



## Practical Guidelines for Ministry to Children in the Church

Let us consider how the church should minister to children in our midst. We will not focus upon Christian parenting so much as the church's ministry, although that ministry has many implications for Christian parents, since they play a unique role in their children's lives as their first evangelists, teachers, and guides. I will attempt to be brief rather than comprehensive in these guidelines.

### Include the Children

Children should attend public worship with their parents to experience the corporate life of the body of Christ. They should learn how to worship by watching others worship. Don't discourage mothers from bringing young children into worship (Luke 18:15-16). The prophet Joel included "*the children, and those that suck the breasts*" in the call to sacred assembly (Joel 2:16). Encourage families to bring their children to worship. You might reserve a section in the back or in the balcony for families with very young children. If they need an early exit, this can be done without distracting or disturbing other worshippers.

The Scriptures teach us to view the assemblies of the church as gatherings of the household of faith. God's children are called to be brothers to each other. When Moses commanded that the law be read publicly every seven years, he said, "*Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law*" (Deut. 31:12). When the Israelites celebrated the feasts of the Lord, the law required them to come to the sanctuary as "*households,*" including sons and daughters and even servants (Deut. 12:7, 12).<sup>1</sup>

Children were also present in the synagogues where Christ taught (Matt. 18:2; 19:13-15). Paul assumed that children would be present when his letters were read in the churches, and he even addressed the children directly (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20). Jeremy Walker writes, "*The constant presumption of Scripture is the children were present in the worship of the people of God.*"<sup>2</sup> Don't separate children, teenagers, and adults into different worship compartments; bring them together as members of one family, and encourage them to sit together as families so that parents can make good use of the situation to train their children in godliness.

Including the children will influence how ministers of the Word prepare for public worship. When you offer public prayer in the worship service, include the children, pray specifically for children and young people. Intercede for God to grant them Spirit-worked submission to their parents, regeneration, faith, repentance, and spiritual growth. If a child is sick, pray for him by name. Encourage them to sing by making frequent use of the psalters the children already know and love – and encourage parents, in teaching the children at home, to give priority to the psalters used in the worship of the church.

In preaching, labor to speak with plainness and simplicity, but also with color and vitality, in the way of a good storyteller, to interest even your youngest hearers in the sermon. If it is necessary to speak "over their heads," stop periodically to address the children directly, giving them explanations or applications at the level of their own understanding. Nothing is more off-putting than to have a preacher tag a statement with "Boys and girls," and then go on to say things that no boy or girl could understand or even care about. Likewise, with regard to the length of the service,

think of the children, and take care not to prolong sermons or prayers to the point that they cease to edify and only become a trial to be endured.

## **Train the Parents**

Ephesians 4:11-12 says the glorified Christ gives pastors and teachers to His church to equip its members. Verse 16 envisions the church as a body in which every member performs its God-designed function. Since the function of parents is to nurture their children in the Lord, the ministry of the church must equip them to do so. How should the church train them?

- Train parents *to lead as prophets, priests, and kings*. Teach parents how, by faith in Christ, we share in Christ's anointing by the Spirit and, in a limited way, are images of His offices and bearers of His authority.<sup>3</sup> Train parents to be prophetic teachers of truth to their children. Call them to be priests who lift up intercessions for their families and lay down themselves as loving sacrifices. Remind them of their authority as servant-kings to defend their families from ungodly influences and to discipline them under the rule of Christ.
- Train parents *to bring their children to Christ*. Just as parents brought their little ones to Jesus in Mark 10:13, we must continually bring our children to Christ. Doing so requires that we believe our children need more than polite behavior and an outward form of godliness – they need Christ or they are lost forever! Bringing children to Christ also requires us to understand that conversion is not the mere recitation of a prayer. God must give every sinner a new heart so that he may know Him, love Him, and walk with Him (John 6:27-29).
- Train parents *to conduct family worship*. In one way, family worship is a child's daily training for public worship. In another, something special and unique happens between fathers and mothers and sons and daughters when they open their Bibles and pray together. For how to conduct family worship, you might want to obtain James W. Alexander's *Thoughts on Family Worship*, Matthew Henry's *Family Religion*, and my *Family Worship*.<sup>4</sup>
- Train parents *to lead their families during public worship*. When parents are in the pews, they are both worshippers toward God and leaders to their children. Parents need to explain to their kids the importance of sitting together as a family. One mother said to her sons, "*It is much harder to pay attention to God when you want to pay attention to your friend. You will have time later to be with your friend; right now Jesus wants all of your attention because he has something to say to us.*"<sup>5</sup> Make public worship a rich family time. Children should be taught that worship is not playtime. Children should not be allowed to turn the pew into a race track for a Hot Wheel, a library for reading secular books, or a nursery to play with toys. Teach your children, as God says, to "*be still and know that I am God.*" If children cannot be quiet in church, remove them discreetly, discipline them, and then return them to the service. Give them a pen and paper to take sermon notes. Help the early-elementary age children to copy key words or sentences from your own notes. To encourage attentive listening, discuss sermons afterwards. Ask your children questions and listen to their responses. Knowing they will be questioned later will encourage your children to listen better now.<sup>6</sup> Talk to your children before going to services and explain your expectations. To pay attention, they must sit straight and look at the minister or the page of the songbook or Bible to which the minister is referring. Talk to them in a quiet whisper during the worship service if they need further exhortations. Encourage them to be respectful and considerate of other people sitting nearby. Leading children in public worship is more than a matter of their outward behavior, however. Worship is about meeting with God! Build a sense of anticipation by praying together on Saturday night for God to visit His people through His means of grace. Talk to your children about the wonderful privilege that through Christ we are entering into God's glorious, holy presence. Teach them to view worship as entering into the house and presence of God to appear before His throne of grace.
- Train parents *to cultivate sober-mindedness in their families*. Titus 2:4 and 6 says we are to cultivate sober-mindedness. To be sober-minded is to be steady, like a ship with its anchor deep in the ocean floor, so that tides and currents cannot drag the ship to destruction. Cultivate

this by talking to your children at an early age about what is in their heart. Talk to them of God, Christ, sin, the devil, heaven, and hell as awesome realities. Encourage self-discipline by limiting their use of various forms of media. Train them in personal and family devotions. Let them have times to play, but also engage them in serious tasks where you labor together for an important cause. Beware of letting them view life as an amusement park that exists for their entertainment; rather, give them something worth living and dying for.

- Train parents to teach their children how *to build a sound, biblical library of great books*. Many families have vast collections of toys, clothing, DVDs, and music. But how many parents invest in solid Christian books for their children? Fill your shelves with good reading material. Some of the same publishing houses that produced Puritan writings like Cumberland Valley or Christian Focus Publications or Reformation Heritage Books also sell high quality children's books. Read them. Give them to your children to read. Take time to enjoy these books by reading them aloud as a family. As your children get older, introduce them to modern renderings of the Puritans, *such as Living by God's Promises or Stop Loving the World*, and then the easier Puritans such as Thomas Watson or John Flavel. If you want to know why we are experiencing a resurgence of Reformed theology and piety, one reason is the republishing and renewed reading of old Reformed and Puritan books. Do you want your children to share in this blessing?
- Train parents *to teach their children to pray*. John Calvin (1509-1564) considered prayer as a holy and intimate conversation with God, our heavenly Father.<sup>7</sup> Calvin said we should cast our *"desires, sighs, anxieties, fears, hopes, and joys into the lap of God."*<sup>8</sup> We are *"permitted to pour into God's bosom the difficulties which torment us, in order that he may loosen the knots which we cannot untie."*<sup>9</sup> Therefore, an excellent way to train a child to pray is by putting them in Daddy's lap. Begin when the child is about three years old, gently setting him in your lap during family worship, whispering a few words at a time, and having him repeat those after you. Walk him through a very simple version of ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. This helps children to avoid getting stuck in supplication, which is natural, given their selfishness and immaturity. When a child is four, tell him to try a few sentences on his own. If he gets stuck, he can give Daddy a poke so that you can return to whispering and repeating. By about age seven, a child should be able to pray on his own. Children naturally view their fathers as an image of God, so it is beautiful to associate prayer with sitting on Daddy's lap.
- Finally, remind parents that the teaching and training of their children begins with and depends upon *their own example* as children of God, followers of Christ, and members of His church. "Do as I say, but not as I do," is no part of the law of Christ for His disciples.

Pastors and elders, if you want to reach the children in the church, train the parents. Parents who conscientiously implement spiritual training of their children are usually those who experience God's blessing of rearing stalwart sons and daughters for the church of Jesus Christ. Proverbs 22:6 then proves to be the norm, not the exception: *"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."*

## **Teach the Children**

Jesus said in Matthew 19:14, *"Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."* We bring our children to Christ by presenting them for baptism and by bringing them to public worship; but we must also teach them the truths of the Christian faith, bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In hearing the words of Scripture, little lambs of the flock hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, who thereby calls them by name to follow Him (John 10:3).

Our children should be catechized. The Heidelberg Catechism presents biblical truth with warm spirituality; the Westminster Shorter Catechism and Larger Catechism offer rich biblical teaching in brilliantly condensed form. With such great resources at our disposal, it is a shame that many evangelical Christians fear that the word *catechism* implies Roman Catholicism. What a joy it is for

many Christians today to rediscover the beauty of Reformed catechisms! The question-and-answer format is ideally suited for children.

As G. I. Williamson writes, a catechism is like a map for a road trip. Someone might say, “*Why bother with a map? Why not just start driving to find where things are?*” The answer, of course, is that you’ll likely waste a lot of time speculating how far you have to drive to places or what route to take, and perhaps get lost. Other people carefully study roads and maps. No map is perfect, but they are generally accurate. So it is with catechisms. The Bible contains the riches of Christ. It is clear but also very deep. While we must read our Bibles, it is wise to use the maps others have provided to guide us through Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

Make sure that your catechism teachers are well-trained members of the church, preferably officebearers who uphold solid, confessional Reformed teaching with hearts aflame with the fear and love of God. Children under ten years old should memorize answers to questions, while children over ten years old should be pressed to explain what they have been learning. Use a good curriculum, such as that produced by Great Commission Publications,<sup>11</sup> or the *Bible Doctrine* workbooks written by James W. Beeke, or G. I. Williamson’s study guides to the Westminster and Heidelberg Catechisms.

Catechism in the church should be supplemented by Christian education, whether at a Christian day school or by godly homeschooling. Never underestimate the impact of school teachers and textbooks on your children. Your child’s education is not just about his future career in the world; a Christian education can have a profound influence on whether your sons and daughters persevere as active members of a biblically faithful church when they grow up.

### **Involve the children**

Involve the children in the whole life of the church. Many Christian parents worship as a family on the Lord’s Day, but do not bring their children to other church meetings during the week. Of course, some meetings would not be appropriate for children, but consider the prayer meeting. Corporate prayer is the lifeline of the church; in Acts, the members of the church devoted themselves to prayer meetings.<sup>12</sup> They were serious about the calling of the church to be “an house of prayer” (Isa. 56:7). Shall we exclude our children from this most essential dimension of our church’s life? Bring your children to prayer meetings.

Bring the children to other ministry opportunities, too. Note the talents and interests of the children and teach them to use those gifts while they are young. Recruit children to stuff envelopes for mailings. Ask them to make cards for the sick or for residents of nursing homes. Take them on visits to shut-ins. One minister I know has several children who are gifted singers. He and his wife and family often visit nursing homes and move from room to room to sing to their church folk and other residents. The people love it. Put their gifts to work! Young men and women who can sing should glorify God in sacred concerts. Girls can join their mothers in making blankets for the poor or in cooking meals for the sick. Boys can help their fathers rake leaves or shovel snow for elderly people. Bring them with you when you visit a mission or work in a church nursery. Children will learn much about ministry by doing it with their parents. As soon as your children are old enough, involve them in one or more ministries in the church.

### **Talk to the children**

Don’t just ignore children as you walk through your church building. Greet them. The Bible commands us to greet one another with warmth and brotherly affection.<sup>13</sup> Would you ignore your nephews and nieces or grandchildren at a family reunion? The assembling of the church is a sacred family reunion. People who stand at the door greeting people as they come in should be trained to welcome children with the same kind of warmth. We should all greet the children around us. Stoop down to their level and look them in the eye. Learn their names. Ask them what they are learning in school or what they did this week.

Try to put in a good word for the Lord when you talk to children. Lift up Christ. Let them see your joy in serving the Savior. Commend them for carrying their Bible. Remind them it is the best of books for it tells us about the Lord Jesus. Talk to them about the sermon. Parents will appreciate this as well. Here's a short e-mail I received from a mother a few weeks ago:

*Pastor, I just wanted to tell you I think our son got a kick out of your questions to him and his friend about the sermon last Sunday. He was quite proud that he knew all the answers (at least he said he did). Thank you for questioning them. I think it's a good thing to do. Thanks for your truly pastoral spirit and attitude!*

Let the children of the church see your joy in knowing and serving this wonderful Savior.

## **Love the children**

To sum it up, God calls us to love children in the church. Children are very sensitive to emotions and attitudes. Don't be sour or stiff with them. Let your heart be warm and your face aglow for them. We have an elder in our church who makes it a point to speak with young children after every service. He gets down on their level, asks them what they learned from the sermon, helps them understand it better, and then gives them a piece of candy. Love permeates all that he says and does. No wonder the children love him!

Christ loves children! So should we. Why not befriend a teenager in your church and shower him with Christ-like love? It can be very rewarding. Take a young man in your church out to lunch every other month. Soon he will open up to you with his most profound fears and deepest questions, and will ask your advice on all kinds of important matters. What a joy it is when you can speak plainly with him about areas of danger and temptation. Soon he will be asking you questions like these: "How can I get through college without falling into temptation?" and "What do you think are the most important qualities to look for in a future wife?" You will love this young man and enjoy your meetings immensely.

Pastors, loving pastoral care is particularly important for you to show to children, teens, and college-age youth. You need to do more than preach to the rising generation and teach them one catechism lesson per week. Get close to them. Ask them questions. Show them you care. Challenge them to godly living in a positive way both from the pulpit and in private. Curb the tendency to be negative about young people in your preaching and private conversations.

Elders, you have a special calling to love the baptized members of God's flock. If you love them habitually as they grow up, when the time comes that they may not be walking worthy of their baptism, you will be able to exercise effective loving discipline in their lives even when they have not yet made public profession of faith. We must love our young people so much that we dare not allow their status as non-communicant members to exempt them from the loving admonition of the church.

Parents and church members, we all need to build close relationships with our children so that when we talk, they will listen, and so that when they talk, we will be sure to listen carefully. Be more ready to hear than to speak or act, especially if anger is present (James 1:19-20). Hold children accountable for their conduct in the house of God in a fair, balanced, and loving way. We must love them without catering to them; but neither do we want to crush the life out of them, turning the experience of worship into an endless succession of rebukes and exactions for every offense.

Church officers, members, and parents all need to work together and stand together in our work with children and youth. We must watch out for their bodies and their souls. We must be diligent to protect our children from spiritual abuse, seeking to inculcate in their minds hatred against sin, love for Christ, and a longing to live wholly and solely for God and His glory.

## **Conclusion: Don't Give Up on the Children!**

Sometimes Christian parents become discouraged about their children. You glance across the pew during the service and perhaps one of your children is asleep. Perhaps another is looking at everyone except the pastor. Perhaps one has escaped and is heading down the aisle! It's easy to start asking, "What am I doing wrong?"

Don't give up. Galatians 6:9 says, "*Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*" Keep waiting on the Lord and persevere in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Be faithful in doing your duty and keep trusting the Lord. Bringing our children to Christ, bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and seeking their conversion to eternal life are long-term endeavors of faith and the obedience of faith. Hebrews 10:38-39 says, "*Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.*"

Persevere in prayer for the children in the church. Remember when you were a child; did not God hear the prayers of your parents and your pastors for your spiritual well-being? He can do the same for your children. When teens go through troubles, intercede for them in prayer with the persistence of the importunate widow with the unjust judge. God will hear your prayers. Remind God of His promises to us. Our Lord Jesus spoke of all our conversions when He said in Matthew 19:26, "*With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.*"

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Josh. 8:35; 2 Chron. 20:13; Joel 2:16.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Walker, "Attendance of Children in Public Worship Services," *Banner of Truth* ([http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?142](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?142)), accessed February 15, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:17; Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15-16; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9; 4:11; 1 John 2:27; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism (LD 12, Q. 32).

<sup>4</sup> James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Family Worship* (1847; repr., Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1998); Matthew Henry, *Family Religion: Principles for Raising a Godly Family* (repr., Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus Publications, 2008); Joel R. Beeke, *Family Worship* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Robbie Castleman, *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2002), 56.

<sup>6</sup> For more on listening to sermons, see Joel R. Beeke, *The Family at Church: Listening to Sermons and Attending Prayer Meetings* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948-50), on Psalm 10:13.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Commentary* on Psalm 89:38-39.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary* on Genesis 18:25

<sup>10</sup> G. I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1993), 2.

<sup>11</sup> A ministry of the PCA and OPC ([www.gcp.org](http://www.gcp.org)).

<sup>12</sup> Acts. 1:14, 24; 2:42; 3:1; 4:23-31; 12:5, 12; 13:1-4; 14:23; 16:16, 25; 20:36; 21:5.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14