



## Children worshipping God

I remember sitting in church, still relatively new to Reformed theology, my mind full of the typical worries of mothers, when our pastor grabbed my attention with an interesting quotation.

*“The key to your own and your family’s spiritual health is remarkably simple. Though there is considerable hype to the contrary, it involves no pilgrimages to sacred places, it requires no week-long or weekend retreats, seminars or special programs. It depends on no special techniques or novel methodologies. You don’t have to spend yet another night out. You won’t need to add one more meeting to an already frantic schedule. The key is to be found in regular, ordinary, weekly worship services of the church. It is not a glamorous key, but it is the key nonetheless.”*

(Terry Johnson, *The Family Worship Book*)

I was ready for simplicity, tired of trying new methods and gimmicks to help my children to know and love God. But then the pastor provided a much more compelling motivation. If the solution seemed too simple or unreasonable, we needed to remember that, as for everything else in our theology, we must begin with God’s revelation, not our own reasoning.

### **Why together?**

What is God’s revelation in regards to children in the worship service? Is there a scriptural mandate to this practice? Some quote Ezra 10:1; Deuteronomy 31:12-13; Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians 3:20 as examples that children were present in both Old and New Testament congregations. The Reformed tradition has generally followed suit.

Others, however, quote Nehemiah 8:2-3, where the assembly included *“both men and women and all who could understand what they heard”* (ESV), or Exodus 19:9b–11, where God tells Moses to gather all the people *“except the children,”* and see them as indications that children should be ushered off to a “children’s church.”

Since the debate on the application of these Scripture references could go on indefinitely, it seems more useful to approach the subject from a different angle — what is public worship, according to God’s revelation, and who are we and our children when we gather to worship?

If we see worship as a time when we get together as Christians to praise God and learn more about Him, or even, as some writer put it, as something done “first and foremost for His benefit and not ours”, then it makes perfect sense to take our children out of the worship service to a place where they can be instructed and learn to praise Him using methods and materials especially developed for their age, while parents can really “give their all” to God.

But if a worship service is a time when God comes down to meet with His people, imparting His grace through His appointed means as they are administered by His formally appointed officers, then it’s absolutely irreplaceable, and His call to worship extends to both us and our children as members of the covenant community.

The Heidelberg Catechism also raises an important issue: *“Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, from where comes this faith?”* (Q 65).

The answer: *“The Holy Spirit works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.*”

If it's through the preached gospel that the Holy Spirit brings sinners to faith, regardless of their age (Romans 10:14-17) and continues to sanctify the believer (John 17:17), do we want our children to miss that preaching? I am a Sunday school teacher and, if my instruction took the place of the weekly service, I would be terrified.

But what if we don't take our children with us to public worship? How bad can a “children's church,” held during the public service, be for our children? For some, the dangers are serious and should at least be considered before making a decision. According to Dr. R. Scott Clark, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary in California (WSC), *“the act of sending children out of the stated service for instruction sends a more powerful message than the instruction is likely to send. It sends the message to the children that they are not really members of the covenant community. It sends the message that the gathering for public worship may be marginalized if something else is deemed more important. It sends the message that it's acceptable to arrange one's priorities during the week so as to require this ad hoc solution, that church is something we do but not something we are.”*

(*The Heidelberg*, March 31, 2010)

Another warning comes from Dr. Michael S. Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at WSC.

*“Maybe the greatest concern in this milieu that I have is that we're losing a sense of the catholicity of the church. We're carving the church into niche markets and setting generation against generation, and socio-economic group against socio-economic group. As such, we are increasingly unchurching the church. In an age when the faith of young Christians is going to be tested more than ever before, they are the least equipped to meet those challenges because they have not been integrated very well into the life of the living church. They have been in children's church, youth group, then in a campus ministry, and they never had to join a church. And we wonder why according to one study eighty percent of those raised in evangelical churches leave the church, they don't join a church, they don't even go to church by the time they are sophomores in college. Well, you have to ask the question: are they really leaving the church? Did they ever belong to it? How many Sundays did they actually spend with the communion of saints in public prayer, public reading of Scripture, public preaching, partaking of the sacraments — did they ever meet with an elder or pastor? If these things are not a part of the normal experiences of young people, they're not really connected to the church.”*

(Ligonier Ministries interview, December 4, 2009)

In his book, *Treasuring God in Our Traditions*, co-authored with his wife Noel, John Piper shares the same feelings,

*“It will probably be harder to acclimate a ten or twelve-year-old to a worship service than a five or six-year old. The cement is much less wet, and vast possibilities of shaping the impulses of the heart are gone.”*

Children who are kept away from public worship will likely miss not only the sense of belonging to a covenant community, but also, as John Piper puts it, *“a sense of solemnity and awe that children should experience in the presence of God. This is not likely to happen in children's church. Is there such a thing as children's thunder or children's lightning or the crushing of the sea ‘for children’?”*

## **Everyone's workload**

God has been very good to me in this as in everything else. I came to the Reformed faith from an evangelical church when most of my children were still young and pliable, and they made it very easy for me. As I was wondering if they could ever be able to sit in a pew during the service, when

they had been accustomed to attending separate groups, my son Jonathan (seven years old at that time) told me that he really liked the new church. When I asked him why, he said that he was learning much, while in the other groups they kept repeating the same Bible stories he had heard for years. He was telling me, in his own words, that he was tired of simplistic and condescending instruction.

Also, Reformed theology made the transition much easier, since I was not trying to raise perfect kids anymore, and I believed that no one was expecting me to do so. Being in a church with a common understanding of God's covenant making us one people, I also never had any problem finding someone to sit with my children if needed, and now at times other young children sit with us.

Still, training children to worship with reverence and awe and to increase in their understanding of the liturgy and the sermons is always — as any other aspect of child-training — work, which can often be frustrating. As I was browsing the web to find some material for this article, I read this touching plea from a mother of young children. *“I was raised in a conservative home-school movement that taught that kids should behave well enough to be in the service. Well, once my kids could move and make noise, I realized that I was spending all of the service focused on discipline and worrying if they were being bothersome to others, rather than actually hearing the sermon! Then it struck me, ‘How can this be God’s best?’”*

Any parent can understand this feeling. Lisa, mother of four young children (seven-year-old triplets and a nine-year-old) at Christ United Reformed Church in Santee, California, probably understands it more than most. Even two laps are not large enough to hold four wiggling children, especially when they all decided to make demands at the same time.

*“As childless couples, we may be able to pull off an appearance of being ‘put together’ as we show up to church in time for a few friendly ‘hellos’ and we slide into our pew before the music begins to play, observing the silence that this meditation time requires,” she explained. “Even with one child, not to mention four at the same time, you kiss those days goodbye and replace them with the very obvious fact that you are not ‘put together’ anymore. With small children, we find, more often than not, that we’re happy when we barely slide through the sanctuary door before the elders file in, all the while firmly telling four bustling, noisy little ones, ‘Shhh, we are in worship!’”*

*“Then, we squeeze into the last three remaining seats in the sanctuary for our family of six with all four children complaining much too audibly that they are squished, or one of them yelling out to me that I promised that this week he or she could sit next to Mommy,” she continued. “Then the service begins, and before we can even sing the last note of the first hymn, one, two, three, or possibly all four suddenly have an extremely urgent need to go to the bathroom.”*

The only thing that keeps you through those difficult years is, according to Lisa, a proper motivation. *“We have believed in having our children with us in worship — as opposed to nursery during infancy or ‘children’s church/youth group’ during childhood and teenage years — since the beginning of our marriage. Our decision was based on theological convictions that have helped us to stay the course even when practical matters could have set us adrift. Our belief that the covenantal framework of God’s Word, His covenantal relationship to us, and, consequently, our covenantal relationship to each other as church members, from our baptisms until our deaths, compels us to have our children with us in worship while at the same time making it possible to do so.”*

This motivation is particularly vital for parents who are new to the Reformed faith and try to get their children used to a worship service that is not aiming at entertaining.

*“Your children may hate it, complain that it is ‘boring,’ and discourage you continuously,” said Rev. Michael Brown, Pastor of Christ URC in Santee, California. “Explain it to them again,*

*remind them of the fifth commandment, pray for them, love them, and continue to bring them anyway."*

*"The practical considerations have been many," Lisa continued, "and have required a lot of planning and foresight where possible, but also a great deal of creativity and flexibility as life with children is full of the unexpected. I had to find the best way to take a child out for 'discipline' without distracting other congregants and without having to leave the other three unattended if my husband was not with us that Sunday," Lisa said. "Most of the difficulties, however, can be overcome with the wisdom, resources and help of the rest of the covenant community and some planning."*

Lisa is thankful that several young singles in the congregation have cheerfully agreed to help by keeping one child with them while she and her husband trained the others. Alex Garleb, a graduate from Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California, relished the experience.

*"Not only do I not see them as an annoyance," he said, "but I feel absolutely honored and privileged as I get to see them learn and interact in worship. One of the main significances of what Christ has accomplished is our unity. Our sinful nature in Adam causes us to be autonomous and individual. It's very important that the whole body worships together, and that we are able to put up with noisy children."*

Sadly, not every church shares the same vision. Lisa remembers visiting churches where the pastors actually discouraged the practice of having children in the main worship service. Brad, a father of four, has this problem in his church. *"We get the dirty looks from different people with no offer for assistance and no defense from the pastor on the importance of having children in the service,"* he said.

Brad feels that, even if a church chooses to have a separate "service" for the children during public worship, they should respect families who believe that children should be included, extending help and encouragement when needed instead of seeing them as a nuisance.

Jonathan and Hillary Taylor have experienced a "mixed" situation where the church they attended offered "children's church" while they and a couple of other families choose to keep their children with them. *"We came to this decision when our theological understanding of the service matured, and we realized that it should be seen as a whole and not as a 'worship time' when everyone participates, and a 'sermon time' when children should be instructed separately,"* Jonathan explained. Thankfully, the Taylors were not the only family sharing these convictions, and the pastor and the rest of the congregation never opposed their choice.

Soon, however, the Taylors found at Christ URC a whole church family committed to worshipping together regardless of age. *"It has been a tremendous encouragement for us to worship along with other families who share our views on worshiping as a family,"* said Hillary. *"Just seeing other families going through the same experience as we did made it easier. We really appreciate that our pastor takes the time to address the children in the pews, as well as the adults of all ages and situations, during the sermon. We have made frequent use of the children's note section through the years. And now that our kids have outgrown using them for notes during the service, we still find quite useful the questions included as at-home discussion."*

## **Over their heads?**

Some don't see the use of keeping young children in a family pew if they don't seem to understand what is happening around them. For us who live in a fragmented culture, with an emphasis on immediate results and emotional responses, keeping a child for one hour in an environment that seems alien to his or her common experience may appear as a waste of time.

John Piper gives an interesting comparison. *"To learn a new language you can go step by step from alphabet to vocabulary to grammar to syntax,"* he explains in his book. *"Or you can take a course where you dive in over your head and all you hear is the language you don't*

*know. Most language teachers would agree that the latter is by far the most efficient. Sunday worship service is not useless to children because much of it goes over their heads. They can and will grow into this new language faster than we think — if positive and happy attitudes are fostered by the parents.”*

Many parents who have raised their children in public worship agree. *“Even though my son does not understand the content he does understand the context,”* said Grace Bower, a member at Escondido United Reformed Church. Grace has raised four children. Her three daughters have all grown up and left home, while her seventeen-year-old son, John, is still with her. He has Down syndrome.

Besides the context of reverence and awe and of covenantal unity, children instinctively understand their parents’ responses and motivations. *“The first thing they should come to understand is the importance of worship to Mommy and Daddy,”* Rev. Brown explained. *“Do they witness your joy and enthusiasm about coming to worship? Do their little eyes see the value you place on receiving from the Lord in Word and sacrament? Do you make an effort for them to understand that being called to worship weekly is not only God’s requirement of his people, but also our joyful privilege? Do you seek to make it a joy for them as well? It is important that we help our children understand (as inconceivable as it may seem to them!) that corporate worship is the highlight of every Christian’s week.”*

In his book, Terry Johnson gives more examples of what our children see in us. *“They will sit by you Sunday after Sunday watching you as you publicly humble yourself before God, publicly submit to His word. Among their earliest and warmest memories will be those of holding their parent’s hands during church, sitting close by their sides, following along in the hymnal, placing money in the offering plate, bowing their heads in prayer. Do not underestimate the cumulative effect of this witness upon your covenant children. No doubt it is considerable, even incalculable.”*

In the meantime, children can be trained to understand the different parts of our liturgy as a dialogue between God and us, to memorize the Apostle’s Creed, Doxology, and Lord’s Prayer so they can recite them with everyone else, and to capture at least a few points from the sermon.

*“When the kids were young, they would draw what they heard from the pulpit,”* said Grace, *“and give the pictures to our pastor at the time. As they got older, the girls would write words they heard (phonetically), until they could take sermon notes. I continued to draw pictures for John until he indicated that he wanted to sit next to my husband Gary instead. Now Gary helps John to understand the sermon by asking him catechism questions related to the part of the sermon that is being preached and requiring a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. John gets a lot out of church now.”*

There are many other practical ways to help the children to participate actively during worship. One Sunday school teacher at our church used to ask the children to write down the reference for the Scriptures used in the reading of the Law or the proclamation of the gospel, which were read again in their classroom, and most teachers made it a habit to review with their class the three points of the sermon.

Children are also motivated to pay more attention to the sermon if they know that the family will discuss it later, on the drive home from church, during Sunday’s lunch or as part of family worship. Some pastors encourage this practice by adding an insert to the weekly bulletin with sermon-related questions to the children, and by posting online the Scriptural texts and songs that will be used in the next worship times.

## **The results**

If just reading about all the work involved in training our children to participate in worship has made you tired, remember that the wiggly years are very short and will soon be forgotten. While the correction and instruction will continue, it will get easier and more rewarding.

*“The benefits are numerous for both children and parents, in comparison to the difficulties, and are worth the pain, embarrassment and frustration,” Lisa said. “The embarrassment of chronic lateness, public outbursts, clenched teeth, and children who give the impression that their parents have never taught them proper behavior turns from humiliation to the blessed fruit of the Spirit called humility when, during the service, you hear a faint little voice next to you pray the Lord’s prayer along with the congregation, or the booming voice of your little lad recite the Apostle’s Creed along with the family of God down through the ages. It is remarkably breathtaking to watch your child tell a man in the congregation that they are glad that God has made him feel better from his cancer, or another man that they are happy to see that God has kept him safe while he is in the war.”*

Keeping the children in public worship is not a magic formula that guarantees perfect young worshippers. Some Sundays, my children write the best notes I have ever read, tell me how much they have enjoyed the message by a visiting pastor, or beam as they sing favorite songs. When, a few years ago, Christmas fell on a Sunday, they surprised me by telling their relatives without any hesitation that they wanted to wait until after church to open their presents. Other Sundays, they fall asleep during prayer (yes, even teenagers), engage in personal conversations, or fill the bulletin’s page with intricate doodles.

It’s then that I remember my own unseen Pindaric flights of the mind, and God’s faithfulness in spite of our weakness. I correct them and then continue to plod along with them on this pilgrim’s way, feeding more eagerly than ever at God’s feast of grace.

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