

THE COVENANTAL HOME LIFE OF



REV. MATTHEW HENRY

by

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What is by far the most beloved and widely read *Bible Commentary* ever published?¹ Without doubt, it is that of Rev. Matthew Henry (1662-1714).

This has seen many editions and impressions. As the famous Anglican scholar Rev. William Romaine pointed out at the front of the fifth edition (in his own 1761 *Recommendation to the Public*): “There is no Comment[ary] upon the Bible, either ancient or modern, in all respects equal to Mr. Henry’s.”² Remarkd the renowned Baptist Rev. Charles Haddon Spurgeon:³ “Every Minister ought to read *Matthew Henry* entirely and carefully through.”

Rev. Dr. A.R.Vidler wrote: “There is nothing like Matthew Henry’s *Commentary*; it ought always to be in print.” Professor Dr. F.F. Bruce called it: “One of the greatest theological classics of English literature.” And ‘Mr. Evangelical’ - Rev. Professor Dr. Wilbur M. Smith - called it: “The greatest devotional commentary ever written.”⁴

The Methodist, Rev. Dr. Leslie F. Church (Ph. D. & F. R. Hist. S.), in his own 1960 edition and abridgement thereof, rightly observed that “the *Commentary on the Bible* by Matthew Henry...is the outcome of personal and pastoral experience. In family worship in his father’s home [while Matthew himself was growing up in the home of his godly father the Welsh Presbyterian Rev. Philip Henry]; and later in daily prayers with his own family [attended by Matthew’s wife and children]; and in the homes of his neighbours [while Matthew visited them pastorally] - he not only studied the Scriptures but learned how best to apply them to the lives and needs of people young and old....

“The beauty of his home life...was moulded on the pattern of his father’s house..., as ‘a house of God and a gate of Heaven.’” Genesis 28:17 *cf.* John 1:51. Indeed, Matthew Henry himself “conducted family prayers in his home at the beginning and the end of the day. In the morning he expounded the Old Testament, and in the evening the New.... These expositions, amended as the result of questions and comments from his family and his neighbours, were the basis of his *Commentary*”⁵

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It is therefore appropriate to take a look at the Henry’s covenantal ancestry. Cromwell had fallen; the Stuarts had been restored; Presbyterians were being persecuted. Matthew was born in 1662, to a well known Welsh Presbyterian Minister - just after the latter had been ejected from his manse under the new and infamous *Act of Uniformity*. The infant Matthew could thus then be baptized not by his own father but solely by the local Anglican Rector (and without godparents).

Nevertheless, Matthew was still given a thoroughly Calvinistic upbringing by his godly parents - who held family worship in their home every morning and evening. So, even when only three years old, he could read the Bible both distinctly and observantly.⁶

Of that Christian rearing by his parents, Matthew later testified on his twentieth birthday - in his memorial entitled *Mercies Received*. There,⁷ Matthew thanked God “that I have been born in a place and time of Gospel light.... I had a religious education, the principles of religion instilled into me with my very milk, and from a child...taught the knowledge of God.... I was in infancy brought within the pale of the Visible Church in my Baptism....

“I have had the Scriptures - and means for understanding them - by daily expositions.... I am blessed with such parents as few have, and sisters also that I have reason to rejoice in.... All these mercies are but the earnest [or guarantee] of more, and pledges of better, in the Kingdom of Glory.... Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, the Fountain and Foundation of all my mercies. Amen, hallelujah!”

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At twenty-two, Matthew became a Law Student at Gray’s Inn in London. There he studied Littleton, Cook and Lambard.⁸ Three years later, after ordination as a Presbyterian Minister,⁹ he married a Puritan (Katherine Hardware). She died, during childbirth, from smallpox. But Matthew’s father, Rev Philip Henry, came and baptized his own surviving infant granddaughter Katherine. Explained the bereaved Matthew on that occasion: “According to the tenor of this covenant, I offer up this my child to the Great God.”¹⁰

When twenty-eight, the widower Matthew married the Puritan Mary Warburton. The following year, his daughter Elizabeth was born. Once again, Matthew’s father Rev. Philip Henry performed the Baptism. He there preached from Isaiah 43:10: “Ye are My witnesses.” Indeed, all the covenant families present at that Baptism were indeed God’s witnesses - without ‘benefit’ of godparents!

Yet Elizabeth died - and but fourteen weeks after her birth. Wrote Matthew of Elizabeth:¹¹ “I am much comforted from her Baptism. I desire to leave her in the arms of Him Who gave her to me. The will of the Lord be done! I had said, if the Lord will spare her, I will endeavour to bring her up for Him.... God is wise, and righteous, and faithful. Even this also is not only consistent with, but flowing from - covenant love.... Blessed be God for the covenant of grace with me and mine!

“I am much refreshed with Second Kings 4:26 [the words of Elisha to the great woman of Shunem whose child had just died]: ‘Is it well with thee; is it well with thy husband; is it well with thy child?’ And she said, ‘It is well!’

“When I part with so dear a child, yet have I no reason to say otherwise but that it is well with us - and with the child. For all is well that God doth!”

When Matthew was thirty-one, his daughter Mary was born. She was baptized, together with her cousin, by their grandfather Rev. Philip Henry. His sermon was from Genesis 35:5. ‘Esau asked [Jacob], ‘Who are those with thee?’ And he [Jacob] said, ‘The children which God hath graciously given thy servant!’” Philip then observed what a religious answer Jacob gave to a common question - and insisted that covenant children are the gracious gifts of a covenant-keeping God.¹²

Yet Philip did not baptize all of his grandchildren. For his son Matthew himself baptized most of his own babies. On those occasions, he preached on the Scriptural authority of Infant Baptism, explaining the advantages of the Sacrament to both those little ones and their parents.¹³ He likened Infant Baptism to taking a beneficial lease for a child while in the cradle, and putting his life into it.¹⁴

In his own *Treatise on Baptism*, Matthew Henry declared:¹⁵ ‘I cannot but take occasion to express my gratitude to God for **my** infant baptism.... It was an early admission into the visible body of Christ.... It furnished my pious parents with a good argument...for an early dedication of my own self to God in my childhood.... God has wrought...good work upon my soul.... I desire, with humble thankfulness, to acknowledge the moral influence of my infant baptism upon it.’”

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To Matthew Henry, every Christian household should practise covenantal daily family worship. He conducted it in his own home, and urged his acquaintances to do the same in theirs.

Matthew himself had ten children: Katherine, Elizabeth I, Mary I, Esther, Ann, Philip, Elizabeth II, Sarah, Theodosia, and Mary II. Only some survived infancy, but none lacked daily family worship from their conception onward. Deuteronomy 6:4-13; First Corinthians 7:14; Second Timothy 1:3-6 and 3:14-17.

Wrote Henry’s biographer J.B. Williams (F.H.A.):¹⁶ ‘His whole conduct to his offspring was marked by kindness. The advice he gave to others, he acted upon himself - ‘Do all you can to make your children love home!’.... Continual chiding and finding fault, he abhorred. ‘Remember,’ he would say [to others], ‘children are **but** children! If parents would not correct them except in a praying frame when they can ‘lift their hands without wrath’ - it would provoke neither God nor them.’” First Timothy 2:8 and Colossians 3:21.

Williams further explained that in Henry’s sermon *Christ’s Favour to Children*,¹⁷ he “placed parental obligations in a strong and affecting light - directed with happy precision in the performance of essential duties.” Henry “imparted instructions at all times suited to the young.” He “so ministered advice and encouragement to those that have their superintendence, as to indicate with equal perspicuity the soundness of his principles.... Such remarks are no less applicable - to the directions to parents contained in his *Treatise on Baptism*.”¹⁸

Matthew Henry, just like his father Philip, gave daily Christian education to his children. Remarkd Matthew:¹⁹ ‘I know you cannot give them **grace**. That is God’s gift. But **duty** is required. Children must be **nursed** for God, and our care should be that they may be **pious**.’”

Henry’s biographer, Williams, graphically described the daily “domestic **worship**” in Matthew’s home. ‘Henry reverently imitated the constancy and punctuality of his father. Like that illustrious saint [his father Philip] so often mentioned, he [Matthew] assembled his family - whatever happened, and whoever were under his roof - as early in the morning as circumstances would admit.’ In addition, he re-assembled them “in like manner, in the

evening - 'being ashamed [these are his own words] to put God off with drowsy devotions.'

'He was comprehensive; but neither tedious nor hurried. The exercise commenced - by invocation in a few words of the Ineffable Name, for aid and acceptance. He then read, in the morning, a portion of the **Old** Testament Scripture, in regular course; and in the evening, with like regularity, a portion of the **New**. Unless the chapter was short, he divided it into sections - confining himself generally to eight or ten verses, of which he gave a brief and edifying explanation.

"After the exposition, some part of a psalm was sung. Everyone had a book.... 'How the houses of the good old Protestants were perfumed with this incense daily'" (wrote Henry) "we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have told us." Psalm 78:3-6.

'Prayer succeeded singing. The whole was usually comprehended within the space of half an hour or a little more. When prayer was over, his children received his blessing - which he pronounced with great seriousness, solemnity and affection. The better to engage the attention of his family, he required from them - at the close of the exercise - an **account!**'

Henry's daily family worship was the gate of Heaven, toward which he conducted his children. That gate lay between their covenantal conception (as sealed by their Infant Baptism) and their later public profession of faith (when admitted to the Lord's Supper on reaching adolescence). First Corinthians 7:14; 10:1-4; 11:27f; 12:13f; 13:11; 14:20; 16:13.

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In addition to daily family worship in his home, Henry also held a weekly course of congregational catechism classes - for the older covenant children. That course prepared them for their admission, when adolescents, to the Lord's Supper - as a fulfilment of the covenant sealed previously at their infant baptism.²⁰

In his weekly catechizings, Henry proceeded from the Westminster Assembly's *Shorter Catechism* and its *Larger Catechism*. He grouped the answers into several other propositions. He then explained the latter; supported them with Biblical proof-texts; and supplied practical inferences.

Wrote Matthew Henry's biographer, Williams:²¹ 'Like his admired father, he encouraged young people to renew their baptismal engagements by a public confession of the Saviour.... He catechized them concerning the Lord's Supper by a form which he printed. He next appointed a day, in the week preceding the Sacrament [of the Eucharist], in which...before the Congregation a Sermon was addressed to **them** [the Catechumens]....

'The following Sabbath they were welcomed to the Redeemer's Table. Such, in his judgment (as in that of his father also) was the true **Confirmation** or transition into a state of **adult** and complete Church-Membership"²² Exodus 12:3,21,26,37,48; Proverbs 9:1f; 22:6; Luke 2:40-52; First Corinthians 3:2-8; 4:1f; 10:1-4; 11:27-29; 13:11; 14:20; 16:13; Hebrews 5:12-14; 6:1-5; 11:23-28; 13:10-17.

All of this Henry developed into a series of writings. First appeared his work *A Scripture Catechism in the Method of the Assemblies* (1702). Next he published his 1703 *Plain Catechism for Children* - to which was added *Another for the Instruction of Those Who are to be Admitted to the Lord's Supper*.

In 1704, three further works followed. These were: his *Church in the House...concerning Family Religion*; his *Communicant's Companion or Instructions and Helps for the Right Receiving of the Lord's Supper*; and his *Essay on Psalmody*.²³

In 1711 appeared his volume *The Holy Seed*, on the subject of "praying youth."²⁴ Here, Henry's 'Preface' expresses his concern for the welfare of the young - that they may be a seed to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Psalm 22:9f and 22:30. See too: Isaiah 52:15; 53:10; 54:3; and 59:21.

1713 saw the publication of Henry's writings: *Christ's Favour to Children* and *On the Catechising of Youth and Sobermindedness Recommended to the Young*. Then, after his death in 1714 at the age of but fifty-one, there appeared posthumously his work on *The Pleasantness of a Religious Life*.²⁵

As Henry's biographer Williams rightly concluded:²⁶ "His piety at home embraced the whole compass of relative religion. He was an example to believers - not only as a husband, a father and a master; but also as a son, a son-in-law, a brother, and a friend."

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In his book *The Life and Times of Matthew Henry*,²⁷ Rev Charles Chapman (M.A.) declared, during the Industrial Revolution: "The pressure of business affords but little learned leisure.... Men daily oppressed with the cares and anxieties of life...desire in their retirement or family gatherings something that will direct their thoughts at once to...the meaning of the promise of the Gospel...."

"By the exertions of all evangelical Christians, an edition of Matthew Henry's *Commentary* could be issued..., at such a low price that the humble village labourer could soon save the amount out of his earnings. Then, what with...thousands of...devoted artisans and agricultural labourers, there would be such an increased interest awakened in the Scriptures - such a diffusion of clear evangelical truth among families - as would be an impassable barrier to the propagators of error."

Matthew's daily family worship had always been his own 'gate of Heaven.' Genesis 4:26; 6:9-18f; 11:9-27f; 18:18f; 25:20-23; 26:25f; 28:3-17; 35:2-7f; John 1:51. When yet hardly middle-aged, he himself passed through that gate - and went to glory.

But such a 'gate' itself - his *Bible Commentary* based on his daily family worship - is still with us, here on Earth. By ourselves practising such daily family worship - and perhaps even using Henry's *Commentary* thereat - we too can see that gate. For thus, also our own home would become - 'a house of God, and a gate of Heaven!'

Endnotes

- 1) L.F. Church (ed): *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (abridged), Marshall Morgan & Scott, Basingstoke, 1960, inside front dustcover.
- 2) See p. viii of "Preface to the Historical Books" - in Henry's *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Vol. I, Marshall Brothers. London, n.d.
- 3) Cited in *Publisher's Note* of L.F. Church's *op cit.*, p. v.
- 4) See front and back outside dustcovers of L.F. Church's *op cit.*
- 5) L.F. Church: *op. cit.* (Foreword), pp. vii-viii.
- 6) See J.B. Williams: *Memoirs of the Life, Character and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry*; in Henry's *Commentary* I:3f.
- 7) *lb.*, pp. 9f.
- 8) *lb.*, pp. 10-13f.
- 9) *lb.*, pp. 17-27.
- 10) *lb.*, pp. 29f.
- 11) *lb.*, p. 31.
- 12) *Idem.*
- 13) *lb.*, p 62.
- 14) M Henry: *The Life of Philip Henry by his Son the Rev. Matthew Henry*, 1825 ed., p. 85.
- 15) 1783 ed., p. 118.
- 16) *Op. cit.*, p. 79.
- 17) M. Henry: *Miscellaneous Works*, 1726, p. 702.
- 18) See the duod. 1783 ed., p. 218.
- 19) Original manuscript - see Williams's *op. cit.*. p. 80.
- 20) See L.F. Church's *op. cit.*, p. viii.
- 21) *Op. cit.*, p. 63.
- 22) M. Henry's *Life of Philip Henry*, p. 196.
- 23) Williams's *op. cit.*, pp. 63 & 106.
- 24) *lb.*, p. 109.
- 25) See p. vii of Henry's "Preface to the Historical Books" in Vol. I of the Marshall Brothers' edition of his *Commentary on the Holy Bible*.
- 26) *Op. cit.*, p 81.
- 27) Cited in J. Stoughton's *Introductory Essay* (p. x) to Vol. I of the undated Marshall Brothers' edition of Henry's *Commentary on the Holy Bible*.