

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
OF FAMILY WORSHIP

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Richard Baxter's Timeless
Encouragement for Today's Home

Jonathan Williams



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

A Practical Theology of Family Worship

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Reformation Heritage Books

3070 29th St. SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49512

616-977-0889

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 26/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Williams, Jonathan, (Senior pastor) author.

Title: A practical theology of family worship : Richard Baxter's timeless encouragement for today's home / Jonathan Williams.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021011369 (print) | LCCN 2021011370 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601788856 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601788863 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Families—Religious life. | Worship. | Baxter, Richard, 1615-1691.

Classification: LCC BV200 .W55 2021 (print) | LCC BV200 (ebook) | DDC 249—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021011369>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021011370>

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FOR JESS, MY LOVE,
who always fills our home with grace and worship,

FOR GRACIE, SILAS, AND ELIJAH,
who bring me more joy than they will ever know,

AND FOR MY MOM AND DAD,
who first showed me Christ



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Preface

More than 350 years ago, an English pastor set out to encourage family worship and demonstrate that it is God's will for the home. Richard Baxter provided a vision for family worship that is deeply rooted in the Word of God. Not content simply to teach, however, Baxter also equipped families to practice worship together and enjoy the transforming power of Christ in the home, presenting encouragement coupled with practical guidelines for implementing this spiritual discipline.

It was in his book *A Christian Directory* that Baxter presented his most powerful and persuasive argument for family worship. He stood on Scripture and wrote with conviction, believing that such worship honors God and blesses families. This blessing remains for those today who bring the Word of God into their homes.

Baxter's approach was deliberate and orderly, leaning on a systematic outline of propositions, arguments, and Scriptures. As Baxter applied these Scriptures to the discipline of family worship, he also applied them to every Christian home, exhorting households to respond to the biblical call to worship together. This call echoes from generation to generation as an invitation for any Christian who longs to see the transforming power that God's Word can have on families.

Based on the conviction that Baxter's encouragement for family worship continues to speak to the church today, this book is fueled by a desire to examine the biblical portrait of family and God's heart for the home. Each chapter considers how God's Word instructs families concerning their worship together and how they can and

must respond. The prayer is that this book might lead more families to worship together so that the Lord will be glorified in the home. It is also offered as an encouragement to those ready to begin practicing and growing in their family worship. It is an exhortation to lead your family in prayer and praise, to teach the Word of God in the home, and to enjoy the blessings of worshipping together. The following chapters celebrate Richard Baxter's bold belief that family worship is God's will. These chapters are offered with the prayer that you will allow Baxter's timeless encouragement and the many Scriptures he stands on to spur you on in a newfound or perhaps renewed passion for worship in your home.

CHAPTER ONE



The Blessings of Family Worship

Family worship takes place when a Christian household gathers to pray, teach the Word of God, and praise the Lord. Many families today seek to cultivate regular rhythms of worship. In these homes, worship becomes an intentional and joyful response to a biblical call, biblical encouragements, and biblical examples. Blessings await all who seek to bring the gospel into the home.

This spiritual discipline is encouraged and modeled throughout Scripture, yet in our busy, distracted culture it is far too often a lost discipline. After seeing this practice fade in importance over the course of generations, it is time to consider how we can begin to cultivate it in our homes once again. How do we rediscover the joy of family worship?

For many today, the idea of incorporating regular rhythms of worship seems overwhelming. Faithfulness in teaching the Bible in the home, consistency in praying with spouses and children, and regular times of praise may seem out of reach and challenging. However, as families begin these practices, they inevitably become more natural over time, and the challenges are overshadowed by the blessings.

Family worship is rewarding. It brings blessings as you find your family members sharing their hearts with one another. It will afford you opportunities to hear your children talk about Jesus while growing in their love for the Lord. It will allow you space to speak words of confession, forgiveness, and grace to one another. Family worship opens up the door to prayers for daily bread, thanksgiving, and

restoration. It is one of the most powerful ways we can usher the gospel of Christ into our homes as we pray that the Lord will open up our hearts to receive it as well. This is one of the greatest opportunities to enjoy the transforming power of Christ in our homes.

A Case for a Practical Theology of Family Worship

Conversations regarding family worship quickly highlight passages such as Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Joshua 24:15, and Ephesians 6:4. While these texts strongly support the church's understanding of family worship, they should not stand alone. A call to teach the Word of God in the home and examples of this discipline are all presented frequently in the Bible. Baxter's encouragement for family worship interacts with more than fifty biblical passages, demonstrating that it is not an insignificant discipline or minor theme of Scripture. Instead, Baxter proves that this form of worship is expected and directed; therefore, it should exist and thrive in Christian homes today.

Instead of treating theology and family worship as separate fields, Baxter viewed the two subjects synoptically, putting them side by side. John Frame proposed, "There really is no justification for restricting theology only to academic or technical questions.... Practical questions are equally grist for the theologian's mill."¹ This certainly seems to fit with Baxter's approach and his understanding of his work in *A Christian Directory*. The original title presented his work as "a sum of practical theology," which may be understood as a comprehensive study that concerns "all that is involved with living before God as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ."²

We will follow Baxter's understanding of a broad definition of theology, one that confronts both the biblical and practical considerations of family worship. Our study will focus on a comprehensive view of relevant Scriptures and their implications for and applications

1. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2013), 8.

2. Richard Baxter, *The Godly Home*, ed. Randall J. Pederson (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 10–11.

of family worship. Therefore, for the purpose of this book, the following definition of theology will be adopted: “Theology is the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life.”³ A theology of family worship is developed, therefore, as Baxter applied Scripture to this discipline.

This approach was also considered practical. Rather than considering family worship theoretically or merely confronting ideas about it, Baxter sought to apply the Word of God to actual families in a very practical way. He hoped to spur them on to action. This is the same hope for this book, for the prayer is that families would grow not only in knowledge about household worship but in its practice as well.

Baxter’s treatment of this discipline proved to be nothing less than an in-depth biblical study. As he engaged dozens of Scriptures in his encouragement of family worship, he successfully and biblically defended his position that “the solemn worship of God in and by families is of divine appointment.”⁴ Baxter demonstrated that families enjoy abundant opportunities for family worship, that it brings opportunities for teaching the Word of God, and that it fills the home with prayer and praises.

Throughout church history, family worship used to be commonplace among Christian households as they gathered regularly to read, pray, and sing praises. But nowadays this might seem rare or even foreign, so a few definitions will be helpful in achieving a common understanding of this practice.

Baxter made an important distinction in his definition of *family*. He focused on a household rather than a kindred group or tribe dwelling in many different homes. We will borrow Baxter’s definition of an ordained household with one head leading the family.⁵

3. Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 8.

4. Baxter, *Godly Home*, 61.

5. Baxter, *Godly Home*, 59. Andreas J. Köstenberger offered a similar yet expanded definition of family that is also appreciated throughout this book. He defined family as “primarily, one man and one woman united in matrimony (barring death of a spouse) plus (normally) natural or adopted children and, secondarily, any other persons related

This simple definition will prove sufficient for examining the theology of the worship taking place within a household and the one leading this time of family worship.

Baxter defined *worship* as “a religious performance of some sacred actions, with an intention of honoring God as God, and that more directly than in common works of obedience.”⁶ Family worship, therefore, will find families intent on honoring God as God through some sort of sacred action. As with Daniel Block’s volume on worship, this book is concerned with Christian worship “committedly monotheistic but also mysteriously Trinitarian, acknowledging the one Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁷

A Case for Richard Baxter’s *Christian Directory*

Richard Baxter (1615–1691) proved to be an avid writer throughout his ministry. J. I. Packer considered Baxter “the most prolific and the most successful of Puritan practical writers.”⁸ Even in his lifetime, Baxter’s works were translated into German and French, being read as far as Switzerland, Germany, France, Hungary, and Poland.⁹ Timothy Beougher estimated that Baxter wrote between 141 and 200 books based on various divisions of his writing.¹⁰

His longest book, consisting of more than one million words, *A Christian Directory*, was published in 1673. He began this intense writing project in 1664 and spent about a year working on it. A

by blood.” Andreas J. Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 93.

6. Baxter, *Godly Home*, 58.

7. Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2.

8. J. I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2003), 55.

9. Packer, *Redemption and Restoration of Man*, 57.

10. Timothy K. Beougher, “Richard Baxter (1615–1691): A Model of Pastoral Leadership for Evangelism and Church Growth,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2002), 10. Beougher argued that Baxter wrote 168 books. Geoffrey Nuttall listed 135 books with an additional six posthumous publications. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965), 132–36.

Christian Directory stands out as an encyclopedia of sorts, exploring multiple aspects of the Christian life. The original, lengthy title read, *A Christian Directory or, A Sum of Practical Theology, and Cases of Conscience Directing Christians How to Use Their Knowledge and Faith; How to Improve All Helps and Means, and to Perform All Duties; How to Overcome Temptations, and to Escape or Mortify Every Sin; in Four Parts: I. Christian Ethics (or Private Duties); II. Christian Economics (or Family Duties); III. Christian Ecclesiastics (or Church Duties); IV. Christian Politics (or Duties to Our Rulers and Neighbors).*

The second part of this directory deals with family worship. Baxter's deeply rooted and extensively defended belief that family worship is God's will shaped his entire pastoral ministry and motivated him as he spent his tenure in Kidderminster, England (1641–1642 and 1647–1660), equipping families through preaching, home visits, catechisms, and counseling. In their evaluation of this aspect of the Puritan movement, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones wrote, "So seriously did the Puritans take the duty of family worship that they regarded the neglect of family devotion and catechism to be covenant-breaking with God, and betraying the souls of their children to the devil."¹¹

Baxter's ministry to families remains an important case study for several reasons and will receive attention throughout the following chapters. His tenure as pastor in Kidderminster enjoyed a revival of family worship, which Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson put into perspective: "When Baxter came to Kidderminster, scarcely one family on each street among the 800 families honored God in family worship. By the end of his ministry, there were streets on which every family did so."¹² Beeke and Jones also noted, "Christians have long recognized that God often uses the restoration of family worship to bring reformation and revival to the church."¹³ Baxter's theology

11. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 864.

12. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 64.

13. Beeke and Jones, *Puritan Theology*, 864.

of family worship, as presented in his *Christian Directory*, remains useful. As Beeke and Jones suggested, “No Puritan work on applied theology has surpassed this treatise.”¹⁴

Packer asked, “Is it important for later generations to remember Baxter? In 1875 Kidderminster they thought it was, and a fine statue of him preaching was erected in the town center, with the following inscription: Between the years 1641 and 1660 this town was the scene of the labors of Richard Baxter renowned equally for his Christian learning and pastoral fidelity. In a stormy and divided age he advocated unity and comprehension pointing the way to the everlasting rest. Churchmen and nonconformists united to raise the memorial, A.D. 1875.”¹⁵

Packer concluded with this plea: “Get to know Baxter and stay with Baxter. He will always do you good.”¹⁶

14. Beeke and Jones, *Puritan Theology*, 938.

15. J. I. Packer, *Puritan Portraits* (Fearn, Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 160–61.

16. Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 178.