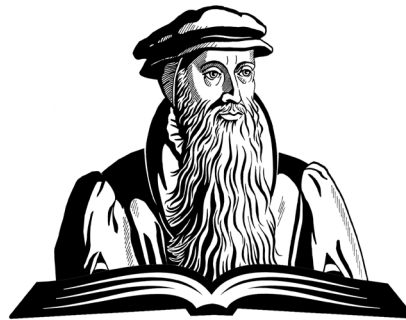


VIDEO DOCUMENTARY SERIES

Family Worship

EPISODE IV:

THE HISTORY OF FAMILY WORSHIP



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Our Speakers:

Rev. Robert D. McCurley is minister of the gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, USA, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States.

www.greenvillepresbyterian.com

Rev. Ian Macleod is minister of the gospel in the Heritage Reformed Churches, in Tillsonburg, Ontario, Canada.

www.heritagereformed.com

Rev. Gavin Beers is minister of the gospel at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, in Burlington, North Carolina, USA, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States.

www.cornerstone-presbyterian.com

Rev. Graeme Craig is a minister of the gospel at Bethel Free Church, in Ayr, Scotland, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Southern Presbytery.

www.freechurchcontinuing.org

Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic Theology and Principal of the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary, in Inverness, Scotland. He is married and has three adult children and six grandchildren.

www.freechurchcontinuing.org

Rev. Michael Spangler is minister of the gospel in the State of North Carolina, USA.

Rev. Maurice J. Roberts is retired minister of the gospel in the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). He previously served congregations at Ayr Martyrs, in Ayr, Scotland, then at Inverness Greyfriars, Scotland. He served as Moderator of the General Assembly in 2007, and was lecturer in Greek and New Testament at the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary, in Inverness, Scotland. In addition, he was editor of the *Banner of Truth Magazine* for a number of years, and is the author of several books. He has preached in many parts of the world, and has had a deep love for the Jews, for whose conversion to Christ he has frequently prayed.

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Family Worship

IN FIVE EPISODES

Episode I. Family Worship, An Introduction

Episode II. What to Include in Family Worship

Episode III. The Benefits of Family Worship

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VIDEO DOCUMENTARY SERIES

Family Worship

EPISODE IV

THE HISTORY OF FAMILY WORSHIP

FAMILY WORSHIP IN HISTORY

ROBERT McCURLEY

Given the Biblical basis for Family Worship, it shouldn't surprise us at all that throughout the whole of the annals of church history, we find that Family Worship has a preeminent place. Going all the way back to the early church and the patristic era, we see it there. But perhaps most notably, we see it in those churches that arose out of the context of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And you can look at those churches, whether in Germany, or Switzerland, or France, or in the Netherlands, or England, or Scotland, or wherever, and in each of these places, Family Worship features prominently. It's interesting that if you look at the period of the Second Reformation of the seventeenth century in Britain, for example, that the Westminster Assembly which had produced the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, also produced a *Directory for Family Worship*. So important was this in their own minds that they wanted to give guidance to the church as a whole. And even more interesting, you discover there that the churches actually deemed Family Worship as a prerequisite for attendance at the Lord's Supper. That if a father was not conducting Family Worship in his home, he would be deemed disqualified from attending the Lord's Supper. So that's an historical nugget that gives us a window into how important it was. And throughout the history of the church subsequent to that period, it has been the same. In Scotland, for example, this has been a prominent feature within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in that nation, through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, and it's formative in creating all that has been produced by those churches—young people being raised up, ministers and missionaries being sent out, and a bold testimony being maintained for the glory of Christ in a wide array of areas within the nation as a whole.

GRAEME CRAIG

Well, I think we can say Family Worship has always been viewed by the church as important. Indeed, in the fourth century, Chrysostom, the church father, urged that "Every house be a church, every head of a home a spiritual shaper, remembering that he must give account to God for his children and servants." Now that shows that it's always been viewed as important, and people shouldn't think it's a Puritan innovation, or a modern innovation. It was something which became very commonplace in Scotland after the Reformation. And I've been reading accounts of revivals in America recently, and one of the interesting features is, often it's said so many homes you can see Family Worship again, where it had been neglected before. So when you've got accounts of revivals, you tend to see a revival of Family Worship. That's this desire to put God at the center

of life. In Scotland, up till perhaps 1900, it would have been commonplace for families to have Family Worship. In many areas, it would have been strange to be in a place, and you don't do Family Worship. Now some of these people, perhaps they went to church, but they went to church because that was the done thing, and they have no interest in the things of God, but they kept Family Worship. And as you passed along the streets, it wasn't the sound of TV you heard, or pop music playing, it was the sound of families singing praise to God. And wouldn't that be wonderful to hear that again? That was the way. And I can only speak for Scotland, but I know it was true of many other places. In the best days, Family Worship was thought to be an essential part of Christian living.

GAVIN BEERS

When you look at the Bible, you see examples of Family Worship way back in the early books, the patriarchal period. And there are other hints of it throughout the Scriptures, even into the New Testament. We think of Timothy—we're told that he was instructed in the home by his mother and also by his grandmother. From that time, throughout the history of the church, perhaps the best period for Family Worship occurred around the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and then after that, into the seventeenth century, in the Puritan period. The *Westminster Standards* were produced at that time, and that's what Presbyterians believe. And when those documents were prepared for the church, they came with a *Directory for Family Worship*. And so, the church was encouraged, and indeed expected to have Family Worship at home. That document provided principles and helps to families worshipping in that way, in that period, and from that time, you saw an advance of the practice. We're told of one historical account in the town of Kidderminster, in England, where there was a pastor there by the name of Richard Baxter. And when he went to that city, he was faced with a town that was not particularly godly—wickedness abounded. And through Baxter's ministry and encouragement of families to Family Worship, towards the end of his time there, he was able to say that as he walked through the streets of Kidderminster, he could hear families worshipping God together. In more recent times, in Scotland, particularly in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, it was very common in the morning and the evening to walk through the villages, and to hear families worshipping God together. And in the country of Northern Ireland, where I'm from, it was also said, back in the 1800s, that it was a time where children were brought up on porridge and on the *Shorter Catechism*; and their mothers and fathers were feeding them, first their oatmeal for breakfast, and then teaching them the Word of God. And what a wonderful thing it would be to see that again

MICHAEL SPANGLER

I can say that the godly men that I know from history, and the godly nations, in times where the Lord particularly blessed, are without doubt marked by Family Worship. Family Worship is a mark, for example, of all the great revivals in the past—a proof that this was not just excitement. It was that people went home from their church meetings where they were blessed by the Holy Spirit, and they continued to seek that blessing as families, in their homes. You can see that in the Bible. We're taught that true revival will mean, as the prophet says, that the families will go apart by themselves to weep for their sins, because they have pierced the Savior.

We see the Philippian jailor. He's converted, and his whole household with him is baptized. It would be strange to think that they didn't go home and, as a household, worship God together. And we see that throughout history. A powerful example of that is in the ministry of Richard Baxter, in

Kidderminster. He wrote that when he came to that place, there was barely one family in a street that would worship God, and through the blessing of God upon his ministry, he said you could go on the Sabbath and hear a hundred families on one street singing Psalms to God. I think that's a good testimony of how the blessing of God on nations and churches is always accompanied by the blessing of Family Worship.

WILLIAM MACLEOD

Family Worship was practiced regularly by the Reformers, by the Puritans, the Covenanters. In days gone by in the Scottish church, particularly in the Highlands of Scotland where I came from, Family Worship was very important. Indeed on the Isle of Lewis where I grew up, even many of those who would make no public profession of faith, they weren't practicing Christians, yet they would conduct Family Worship in their homes, and it gave a certain fear of God to the community as a whole. So when Christians have been at their best, as it were, Family Worship is something that was carefully observed.

IAN MACLEOD

Where do you see Family Worship practiced most regularly? I think the short answer is, Wherever godliness flourished. Wherever godliness flourished, whether you go all the way back to Noah, and Abraham, all the way down to the present, wherever godliness flourished, there you can be sure there was the family altar, there was Family Worship in the home.

And certainly, you can trace this flourishing of religion together with Family Worship, as we said, in the Old Testament, down to the New, into the early church. Douglas Bannerman, in his work on the church, summarizes the inner life of the church this way. He says, "The inner life of the church, after the ascension of her Lord, went on as it had begun, in an atmosphere of prayer and praise. Their voice of united prayer rises continually in the apostolic church." And you can go all the way down to the Reformers, to men like Martin Luther. You can go to Holland, and you'll find men like Wilhelmus à Brakel, and these men are commending Family Worship. You can go to the Puritans in England. You can go to the southern Presbyterians in America. You've got men like Jonathan Edwards, and Samuel Davis, and then into the nineteenth century, Charles Hodge, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, James Alexander—these men are writing, these men are commending Family Worship, and you see the godliness that they have. It's the same in Scotland, in the nineteenth century, you have men like Robert Murray M'Cheyne, he's speaking to this. And there is, all the way down to the present, wherever godliness flourishes, you see Family Worship there with it.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF BENEFITS

MAURICE ROBERTS

I think the best way to handle this one would be to look at the lives of the outstanding Christian preachers who we've had over the years. And I think one can see when one reads the biographies of great preachers, one would see like Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and Dr. Lloyd Jones, and men who we respect like that, that very often, their characters and their preparatory work in childhood in Family Worship has shaped their excellent thinking about theology, and provided for them a prayerful desire for the gifts which they would need when they came to maturity, to preach the

word of God. So I think you could say Family Worship is like a preparatory place, a theological preparatory experience for young people, so that when they become mature enough, they have a desire to preach more than anything else.

GAVIN BEERS

There is historical evidence that regular Family Worship has been a great benefit, both to the church and also to society in general. A basic building block of both church and state is the family. And so it is true to say that as the family goes, very often, so the church goes, and so society goes. And so you can imagine from that principle alone that when families are biblically-ordered and worshipping God together, they're going to have a profound effect upon the church and society. In the past, where families were found regularly worshipping God, sometimes in rural parts of the land, when the "drift" came into the church, it was those families who were able to identify the shift. Stories are told of the Highlands of Scotland, when liberalism was seeping into the national church in the 1800s, and some of the city ministers would travel out to the country regions to take services. And when they were there, preaching the new doctrines, it was old crofters, old farmers, old ladies who had been brought up on a diet of the Word of God, and catechism, and worship in the home. And they were able to identify and sound the alarm against these new ideas. I remember reading on one occasion, of J. Gresham Machen, who was a seminary professor in the 1900s in America, and he had to lament, when he was teaching in the seminary, that the new students in his classes didn't know the Bible. He said that he knew more of the Bible from his mother's knee than these young men were coming into Bible college with. So you can see, if we get back to regular Family Worship, and learning the Word of God upon our mother's and our father's knee daily, what an impact that would have upon church and, with God's blessing, on the society.

GRAEME CRAIG

I think that if you look at times when the church has been strongest, Family Worship has been a factor in it. And in that regard, it has been a blessing to it. It's also helped in the development of a Christian society. You end up with an awareness of God. In our secular age, it's hard to imagine a time when people would regularly talk about the things of God, and whoever you spoke to, you would mention the things of God too. There was a day when that was done. And part of that, what developed that and maintained that was Family Worship. I think Spurgeon wrote of his mother's prayers about himself. And many, I'm sure can trace their spiritual pilgrimage, perhaps to the prayers of fathers and mothers that they heard in Family Worship, driving home the truth that they heard as they worshiped in public as well.

WILLIAM MACLEOD

Family Worship has certainly been beneficial. Where families worship God, they are families generally that know God, and as they live out their lives, they are experiential Christians, who have not just a kind of abstract Christianity of mere beliefs or certain Christian practices, but a Christianity of knowing God, and of being in a personal relationship with God.

IAN MACLEOD

You can think of the well-known missionary, in the nineteenth century, John Paton. Most have heard of John Paton and the impression his father had on him—his father's tears, his father's prayers, his father's pouring out of his heart to the Lord for all his children in Family Worship. But there was an account of one lady, who the biographer calls "the most wicked lady in the town."

And she would go on the winter nights, when she was close to despair, she said, she would creep up under the window, and she would hear John Paton's father pouring out his heart in prayer and praying for the conversion of the wicked sinner in the town. And she said there that it was that thought that the Lord would not deny him his request. It was that thought that kept her from despair, and it was that thought that eventually led her to the only Savior. So John Paton gives us a good example of the blessing that can come, not only to the family, but even to somebody listening from the outside.

You can think too a little further back of Thomas Boston. Thomas Boston went to his first charge in Simprin, where he found much vice—many immoral behaviors in that town. And by the end of his charge there, he described Simprin as a field in which the Lord has blessed, and there was not a home there in Simprin that did not offer up morning and evening sacrifice of prayer and praise to God. There is community blessing that came as a result, in a large part, of Family Worship.

WHY IT IS RARELY SEEN TODAY

ROBERT McCURLEY

So why has Family Worship become so rare today? The answer is not what most people think. So many people would say, "Well, in our day and age, we are so busy, there are so many pressing demands, and the inability to manage our time squeezes Family Worship out." That's absolutely false. And we know that because we're no more busy today than we've ever been in history. In fact, I would say we're less busy. In previous generations, they had to work six days a week from dawn to dusk, and they did so without all the helps that we have, without machines, and modes of transport, and refrigerators, and dishwashers, and so on and so forth. They carried and shouldered far greater responsibilities in many ways. No, the problem is that priorities are what we do, not what we put on paper. And we can look over the course of yesterday, and ask the question, "What did I do yesterday?" and whatever I did reflects what my priorities are. And so we have to determine what the Bible says our priorities are, and build everything else around that. And so the problem is not the lack of time. We do what we love. We do what we consider is important. The problem is deeper. It's a heart problem. It's a lack of love for the Lord, a lack of love for his Word, a lack of love for the souls of those in our family that lies behind the neglect, in our own day, of Family Worship. And so we need to fix the heart problem, in terms of putting the Lord first once again in our own thoughts, and the implications will follow—Family Worship will be established as it ought to be.

GAVIN BEERS

I think one of the reasons that Family Worship has become such a rare practice today is the general overall drift in commitment to the truth of God. The church has been experiencing this over centuries. And as a result of it, sadly, many Christians have never been taught about Family Worship. I was not brought up having Family Worship in my own home. And when I was converted, in my twenties, I became convinced of this principle. When we were married, we established it. And what we discovered was that when we spoke to other Christians, and they'd never done Family Worship before, the idea of Family Worship seems to be so obvious to them when they heard of it. So there are people out there, who, when they are instructed, they implement the

practice of Family Worship.

But something else happened as well, particularly over the last two hundred years, evangelicalism has placed a predominant emphasis on reaching out. And, of course, that's good—the church has to reach out. But at the same time, the church has lost an understanding of the biblical family. And as Family Worship has fallen on hard times through this period, and then both parents are very often gone out to work, they began to look to the church to do their work for them. And so you have Sunday schools, and youth pastors. And instead of parents teaching children at home, and worshiping God as families, that responsibility has been placed solely into the hands of the church. And parents, sad to say, have sinfully abdicated their responsibility. Our hope is, however, with God's blessing, and through instruction, that many people will come to see, not only the duty, but also the great benefit of Family Worship.

MAURICE ROBERTS

Well, this is a sad one, and it is true that Family Worship is not so regularly practiced today as it used to be. I am afraid it's because of the spiritual decline in the Western world. Sadly, in Scotland and in England, the day was when the Bible was greatly respected, and church attendance was largely observed in all our country, most parts of our country. Congregations were large: in Scotland, a thousand people, five hundred people. But because of the spiritual declension that's come in since the 1960s, I think, I would have to say that these numbers are very much smaller today. So that's the reason behind the fact that people aren't observing Family Worship. It's just that they are in a state of religious decline. And we pray to God that he would send a spiritual revival to bring us back to what we once used to be.

GRAEME CRAIG

Because the word of God is central, the importance of the Word of God, the importance of taking the things of God seriously. And the decline, I think, can be traced back to the liberalism that crept in, the lower view of worship, the secularization of society, where God is increasingly put to the side, and therefore he becomes restricted to personal life, and isn't seen as part of everyday life, even science being seen as understanding what God has created, and the explanation of God's creation. Once you sideline God in society, he ends up being sidelined in the family, because he's sidelined in our thinking. There isn't the same value put on the Scriptures, perhaps in the churches, and you end up with a decline. And within a generation or two, you've gone from a situation where Family Worship was common, to being hardly known about. So I think you can trace that decline in Scotland to the liberalism, the modernism that came in, in the 1870s. And probably for the past hundred years, Family Worship has been hardly known in certainly the central belt of Scotland, and the south, where really the gospel had been lost because of liberalism. I think of my own parents, and my grandparents, and they knew nothing of Family Worship. And yet, it could only have been a generation or two before, it was very common.

WILLIAM MACLEOD

I think Family Worship has become a rare practice because of liberalism coming into the churches, and also because of the, in a sense, the prosperity of today. Prosperity and religion—the Christian religion—do not go well together. When people have plenty, they tend to forget God. This was often the case with Israel long ago. When they were prosperous, “Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked,” and rebelled against God. And when there were times of trouble and trial, they would

turn to God. So the riches, the prosperity of today where people have nice houses, plenty of food, and clothes, and plenty of entertainment, and social media, and so on, their work is so busy, and social life, and pleasure is so busy, it's easy to forget God. And even in churches where there is considerable emphasis on entertainment and man-centered worship, that in itself has led people away from true religion, which is God-centered, and focusing first and foremost on our relationship with God, rather than the pleasure and enjoyment that we have in life.

MICHAEL SPANGLER

Well, just as in the personal life, and the church life, the reason our families don't worship God is because we don't love him. And the reason we don't love him is because we don't believe in him. So it always takes us back to the very beginning. Is God your God? Do you believe in him, through Christ the Savior? That's where it begins. David prays, "Oh Lord, open thou my lips and my mouth may show forth thy praise." It's through the opening of the lips, and particularly the heart through the salvation of Christ, that we don't need to be forced to praise God—we do it naturally. And so I think the lack of Family Worship is one of many fruits of a lack of saving grace—a lack of saving faith. There's a lot of unbelief, even in the church today. And then, even among believers, there's a lot of lukewarmness. There's a worldliness, by which we think that God's either not worthy, or we're not able to give him an hour a day as a family. You know, people complain about modern life being very busy—I don't know of a time in which people weren't busy. Life is full of labor. I think it's revealing that we claim busyness, but we will give ourselves to a thousand other things before the simple worship of God in our families. I think it is a real revealing of our hearts and our priorities that we're earthly minded. And that's why you see so little Family Worship today.

IAN MACLEOD

Well, why has Family Worship become such a rare practice in the church today? When you look at the Scripture, when you look at church history, it's hard not to conclude that a lack of Family Worship is the result of personal declension in the soul. Really, it's a lack of the fear of God, a failure to adore God, and to revere God, and worship God, therefore, as he is worthy of. With that, there comes a spirit of independence—a sense really that I don't really need God, I don't really need to pray as a family, I don't really need to praise as a family. So the lack of Family Worship comes from the spirit of Laodicea—a lukewarm spirit that says, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and know not that I'm poor, and wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked. And we'd do well to take the counsel of the Savior: "I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see." And if that's true for us individually, surely it's true for us as families also.

The excuses we have for not doing Family Worship are not new. There's nothing new under the sun. The same excuses as there were before—you can read of them in the old writers—will be the same that we hear today. "I'm too busy." "I can't pray." "My family won't come." Well, as one old minister said in Scotland, you have to make time for your soul, and if you have to make time for your soul, you have to also make time for the souls of your children. To say there's not enough time is a poor excuse indeed. To say you can't pray, well, why don't you go to the Spirit of prayer? Why don't you go to the Lord in his promise and ask the Lord to teach you to pray? And if you say your family won't come with you. Well, have you tried? Why don't you take them round the table? Why don't you speak to them as the head of the home, and encourage them, and exhort them? And

use the influence you have to bring them under the word of God with the enormous blessing that comes as a result.

PERSONAL STORIES

IAN MACLEOD

When I think of Family Worship growing up, I don't remember a time without it. Many of my earliest recollections, thoughts, and impressions come from Family Worship. And I think there are two things—no doubt there are more, but there are at least two things that were impressed upon my mind from an early age because of Family Worship. Firstly, there is reverence. There is the sense of the majesty of God, that we are to come before God. We're to do so with reverence, as well as with joy, that we're to join trembling with our mirth. But the constant, daily exercise of Family Worship produces a sense of the awe, the majesty of God, and the reverence that we, as families, should have for him. The second word is priority. We had Family Worship morning and evening. No matter what else was cut in the day, this was not cut. The impression, the indelible impression that is left was that this is a priority. This is nonnegotiable. Your worship of God is first. It is priority. And so these early impressions I thank God for, giving a sense of the reverence that is due to God and the priority that God has in all things.

ROBERT McCURLEY

One of the things that I recall as a child, in the Family Worship that took place in our home, was my father's instilling within us a sense that we were on a treasure hunt. So this was a theme that he revisited frequently. We were coming to the Word of God as a family, and we were hunting for treasure. So we were looking. What is God going to say to us? What are we going to learn? What wisdom are we going to glean from what we hear? That whole concept of a treasure hunt was a great benefit to me as a young person, and it's obviously been retained in my own heart and mind to the present day.

GAVIN BEERS

I didn't have the privilege of growing up in a Christian family, and so I didn't have the opportunity to worship God in my household. But after I was converted, I became convinced of the practice of Family Worship for myself. And what happened was that when we began to institute it as a family, my wife's parents, who were godly people, but had never been taught about Family Worship—they looked on. And they began to ask us questions. And when we explained it to them, they began to practice Family Worship as well. And so, for the last twenty-five years or so, not only my own family, but also my in-laws have been worshipping the Lord together in their own household. And it would be great if more people picked up the practice, and similarly, Family Worship began to spread throughout many more households.

MAURICE ROBERTS

Well, I have to be honest here and say, I was not a Christian as a child. I was about eighteen when I was converted at university. So there was no such thing as Family Worship in our home. Now having said that, I had a loving father and a loving mother. They were dutiful and faithful to one another, and they were very good parents in so many ways. I owe them a great debt of gratitude

for that. But they were converted only after I was converted at the age of eighteen. So when I was eighteen, I realized then, by the example of other Christians whom I had got to know, that it is proper in a family home, that there should be Bible reading and prayer every day, every morning and every evening. So what I did was, when I went back home, I said to my dear father, “I’m now converted to faith in Christ, father, and little by little, gently, I tried to encourage my parents to share with me a little Bible reading and prayer in the mornings and in the evenings. And they didn’t just do it regularly, but little by little, and little by little, it became a routine in the family. And over a period of a few years, by the grace of God, my mother was converted, and then my sister was converted, and she became a missionary, and then our father was converted. So I would say, this is what we must remember, that God gave me the experience as a child of not having any experience with Family Worship. My wife is totally different—she had a wonderful upbringing, and excellent father and mother and family. I didn’t have that, but that’s something which you can only do properly when you’re converted yourself. So God’s dealings with me were slightly different from with many. But by the grace of God, we had Family Worship myself when we had a child. We had just one child, a girl, and she was converted at the age of eight. And I believe that part of that was through being brought up by her mother and her father in reading the Bible at home.

WILLIAM MACLEOD

Family Worship was certainly very important in the home that I grew up in. My father would go out to work very early in the morning before the rest of us were up, but one of my earliest, clearest memories was of my father going into the back porch of the house, where he would pray, and I would hear, lying in bed in the morning, I would hear my father praying and pleading with God for his blessing upon us as a family. My mother would then conduct Family Worship with us before we went to school, and we would read and pray like that. So these are some of the memories that I have, and I’m thankful for the Family Worship that we had as children growing up.

MICHAEL SPANGLER

Growing up as a boy, we would have some measure of Bible reading and prayer in my family, and I think it did affect me. It at least trained me in the pattern that this was right. So that when I became a father and a husband, I at least knew that it ought to be done. I was particularly blessed with a pastor after that who taught me Family Worship by his own example, and his instruction toward me. And made it clear to me that from the very beginning of my family, we ought to serve God in this way. I also borrowed from my wife’s experience. She grew up in a very sound and faithful Reformed home, in which, after every meal, sitting at the table, once the food was done, they would open the Bible, read it, and pray. We do a little bit more now than that in our Family Worship, and we do it now in a separate space, to give it a bit more room. But that kind of habit was a great blessing to my wife growing up. And that’s how we did Family Worship at first—just right after the meal, so that you’re never distracted, even before you did the dishes, just to make sure it gets done.

As my former pastor said to me, you want to make Family Worship hug the pillars of the day—pillars like getting up, or having breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Make it either right before or right after that, so that it’s connected to these things you always do. That way you always also do Family Worship. So we built that habit. We did it around the table at first, and we only did it in the evenings. Now I regret that we missed the opportunity to do it in the mornings as well, but the Lord’s a patient teacher, and he’s taught me since. And it was building on that habit the Lord

initially taught me that we were able then to add the greater blessing of a more devoted time of Family Worship in our family room, and a second time of Family Worship. It's been a few years now, and I testify, the Lord has blessed richly, so richly! So from the beginning of our marriage to the end, and in the development of that Family Worship, we have seen the Lord be very kind to us, and it's been a real comfort and help. So much so, that I think I can say we utterly depend on it, and we wouldn't know how to live as a family without it.