



What Do You Do with Children in Worship? *Historical and Scientific Perspectives*

By Phil Huebner

Why? It's a question so beautiful yet so horrifying. Parents know. It can be equal parts inquisitive and annoying. It can cause a parent joy or frustration. "Why is the sky blue? Why do cows have spots but zebras have stripes? Why does it take so long to get to grandma's? Why did that man just make a hand gesture at your driving?" Oh, to be a child again with such an inquisitive mind!

For all the times that parents hear an equally dear and dreaded question, God forbid they ever stifle curious minds when it comes to Christ and his kingdom! Children want to know so much about Jesus. "Why was he so loving? Why did he have to die? Why did he ascend into heaven?" They want to know so much about worship, too! "Why do we say 'Amen' so often? Why does the pastor make the cross with his fingers? Why did he say that you're eating his body and drinking his blood?" How precious and how special that little children are asking giant questions!

God's design is for children to be curious and for parents to be the ideal teachers. In the previous article we noted how Scripture testifies that it is God's will for parents to train children in "the way that they should go." Before exploring this further, consider support from church history and science.

History on Children in Worship

Last time we considered key principles from Scripture. To summarize:

- Worship is for all people of all ages.
- Parents have primary responsibility for training their children in the faith.
- Parents in Scripture taught their children to worship.

- Parents in Scripture brought their children to public worship events—no matter how great, grand, or gruesome.
- Children were expected to be present at worship. (Paul addressed them in his epistles.)

Children joining their parents for worship is not a fad or phase of the past. This has always been the case. We can go back to Abraham and God's encouragement to train his children in the ways of the Lord (Genesis 18), or to Moses and his encouragement to teach children anywhere and everywhere the commands of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6 et al.). Claire R. Matthew McGinnis notes in an essay on children that expression of the Jewish faith involved much interaction with children in worship.¹

McGinnis reminds us that Passover (Exodus 12:25-27), the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 13:7-8), firstborn rituals (Exodus 13:14-16), and the promised land monument (Joshua 4:6-7, 21-24) all had intended opportunities for children to ask "What does this mean?" God had designed worship for his people in such a way that the children would ask the giant "Why?" questions! The parents would then have occasion to teach and explain how these rites and rituals of worship connected to God's grace in the past. Alfred Edersheim similarly describes in detail how from early on children would know the sights, sounds, and songs of temple life and worship.² This was simply what the Jewish people always did. This was their way of life with their children—going to worship with their children and then teaching and training them.

As the Christian church then emerged from the Jewish people, the first Christians carried forward the attitude of Christ who welcomed little children and the rich history of families worshiping together. Marcia Bunge notes that while descriptions of early worship practices aren't common, the evidence is strong enough to suggest

that children were present at worship.³ Many of the early fathers also discussed children in their writings and sermons, and especially the importance of teaching and training children. John Chrysostom in particular wrote much about parenting and children.⁴ In every era of church history children were always included in worship, and parents were thought of as the critical influence in a child's life.

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Thus, as we sweep across history and observe the evil of this world's people using and abusing children, we witness the stark contrast of God's people who treasured their children. They treasured them so much that they brought them again and again to Jesus' feet as they carefully taught them the faith and trained them to worship, answering so often their "Why?" questions about worship.

Contributions from Science

As Lutherans, the solid foundation of our faith is the living Word of God alone. The Scriptures alone dictate our doctrine. However, it is a blessing from God when other sources of information give us wisdom and insight into what we know from the Word. We have seen how church history gives us additional information about children in worship. Science has much to offer as well.

Lisa Miller is a *New York Times* bestselling author who has spent more than two decades studying the spirituality of children.⁵ Her discoveries are conclusive that children are spiritual. We may smile at that since we know the Scriptures have testified for millennia about the soul and conscience that all people possess. However, her studies are still fascinating and useful.

In her work, Miller continually observed the child's keen perception for the big, grand, and divine. Consider how children "Ooh" and "Aah" at the ocean or the Grand Canyon, or how they draw incredibly profound pictures about Jesus and heaven. It's as if children were made for awe and reverence. Surely this is part of a simple child-like faith. This is the divinely-designed science behind the "Why?" questions children often ask.

Science also provides much information for us to ponder on the topic of child development—volumes of facts and figures about the developing body and brain of children. Consider a few key pertinent points:

- Children learn best when they follow examples (mimic, imitate, repeat after me).
- Children learn best when there is repetition (doing something over and over again).
- Children learn best when examples and repetition come from their own parents.
- Children learn best when they use all their senses (sight, sound, touch, etc.).

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Clearly, science offers support for the importance of parents taking the lead in teaching their children the faith and training them to worship. But another thought occurs: what a precious gift God has given to us in the divine service! The church has been richly blessed with a liturgy that is centuries ahead of the sciences.

In worship the entire body of Christ gathers together—young and old alike. In the service children mimic and imitate the examples of their parents. They repeat songs, psalms, confessions, creeds, and prayers over and over.⁶ And while doing this, all their senses are engaged:

- Eyes that see colors of the church year, robes, movements of the congregation
- Ears that hear music, songs, psalms, words, prayers, and sermon
- Mouths that join in those songs, words, and prayers
- Noses that smell candles, flowers, perhaps incense, or a familiar "churchy smell"
- Bodies that move by sitting and standing, bowing, folding hands, kneeling

Science contributes to our topic by emphasizing the importance of *parents* teaching and training. Experience teaches the same. I think of my daughter who from little on has sung hymns by herself in bed, or my son at age four wandering the living room with a piece of paper because he was "memorizing his sermon." Both of them (now 8 and 11) just a week ago recalled my father's Easter sermon theme from last year: Christ is Risen! No Foolin!

I think of a host of children who would belt out, "Glory to God in the highest" because they sang it in chapel during the week.





I think of little Audrey setting a great example for the whole congregation with every hearty “Amen!” and fervently loud rendition of the Lord’s Prayer. I think of the preschoolers who watched with silent awe as their parents received the Lord’s Supper or ashes on Ash Wednesday. I think of kindergartners enamored with the flickering candle flames of a Compline service, first graders who pondered the import of a pitch-black sanctuary as the seventh candle was extinguished on Good Friday, and even the littlest tykes who know when to respond, “He is risen indeed!”

Children have ... a great aptitude for awe and reverence.

Children have been designed by God in such a way that as they develop—cognitively, emotionally, spiritually—they have a great aptitude for awe and reverence. Children are built for the “Why?” you could say. And God has given parents the great privilege of teaching and training in order to explain the “Why?” This is true for their faith lives and their worship lives.

History Repeats Itself?

What a mess it was! Few knew anything about the Bible. Few understood or even attended worship. Most abused their Christian freedoms. And regrettably, the pastors were leading the people astray. Luther could hardly believe it was actually that bad. Luther reported to Nicholas von Amsdorf on his horrifying visit to the

Saxon churches, a letter that is now part of the enchiridion to the Small Catechism. Luther wrote:

The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version. Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom. Now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all freedom like experts.

Considering the massive influence of a messy American culture along with the abuses of freedom seeping from Evangelical churches, perhaps we could say history is repeating itself. What was Luther’s solution to the problem? Teaching! Parents needed to be taught and they in turn needed to teach their children. Hence, the Large and Small Catechisms. If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion, history should repeat itself here, too: more teaching and training about worship.

The solution to any challenges is teaching and training parents.

Regarding the question of what to do with children in church, the answer from Scripture and other historical sources seems clear: the best practice is children worshiping with their parents among the full body of Christ. The solution to any challenges then is teaching and training parents and they in turn teaching and training their children. Statistics suggest that we haven’t been doing a great job with this.

In a survey of nearly 600 WELS pastors across the US and Canada, 92% reported that they do not offer formal training to parents about how to engage their children in worship. Confirming this, a survey of 200 WELS parents reported that 93% have not received any worship education.

Similarly, a survey of pastors reported that 78% of churches do not offer training to children about worship. However, it is suspected that those that do train children do so only through their Lutheran school. Why this assumption? Because a survey of parents found 95% reporting that their congregation has not offered any training to their children to help them understand or participate in worship.

It would seem as though a wise first step in our congregations would be to follow in Luther’s steps (again!) and double down on families. Surveys strongly indicate that parents and children would

benefit from more teaching and training regarding worship. But when presented with some test materials that could help in this matter, more than 75% of focus group parents indicated they would like more materials to help their family engage in worship. Our congregations seem to want help, too. The survey of WELS pastors indicated that 78% of them would be highly interested in materials that help teach and train parents to teach and train their children.

An Example of a Solution

Recently, WELS Congregational Services created a booklet of daily devotions with accompanying prayers, rites, and rituals for Advent and Christmas. The intention was for the family to spend time together at dinner or bedtime to meditate on the Word, discuss some common worship practices (like the Advent wreath), and prepare for the coming of the Savior.

These materials are brilliant—*precisely* what is needed to help train children in worship. Consider the benefits of making use of such materials:

- Families are growing together in the Word.
- Children have opportunities to ask their “Why?” questions and get answers from parents.
- Families are following scriptural directives and precedent, reflecting historical and scientific support, for parents taking the lead in teaching and training their children.
- Families are reflecting on the Scripture readings heard in worship, subtly training children to listen carefully in church so that they can be prepared for these daily devotions.
- Parents are training children for worship as they teach them about various aspects of worship (in this case the wreath, the tree, candles, etc.).

In my reading and research on the question of what to do with children in church—in Scripture, church history, science, survey work, and more—it is quite clear that the number one solution lies with the parents. God tells us that he wants all his people to worship him. God tells us that he has charged parents first with the responsibility of teaching and training children. Thus, if we want to make improvements on the topic of children in church, we must work hard to teach and train the parents.

Conclusion

The long history of this world is filled with darkness, evils, and atrocities, especially toward children. From Molek to medieval or modern times, from varying abuses to millions of abortions, sin has gripped the hearts of many cultures and children have sadly experienced far too much evil. But through every era the light of

Christ has shined on and through his people who act distinctly different. God’s people treasure the blessings that are their children. Thus, throughout the ages Christian parents have been careful to answer the “Why?” faith questions of their children. It is the distinct privilege of parents to teach their children how and why we worship a gracious Savior God who shepherds us to a paradise much different than this world of sin.

As leaders of churches, schools, and synod, pastors would do well to follow the directives of Scripture, the support of history and science, and the saints who have gone before us. We must find more and new ways to continue the critical work of supporting parents in the teaching and training of their children. May our actions support the prayer of the hymn *Gracious Savior, Gentle Shepherd*:

By your holy Word instruct them;
Fill their minds with heav’nly light.
By your pow’rful grace convince them
Always to approve what’s right.
Let them feel your yoke is easy;
Let them find your burden light.

Taught to love the holy praises
Which on earth your children sing,
With their lips and hearts, sincerely,
Glad thankoff’rings may they bring,
Then with all the saints in glory
Join to praise their Lord and King.

This article has focused in a general way on a vitally important strategy: teaching and training parents so that they can do the same for their children. In the next and final article on children in worship, we will explore specific ways that congregations and parents can partner together to teach and train children to worship.

¹ Bunge, Marcia J., Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds. *The Child in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

² Edersheim, Alfred. *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003, p. 103-104.

³ Bunge, op. cit.

⁴ See especially his major work, *An Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children*, also known by a more concise title, *On Vainglory and the Raising of Children*.

⁵ Miller, Lisa. *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. New York: St. Martin’s, 2015, p. 10.

⁶ Is there a risk of encouraging thoughtless auto-pilot worship? Not when pastors, parents, worship planners, and musicians focus on the depth, richness, and variety available in Lutheran worship. Helpful content is at worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/worship-education; e.g. for pastors (Theology of the Ordinary) for congregations (*Worship Service Notations*) and for parents: (*The ABCs of Worship and Meaningful Worship*).