

# Biblical Parenting – 4 How Parents Instruct: Ceremony & Worship

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We have considered how the parents' religion, roles in the home and routines are critical to shaping the child's religious imagination. We now consider a fourth powerful shaping force. Deuteronomy 6:8-9 says,

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

It is possible that Moses wanted Israel to do something physical, such as writing out some Scripture, since people did not have a copy of the Law for themselves. But more than likely, God was saying through Moses that Israel was to fill their homes with things that served as *signs* and *symbols* of God as the ultimate reality. The Israelite home was to teach and instruct love for God not only by the piety of the parents, the godly roles, the God-centred routine, but also by ritual.

Evangelical Christians hear the word *ritual*, and typically respond with nervous suspicion. For those who prize genuine conversion and piety, *ritual* has connotations of dead religion, empty ceremony or even hypocrisy.

What is a ceremony or a ritual? It is an event which carries special meaning, performed on a special occasion. Weddings are rituals, ceremonies done on special occasions. All that we do at that ceremony has meaning: the way the bride and groom are dressed, what music is played, what is said, and the use of symbolic rings. The same is true of funerals, birthdays, graduations and inaugurations.

If you read the book of Leviticus, you will find that the worship and service of God in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple, contained elaborate ceremony. The Levites followed God's prescriptions for the various rituals of cleansing and sacrifice to the letter. The Israelite's life was filled with laws, rituals and ceremonies, prescribed and designed by God. Here and there, God explained what the teaching purpose was of these rituals and ceremonies:

"that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean."  
**(Leviticus 10:10)**

God filled the life of Israel with ceremonies that helped the Israelite to see the difference between worship and selfishness, between a life lived only for things under the sun, and a life lived with a perspective of things above the sun. To put it in modern language, God was rescuing the Israelite from practical atheism, from what we would call *practical secularism*. By clothing life in all kinds of symbols, God was frequently reminding and teaching that He was the ultimate reality.

Further, God knew that ceremony and ritual are some of the most memorable tools for teaching children.

And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever. It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service. And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' "that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.' **(Exodus 12:24-27)**

Notice that God predicts that the ceremony will provoke a question from the child. That's the idea. Any well-planned ceremony has all kinds of symbols and procedures and manners which have meaning. It's the joy of children to observe and wonder, and the joy of parents to explain.

Inevitably, someone will say, "All that ritual belonged to the Old Testament. The New Testament is free of ceremony and form and ritual." Not true. What is baptism, but a ceremony, a ritual, in which we use a symbol to convey a deep, transcendent meaning? What is the Lord's Supper except a ritual, a ceremony, in which we use various symbols to convey special meaning? In fact, every Sunday worship service is a ceremony, in which we read the Scriptures, pray the Scriptures, sing the Scriptures and preach the Scriptures. Properly done, this ceremony will deeply shape the imaginations of children who have yet to grasp the realities of the gospel.

God is not against ceremony or ritual. He is against ceremony and ritual that points only to itself. He is against ceremony with evaporated meaning, performed by loveless, disobedient hearts. He is against ceremony which is unbiblical or promotes a false gospel. He is against additions or subtractions from prescribed worship.

### *Which Rituals?*

For our purposes, the application is to Christian parents. What kind of rituals or ceremonies ought our children to view and, in some cases, participate in, to provide analogies of ultimate reality?

1. First of all, there is the **ceremony of gathering with God's people for corporate worship**, which families attend. In the Old Testament, the Bible makes a point of saying that when Israel gathered corporately, "Now all Judah, with their little ones, their wives, and their children, stood before the LORD." (2 Chr 20:13) Corporate worship is a ceremony and ritual that the family should prepare for and look to and honour. I am strongly in favour of children being present in our worship services, so that they can view the very rituals that will provoke their questions and fire their imaginations. (Not sure what Moses would have made of "Children's Passover".)

Even if a child does not understand all the elements in worship, he is being shaped. The Bible anticipates, and even desired, a child's puzzlement and consequent curiosity with corporate worship. The resulting questions are an enormous opportunity for teaching.

The ceremony, for a conservative Protestant like me, is not elaborate. It is reading the Word, singing the Word, praying the Word and preaching the Word. However, the wonder for the child comes in how these elements are handled. How do the men pray corporately in addressing God? How do the people sing – what sort of songs, what kinds of emotions and responses do these adults endorse as fitting in responding to the invisible God? What *kinds* of emotions do they seek to evoke in response to God? How does the preacher proclaim the message of God to man? If you are fortunate, your children get to observe *ordinate* worship. That is, they see responses and proclamations of God that correspond to who He is in Scripture. This powerfully shapes the way they imagine God to be, long before they have embraced the gospel itself. If they imagine God to be a therapist, a boyfriend, a grandfather, a rock star – because of the *kinds* of songs and prayers offered in corporate worship – then that will shape their view of what the gospel is.

Beyond what is publicly prayed, preached or sung, the parents' attitude towards this ceremony speaks volumes. It paints a picture in itself. If corporate worship is regarded very highly, and set apart as unique, it enables our children to distinguish between the holy and the common. They recognise God is holy, majestic and to be loved ultimately.

Let's say I didn't believe that. Let's say I wanted to communicate to my child that Sunday worship was ordinary, that Sunday worship was commonplace, or that there was nothing transcendent or majestic happening. How might I communicate that to my child? If I wanted him to think that Sunday worship was no different to activities performed on Monday or Thursday or Friday, then one way to achieve

that would be to dress him like any other day. If the ceremony of Sunday worship is as ordinary as any other day, then I would want to make sure the child feels that way. And I'd make sure I dress that same way. But if I wanted him to think that the Lord's Day is unique, and that worship is something sacred, and not common, I would use the very physical, tangible thing called clothing to help communicate that message. Comes the objection: "Sounds like legalism. God looks at the heart, you know!" Yes, but the physical affects the spiritual. If you want your child to feel *inside* that the event is casual, then dress him that way on the *outside*.

- When we are *about* to worship, we need to help our children to understand that we're going to do something important, and joyful and serious. That means we have to sit quietly, and pay attention. That's what we would tell them if we were in the Supreme Court, or if we were at a funeral, or at a military memorial. If we want the child to think lightly of it, then we should let them act as they would at a MacDonald's.
- What about what we do *before* worship? If we want to communicate how special this day is, we begin preparing beforehand. We get things ready on Saturday night, because not only do we want to avoid the tension that comes from rushing on Sunday morning, but we want to communicate, "tomorrow is the *Lord's Day*." We get ready in advance.
- *After* worship, we can use the Sunday dinner table to discuss what we saw of God in corporate worship that day. If, after church is over, all that happens is that the TV goes on, or the PlayStation comes out, the message is, "Well, *we got that out of the way*." But if we talk of the Word that afternoon, we communicate that we have just worshipped God with His people, and it has affected us. He is our ultimate devotion. How we use the rest of the day communicates much, particularly if we persist in calling it the Lord's Day, and not merely the Lord's *morning*.

In small and great ways, Sunday worship is shaping the religious imaginations of our children. What we do before and after corporate worship, *how* we worship, *how* we approach it, *how* we sit, *how* we sing, *how* we talk in the car on the way there and on the way home – all of this tells a child how he should imagine God.

2. A second ceremony we need to build into our lives is **family worship**. Family worship does not need to be elaborate. It needs to be sincere and thoughtful. Family worship is a time, ideally daily, but realistically several times a week, when the whole family gathers, and the father leads by reading the Word, explaining it, helping the family to understand it and apply it, and then to pray it – to respond to God in prayer, and even in song. Another ritual or ceremony that can partner with family worship is the dinner table. In Scripture, the table is the place of fellowship, the place of honouring those you love, the place of sacrifice and service, and the place of instruction. Isn't it interesting how often God instructs us and teaches us love for Himself over a meal?

It is true that there is no explicit biblical command that we hold a formal worship service, or other teaching time, in our homes—just as there is no formal command that individual believers must do a daily bible study or "quiet time." But it's wise to do so. Likewise, given the nature of children, the command to "teach [the Word] diligently" and to "impress" it on our children *strongly suggests* that we teach them in a planned, structured way; and a good way to do that *can* be through a short daily worship service.

As Professor Don Whitney – puts it:

"Bringing up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord is not accomplished unintentionally and incidentally. Yes, it should and will happen throughout the day at unplanned, serendipitous occasions, but it should also happen purposefully. Without some regularity and structure and

purpose, it is one of those things that we assume we are doing but never actually do. Consistent, father-led family worship is one of the best, steadiest, and most easily measurable ways to bring up children in the Lord's discipline and instruction." (Whitney 7)

And Whitney shows that Christians have long agreed on this point.

1. *Christian history shows the high value believers have consistently placed on formal family worship.*

- The first generations of Christians consistently worshiped together. Whitney explains, "At an early hour in the morning the family was assembled and a portion of Scripture was read from the Old Testament, which was followed by a hymn and a prayer ... In the evening, before retiring to rest, the family again assembled, the same form of worship was observed ... with this difference, that the service was considerably protracted beyond the period which could be conveniently allotted to it in the commencement of the day." Donald S. Whitney, *Family Worship: In the Bible, In History & In Your Home* 9 (2005).
- Martin Luther said that, even with all of his responsibilities as a professor and church leader, as a husband and father, he had the responsibility to be the worship-leading pastor *of his family*—and that his house was "actually a school and church." Whitney, 9.
- The Second London Confession of 1689, which is the classic Baptist statement of faith modeled on the Westminster Catechism, says, like the Westminster Catechism: "God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth; *as in private families daily*, and in secret each one by himself." Whitney, 10 (emphasis added).

In short, as Spurgeon put it, "I trust there are none here present, who profess to be followers of Christ who do not also practice prayer [i.e., family devotions] in their families. We may have no positive command for it, but we believe that it is so much in accord with the genius and spirit of the gospel, and that it is so commended by the example of the saints, that the neglect thereof is a strange inconsistency." (Whitney 3)

2. *What should a family teaching-worship service be like?*

So what should a family worship service be like? Spurgeon wrote that, "I agree with Matthew Henry when he says, 'They that pray in the family do well; they that pray and read the Scriptures do better; but they that *pray, and read, and sing* do best of all.' There is a completeness in that kind of family worship which is much to be desired."

There's lots you can do – ask other families for ideas. And don't feel overwhelmed: ***pick something*** then do it. You'll change what you do anyway based on your kids' age and your life circumstances. The keys are *brevity, regularity, and flexibility*. (

The dinner table ought to be a ceremony we have every day. We open it with prayer. We eat together. We speak to each other of the day, of its blessings, of its challenges, of its lessons. We laugh

together, learn together and enjoy each other. The table is a useful place for the father, if he's present, to relate life to God, to speak of His works, and His ways. When the dinner table is an event which is beautiful and memorable, it is one of the strongest rituals that will instil the love of God into a family's heart.

But what is fast replacing the dinner table is the TV tray and the coffee table. The television is the only speaker at meal times, while everyone silently munches away, glaring at the box. Parents, reclaim the dinner table. Reclaim a time for family worship.

3. A third kind of ceremony or ritual or tradition can be those you build around **significant Christian holidays**. Yes, the Christian is not *commanded* to celebrate Christmas or Good Friday or Ascension Day, but what opportunities the Christian holidays present!

Whatever your convictions about the celebration of Christmas or Easter, you should consider using those days as opportunities to build your own ceremonies in the home that will teach the truths represented by those days. Remember, God has given you the pattern in Scripture. We understand ultimate reality through symbols, and if we can taste, touch, smell, see and hear those symbols, they are all the more memorable.

In your home, what symbolic actions will honour our Saviour's Resurrection, and mark that day with significance? On Christmas, what do you do that celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus Christ? What do your ceremonies at home on Good Friday, or Passover, or Resurrection Sunday, communicate? Just another day? A day for more food? A day for self-indulgence? A day to see extended family? Or can we memorably symbolize ultimate truths on these days so that loving God is again on the doorposts of our houses and on our gates? <sup>1</sup>

4. A fourth kind of ceremony would be the kind you develop as a family **to mark special days or events that illustrate or teach God as the ultimate reality**. *Raising A Modern-Day Knight*<sup>2</sup> is a book that contains some helpful suggestions for returning ceremony into the life of a growing young man, with Christ at the centre: ceremonies for birthdays, for adolescence, for graduation, for pledges of purity, for engagement, and so forth.

Don't dismiss the whole idea of ceremony, and turn all of life into a bland grey nothingness. If God built ritual and ceremony into Old Testament Israel's life, if He continued it with New Testament believers in baptism and the Lord's Supper and New Testament worship, we have all the precedent we need for family rituals and ceremonies which inscribe the love of God on the doorposts and gates of our homes. We need these signs and symbols which teach truth vividly, powerfully, and unforgettably.

The difficulty is that meaningful ceremonies take work. It takes great effort to have a worship service with beauty and unity and meaning. It takes ongoing diligence to have family devotions that are thoughtful and regular. It takes work to plan traditions and activities associated with biblical events. Ceremonies are costly, when they're done well. But when they are memorable and beautiful, they become powerful tools for the shaping of the religious imaginations of our children.

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1 For helpful suggestions, see Noel Piper, *Treasuring God in Our Traditions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

2 Authored by Robert Lewis (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2007).