christ. This praise is brought to God in various ways. The thankful child of God praises His God through singing. He praises His God in prayer. In the widest sense he thanks and praises God by a life of service and obedience to God. From that point of view one's whole life is worship.

The second element of worship is seeking God's blessings. The saint who has tasted the blessings of God's salvation is moved to turn to the Lord to seek His great blessings day by day both for himself as well as those whom he loves. This he does through the use of God's Word (both preached and studied) and through prayer.

We can speak of three different levels of worship. There is worship on the individual level, on the family level, and on the congregational level. We are concerned here with worship on the family level, that is, the gathering together of a family in the home to praise God and seek God's blessings through prayer, singing, and the study of God's Word.

Worship, whether on the individual, family, or congregational

level, is necessary. In a certain sense we can say that the worship of God is necessary because God requires it. The Scriptures everywhere call us to worship God. God expects His people to praise Him with thankful hearts and to seek His blessings from day to day.

But the real necessity of worship is an inner necessity. The need to worship is a necessity that arises out of the very work of God's salvation in the hearts of His people. Those who have truly tasted the great salvation of God are overwhelmed with thankfulness so that they cannot help but break forth in praise to the Lord their God. And those who have tasted the great blessings of salvation cannot help but covet God's blessings from day to day. Hence, they turn to God in worship to seek His salvation. To illustrate this truth with an example we may say that because of the way God made the sun, the sun must shine. It can do nothing else. It is the very nature of the sun to shine. In like manner we may say that the born-again Christian must worship God; for it is the very nature of God's work of grace in him to worship.

And this is the emphasis we must have in our worship. If worship is merely a matter of an external command or duty, worship will most certainly flounder. Our worship of God will flourish and

...all be pleasing to God only when it arises from an inner need of the born-again heart.

The same applies to family worship in particular.

It's striking that the Bible doesn't specifically call families to worship in their homes. Nevertheless the Bible is filled with many examples of family worship. Time and again in the Old Testament we read of the patriarchs (Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) building altars to worship God at important junctures in their lives. This was essentially family worship. In the New Testament consider Cornelius, the Roman Centurian, to whose house Peter came with the gospel of salvation after the vision in Joppa. Cornelius obviously gathered together in worship daily with his whole household.

This worship of God as families in the history of the church has all arisen as a necessary consequence of God's work of salvation. In harmony with the fact that God's covenant is with believers and their seed, God performs His great work of salvation in family lines. God's salvation is not only for believing parents but also for their children. This spontaneously results in family worship. Were God to save only one from this family and perhaps a couple from that family, family worship would not be possible. Then all worship in the home would be individual.

Nor would there be families in church. But God saves families. And therefore families feel the need to worship God not just on the Lord's day in church but also in their home.

If family worship will flourish in our homes, we must emphasize and build on this inner necessity.

THE BENEFITS OF FAMILY WORSHIP

Family worship is very beneficial for the family. This needs to be emphasized. We have just seen that family worship must be more than mere duty. Family worship will flourish only when it is properly motivated. We have that motivation when we see that family worship is very beneficial for the family.

Family worship is of great benefit to the family exactly because the family enjoys God's blessings through its worship of God. We have already noted that an essential element of true worship is the seeking of God's blessings in Jesus Christ. To this we may add that when the family seeks God's blessings in worship, it receives these blessings in rich abundance. Family worship is a powerful means of grace for the family. The family that worships God is richly blessed of God. And this, for the family, is the great benefit of its worship.

We ought to note these blessings more specifically.

One great blessing the family realizes from family worship is a higher level of spirituality in the home and family. The level of spirituality in our homes is declining at an alarming rate. There certainly is not the interest in spiritual things there ought to be. Our attention as families is all too often occupied by the television, by worldly music, by sports and recreation, by vacationing and material possessions. Instead of thinking and talking about things spiritual we are all too often preoccupied with the earthly and material. We see this and are perhaps alarmed. How can we turn this around?

The cure for the worldliness creeping into our homes is regular family worship. The family that day-by-day sings God's praises, studies His Word, and comes to God's throne of grace in prayer can't help but grow spiritually. First of all, the time the family spends in worship is time not spent in worldly pursuits. Time spent in prayer is time not spent in front of the television. Time spent in singing God's praises is time not spent filling the soul with the songs of the world. Time spent with God's Word is time not spent reading questionable novels. But secondly, and more importantly, God uses family worship to increase the level of spirituality in the home. For family worship is a means of grace

in the home that God uses to build up the home spiritually.

And this worship of God must be in the home. For the spirituality of our homes we can not rely solely upon the worship of God by the family in church and the worship of God by our children in the Christian school. Important as that worship is, it is not sufficient to establish a spiritual home. Spiritual homes are built on daily worship of God by the family in the home.

A second benefit of family worship in the home is family unity. There is usually a great deal of tension in our homes among the family members. Husband and wife often have tensions in their marriage. Parents often find their children rebellious, especially their teenage children, so that there is open conflict, almost on a daily basis between parents and children. And how the children of the home can fight with each other! Sometimes the turmoil of the home can be very depressing.

This strife and conflict can't survive when the family worships together day-by-day in the home. When the family in worship studies God's Word, the members are taught by God how they are to behave in love towards one another. What a power this is to establish and restore family unity.

In family worship the family has opportunity to pray for unity

in the home. In prayer the family can bring to the throne of God's grace the various conflicts that have arisen in the home and seek His help. And God hears those prayers so that conflicts are resolved and family members are led by the Spirit of God to live in peace. Just the fact that family members come together in worship to remember one another in prayer and thank God for one another is a great power to restore unity in the home.

Another great benefit of family worship is the opportunity it affords parents to provide instruction and training for their children. Parents have the calling to instruct their children in the fear of God. Given to parents is not only the responsibility of providing their children with the knowledge of the truth. Parents must also teach their children how to live that truth in all godliness.

Parents provide this training in part through the Christian school and in catechism. But this instruction of the church and school is by no means sufficient. It is merely supplemental instruction. The most important elements of a child's training is training only his parents can provide in the home. In the home he must learn from his parents how in a very real and practical way he is to live godly in this world. He must learn how to apply the Word of God to his own life that it may be a lamp unto his

feet and a light unto his path. He must learn how to pray and in prayer to find forgiveness at the cross and the strength of Christ to live in God's service. Only parents who have intimate knowledge of their children in the home are qualified to give this training.

And regular family worship is essential to this training. What a golden opportunity to instruct children in godliness when the family gathers around the Scriptures to worship. What better way is there to teach children to pray and to find their salvation in Jesus Christ than by bringing the family to God's throne of grace in prayer? The parents who lead their children to worship God in their homes will be the parents who will be providing proper training for their little ones.

THE PRACTICE OF FAMILY WORSHIP

Family worship will be a great power for good in the home only when it is conducted on a regular basis.

The Bible gives us the example of daily worship. There were every day in the temple the morning and evening sacrifices, at which the people of God gathered to worship. The Psalmist speaks of praying at evening, morning, and noon (Ps. 55:17). Daniel prayed three times daily (Dan. 6:10). From James Alexander's work *Thoughts on Family Wor-*

*ship** (a book every parent and young person in the home ought to read) we learn that it was the Scottish tradition of years gone by for the family to gather for family worship at the beginning and the end of the day. We would do well to adopt this Scottish practice. With father gone to work and the children to school during the day, family worship is not really feasible three times a day. But twice a day for family worship certainly is possible and should be considered the minimum for worship every day by the family.

The life style we have adopted today makes this rather difficult. We have allowed ourselves to become so busy that we have very little family life together. We are seldom home as families anymore. When the family is home there is such a rush that family worship is often impossible. This is something to which we must give our immediate attention! We must not and may not allow all sorts of activities, many of which are good and wholesome in themselves, to rob us of our family worship! There is nothing more important

and beneficial for the family than its worship. For the sake of family worship we must be willing to sacrifice. It is time we slow down the pace of life and cut out many of the activities that are taking us from the home and denying us family worship. This may even require a cutback on some of the various church and school activities that have multiplied over the years.

We conclude with some practical suggestions for family worship.

The Scriptures should not just be read during family worship but studied and discussed. Let every member of the family that can read have a Bible to follow along. Don't be concerned to finish a chapter a time. Be concerned rather that a certain amount of time is spent to understand, discuss, and apply God's Word to the family.

The prayers uttered in family worship should be family prayers. They should be prayers in which the needs and concerns of the family are brought to the throne of God's grace. God should be thanked specifically for the blessings He has brought to the family. The needs of the individual members of the family should be mentioned in prayer. Prayers should also be made for the various causes of God's kingdom as they touch the home and family. To make these prayers

* (This work along with *The Family* by B.M. Palmer is available under one cover for \$14.00 from the Sprinkle Publications, P.O. Box 1094, Harrisonburg, Virginia 22801.)

ally family prayers it is profitable to have the various members of the family discuss together what ought to be mentioned in prayer. There is room also for more than one family member to pray during family worship.

And don't forget in family worship to sing. We tend to neglect this. But singing is an integral part of worship. We ought to sing the songs of Zion when we gather together as families to worship. This perhaps will be the highlight of family worship for children. How children love to sing! How singing enhances the worship of God for our children!

Finally, don't make the

mistake of setting unrealistic goals or having unrealistic expectations. This only stymies our worship. Set a reasonable time for family worship. This will be determined by a number of factors, chiefly by the size and age of your family. And start at a level that you are able to worship. If for lack of family worship in the past you find worship awkward, don't give up but persevere. Do the best you can, knowing that God will bless your efforts. And always be looking for ways to improve so that family worship becomes more and more beneficial to build up your home.

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PARENTS' CORNER

For this rubric we have a contribution from a Mr. Mark Brooks. Mark lives in Pittsburgh. He attends there a Presbyterian Church, but over the years he has corresponded with several of our ministers in the Protestant Reformed Churches and has come to appreciate our perspective of things — to the point where, as you will see, when he writes of “our churches” and “our schools,” he means the Protestant Reformed Churches and the schools established in various localities by Protestant Reformed parents. Convinced as he was of the necessity of Reformed, Christian education, and finding nothing of the kind available anywhere near his home in Pittsburgh, he chose correctly for home schooling. Not himself having the privilege of sending his children to a school where the instruction given would be in accord with his own convictions, he knows whereof he speaks when he admonishes us who do to praise God for the “tremendous blessing” we have received “from our God’s good hand.”