

A Neglected Shrine.

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We are living in an age of great religious activity. Never were there more organizations for the promotion of Christian work than in the present day. Never have larger assemblies convened, avowedly in the interests of the gospel. Never has more enthusiasm been displayed in all that pertains to the spread of the kingdom of Christ. Never have there been so frequent meetings for worship and Bible study. Never have more buildings been dedicated to sacred purposes. Yet, amid all these signs of earnest effort, there is one sign of ardent piety that is largely missing; amid all these excellent observances there is one goodly practice that has generally fallen into disuse; notwithstanding all the places set apart for the service of the Most High, there is an ancient shrine that has become almost entirely deserted.

The missing sign of piety is the household group gathered around the devout sire; the practice that has grown almost obsolete is that of worship in the home; the neglected shrine is what our fathers termed "the family altar." Alas! that hallowed trying place between God and man is not often visited in these degenerate days. That spot around which so many fragrant memories cluster is left to silence and solitude.

We often proudly claim to be in advance of our ancestors. We have more conveniences and comforts. Our homes are more completely and handsomely furnished; they are more brilliantly lit; they are stocked with more books and periodicals; they are not so isolated, being in many localities linked together by the telephone.

But if that best adornment of a dwelling be absent—the family mercy-seat; if that brightest illumination be withdrawn—the light that distinguishes Israel from Egypt; if that noblest piece of literature be lacking or left unread—the English Bible; if that quickest channel of communication between friends on earth and friends in heaven be unfit or disconnected—the speaking-wire of prayer, then surely we have lost more than we have gained. It will be for our profit to enquire how we stand in this respect.

In my brief paper I wish to make a few statements concerning the Scripturalness, the importance and the neglect of family worship, and in closing endeavor to answer the question—how its general restoration may be effected.

I would say, first, family worship is prescribed and exemplified in the Word of God. Both in the Old and New Testament the observance of it is enjoined and the practice of it is recorded. God's ancient people were repeatedly urged to instruct their children in the precepts of the law. They were to be taught to their sons, and their sons' sons. God, speaking through Moses, said to Israel: "These words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." There are many other similar exhortations. In the home the child was to be taught to reverence the God of his fathers, to have impressed upon his plastic mind the first principles of the faith, and to be familiarized with the story of Jehovah's mighty acts. And certainly the Jews very strictly carried out this religious discipline and education of their offspring. Children began to learn the law as early as the age of five years. As Ceikie says: "In a virtuous family no opportunity was lost—at the table, at home, or abroad, evening or morning—of instilling reverence for God's law into the minds of the family, and of teaching them its express words throughout, till they know them by heart." It is probable that this careful and systematic training among the Jews is one reason of their strong and indestructible individuality, so that among whatever races they mingle they still remain a peculiar people. They adhere steadfastly, amid all vicissitudes, to their national character and religious creed. Let us ever remember that it was in a Jewish home that the boy Jesus grew in wisdom, and stature, and favor with God and man.

And as all that was best under the law is conserved and enhanced under the gospel, we are not surprised to find the duty of piously training the young insisted on in the pages of the New Testament. So Paul says: "Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." In the apostolic days worship was not merely held in public and so-called sacred buildings, but also in the homes of disciples. The habitations of the early Christians were consecrated by religious exercises. In fact the Christian church may be said to have been born in the upper room of a private dwelling. Of the believers constituting the first church we read: "And they continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people." Of the apostles we are told: "And daily in the temple and in every house they ceased not to preach and teach Jesus Christ." And as in both these passages the word "house" is rendered in the Revised Version "at home," we have

the best precedent for family worship. Indeed, the Bible affords several illustrious examples of this household religion. The father of the faithful was fitted to become the progenitor of an unnumbered and blessed seed because in his own immediate circle he taught and practised his faith in God. The Lord said of Abraham: "I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." And we see the result of this influence in the character of Isaac,—so filially obedient, so meditative, prayerful and generally devout. The very course of the wandering patriarchs was marked by the altars which they built. Though they led a nomadic life the scenes of their brief sojourns was indicated by these monuments of piety.

How came it that Moses maintained amid the idolatry and worldliness of an Egyptian court his fear of God and his sympathy with his oppressed kindred? What led to that strange and crucial choice of his? Have we not the secret in the fact that his mother acted as nurse for Pharaoh's daughter. It has been well said that Moses would never have become the man he was had he not been nursed by his own mother. She doubtless endeavored and kept alive in his heart the sacred flame of faith. We are all familiar with the resolute stand taken by Joshua as evinced in his grand declaration: "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord," a stand which had much to do with determining the wavering people for right and truth, so that "Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua." Coming down to the later times we find that the godly character of Timothy was chiefly due to early training. The unfeigned faith which characterized him dwelt first in "his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice." From a child he knew the Holy Scriptures, which were able to make him wise unto salvation. These instances will suffice to show that both by precept and example the duty of family worship is set before us in the Word of God.

I have now to advance another statement: That family worship is closely allied with all that is best in the church, community and country. It were impossible to overrate the extent and force of its influence. We have already hinted at its effect upon Hebrew character. And among Christian nations it has played a wonderful part. When it has been most widely practised then the church has been most pure and flourishing. The home and the church act and react upon one another. When the teaching of the sanctuary is supported and supplemented by the training of the home, then the church will be freed from corruption and will wield the greatest power for good. The public proclamation of truth is rendered ineffective unless there be private indoctrination and exemplification. But when the homes of our members are tributaries to the stream that makes glad the city of our God, then shall men be attracted to its crystal waters and heaven shall be mirrored in the church below. Family worship will also have an effect upon whole districts as well as upon churches. That neighborhood where it most generally prevails will be most peaceful and law-abiding. Such a custom will be the best safeguard of morals. Parents who are wise will select such a locality as a place of residence in preference to those more advantageous in a merely worldly sense. In the end they would be gainers even temporally. Matthew Henry says: "Those that expect family blessings must make conscience of family duty." Happy and desirable is that vicinity where every house is a temple, every father a minister of the Most High, and every meal a holy feast!

Family worship likewise is undoubtedly a potent factor for good in national life. We know that the family is the corner-stone of the nation. If the nation is to stand securely the family life must be sound and true, for it is righteousness which exalteth a nation. Where the family life is pure and pious then the country will be powerful and prosperous. History teaches us this. England holds her proud place among the kingdoms of the earth because her homes have been for the most part sanctified by religion. The family Bible is truly the secret of her greatness. And her liberties have been achieved by men who were animated by the fear of God. Cromwell was made what he was by a godly home influence. His invincible Ironsides came from the households of the faithful, and they carried their religion into camp with them. And though their enemies might despise their praying they could not but respect their fighting. I think it could be shown that some of the greatest and noblest men have sprung from homes where God was honored. They grew to stalwart and worthy manhood in an atmosphere of sincere and simple piety. Time will not permit us to give illustrations of this fact, but many such can be readily found by any student of the history of Great Britain, America, Germany, Holland and some other countries where Protestant Christianity has held sway. The scene of a family grouped around the priest-like father deeply moved a great, but godless poet, and inspired one of his sublimest compositions. In classic verse Robert Burns has painted for all ages that engaging picture.

"The cheerful supper done wi' serious face,
They round the ingle, from a circle wide;
The sire turns o'er wi' patriarchal grace,
The big ha'—Bible ance his father's pride:
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,
His lyart haffets wearing thin an' bare;
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
He wales a portion with judicious care,
And let us worship God! he says, with solemn air.

They chant their artless notes in simple guise;
They tune their hearts by far the noblest aim:
Perhaps Dundee's wide warbling measures rise,
Or plaintive Martyrs, wo' thy of the name;
Or noble Elgin beats heavenward flame,
The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays:
Compared with these, Italian trills are tame;
The tickled ears no heartfelt raptures raise;
Nae unison has they with our Creator's praise.

The priest-like father reads the sacred page,
How Abram was the friend of God on high;
Or Moses bade eternal warfare wage
With Awalek's ungracious progeny;
Or how the royal Bard did groaning lie
Beneath the stroke of Heaven's avenging ire;
Or Job's pathetic plaint, and wailing cry;
Or rapt Isaiah's wild seraphic fire;
Or other holy Seers that tune the sacred lyre.

Then kneeling down to Heaven's Eternal King,
The saint, the father, and the husband prays:
Hope springs exulting on triumphant wing,
That thus they all shall meet in future days:
There ever bask in uncreated rays,
No more to sigh, or shed the bitter tear,
Together hymning their Creator's praise,
In such society, yet still more dear;
While circling time moves round in an eternal sphere.

Compare with this how poor religion's pride,
In all the pomp of method, and of art,
When men display to congregations wide
Devotion's ev'ry grace except the heart!
The Power incensed, the pageant will desert,
The pompous strain, the sacerdotal stole;
But haply, in some cottage far apart,
May hear, well pleas'd, the language of the soul;
And in His Book of Life the inmates poor enrol."

And well does Burns exclaim: "From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs."
From such scenes comes the truest grandeur of any land.

I fear my next statement is incontrovertible, viz: That family worship is in many places very generally neglected. So far as my observation and experience go, I must say that this practice is the exception rather than the rule. In the homes of many of our members it is only when the pastor makes a call that the household as a whole is assembled to hear the reading of the Scriptures and bow in unison during the offering of prayer. Indeed, I have been at the tables of professing Christians where no blessing was asked until the presence of the minister was suddenly remembered, and with somewhat of an awkward apology for the oversight, he was requested to say grace. I have not attempted to compile statistics on the matter; but I think if our membership was honestly canvassed, it would be discovered that the proportion of those who keep up the good old custom of family worship would be lamentably small. And reasons for this unsatisfactory state of things, are perhaps not far to seek. Modern life is so complex, we live in such a hurly-burly, there is such a multiplicity of engagements, that we have little time for the cultivation of piety at home. And the very number and variety of religious societies accounts to a considerable degree for an absence of family worship. We rush from one meeting to another, and thus the quiet culture of devout life rendered well-nigh impossible. Many of us have sadly to confess: "They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept." Another reason for the discontinuance of this Scriptural practice may be found in the vast amount of reading matter which is circulated in the present day. What with newspapers and magazines, secular and religious, and endless books—good, bad and indifferent, the poor old Bible is being crowded out. Ah, me! we shall not build up a very high type of manhood on the mental pabulum provided now. Our Puritan fore-fathers were fed on what Mr. Spurgeon was wont to term Bibles, and we shall never see their like again until we restore the pure Scriptural dietary to our homes.

Most surely it is anything but an encouraging sign—this neglect of family worship. Nothing else can be an adequate substitute for it, not even the Sunday School. The parent comes nearer to children than any other person can, and has most to do with moulding the life. He is acquainted with the different dispositions in his home circles, and should be the best qualified to deal with each. His responsibility for the training of his offspring is unmistakable and cannot be shifted onto other shoulders. Therefore the heads of families who refuse to discharge this duty are amenable to God, and will have to answer for their criminal negligence.

Now we come to the crux of the whole matter as we consider the question: How may we best revive the practice of family worship?

About the only sure way of reviving it would be to obtain a true revival of religion. One of the best evidences of a genuine revival is the observance of family worship, as it is an evidence at any time of the presence of real spiritual life in a community.

When holy Richard Baxter exercised his blessed ministry in the town of Kidderminster, England, it is said that a stranger going along the streets in the evening would hear the strains of Psalm-singing issuing from almost every house. The Christianity preached, fostered, and exemplified by Baxter was of such a deep, down-right and practical sort that it entered into the innermost life of his parishioners. And that is the kind we need to-day. Let us seek in all our churches for a deepening of spiritual life. A life so full and rich that it shall make us better in all the relations we sustain: better parents and children, better masters and servants, better buyers and sellers, better neighbors and citizens. A life which shall make itself manifest everywhere: in the residence, the store, the market, the workshop, or on the street. If our people only get right at the centre they will be right even to the circumference. If they only get filled with the Spirit of God they will joyfully perform all the duties devolving upon them whether those duties be private or public.

In further considering the remedy I would suggest that it might be well for pastors sometimes to preach on this subject and urge upon their congregations its importance. And when the covenant is read in our Conference meetings it would be helpful to specially