



What Do You Do with Children in Worship? *Biblical Perspectives*

By Phil Huebner

“If that happens, I’m leaving.” If Helen of Troy had a face that launched a thousand ships, this threat has launched a thousand conversations.

It happened so fast that I hardly knew how to react. One older council member was frustrated by the noise and activity of children during worship. He strongly suggested, “I think every child should be out of the sanctuary in a separate children’s service or Sunday school program.” With that Satan didn’t just put a foot in the door—he slammed it down and burst in SWAT-style. Sure enough, a younger parent councilman launched a return mortar: “If that happens, I’m leaving the church.”

And so our conundrum began. Satan found opportunity to push us toward obsession over the topic of children in church to the extent of some leaving the flock and other sheep wandering with wounds from the crossfire. Older members were angry, younger parents were hurt, and I was left in the middle trying to figure out, “What do you do with children in worship? What’s the best solution?”

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Previous articles¹ have painted a picture of America today, a Pollack-ian abstraction that is hard to make sense of. Confusing problems are evident at the intersection of children, parents, and worship. Generational corrosion, the decline of the nuclear home, the struggle of parents to discipline their children, the

post-Christian environment, and more contribute to the problems. Adults have been influenced by culture to segregate children to “age-appropriate” experiences as parents learn to have “others” care for their children. All these cultural complexities create vastly mixed experiences for many families in the pews on Sunday.

Following these philosophical meanderings, we considered how pragmatic Americans often look for solutions to problems. So too with this one. The second article reviewed current strategies and then shared a concluding thought from Paul’s wise words: “I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive.” We may have Christian freedom to make such choices. We may feel that these various solutions are ways to serve families better. But...what if some of these choices aren’t actually beneficial or constructive? What if some of these choices are actually detrimental or destructive, and we don’t realize it? What if some of these choices are contradictory to Scripture and to the history of the Church and even to recent insights into “best practice” nurturing of children in worship?

Back to the question: What do you do with children in church? This article, starting with Scripture, moves toward a clear and concrete answer.

Scripture on Children and Parents

As we trace through Scripture, we see throughout history that children were considered to be blessings. From God’s first command to be fruitful and multiply, the careful naming of children, to Psalms 127 and 139, to the women who lamented not being able to conceive—we clearly observe that children are blessed gifts from God.

However, with these little sinner-saints running around the house, parents have quite the job to do! And surely, God has charged them to embrace this high calling. Proverbs is replete with memorable quotes about parents disciplining children and children obeying parents. Perhaps the most famous parenting proverb is 22:6, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” The greatest responsibility of parents is to bring their children up in the ways of the Lord. Much of Scripture echoes this. We consider Moses’ parting words at the doorstep of the Promised Land, encouraging the people to teach the commands of God to their children and talk about them at home and on the road and at all times of the day. And Joshua’s charge to follow his example: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Similarly, Psalm 78 poetically proclaims the importance of telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord.

Then there’s Jesus. It is not at all surprising that the compassionate Good Shepherd took time for even the littlest of lambs. We see Jesus bring a child to the center of the discussion as a living object lesson about greatness in the kingdom. We see Jesus welcome children joyfully as he indignantly rebukes his ignorant disciples. “Let the little children come to me!” he says, supporting parents who bring their children to him at any and every time. And who can forget Jesus’ sharp words about training children in the way they should go? So serious is the task of caring for the souls of children that a millstone around the neck in the middle of the sea is better than doing spiritual damage to a child.

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In summary then, Scripture is clear: a family consisting of two parents² with children is a foundational design of God for humanity. Those children are precious blessings—rich rewards from the God of grace. However, the vocation of parent is one to be taken seriously. There are many scriptural charges to all adults to help in raising children, especially in telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of our Savior God. Yet particularly clear is that this duty of disciplining and discipling children first and foremost is the responsibility of parents, *and not someone else*—contrary to current American practices.

Scripture on Children and Worship

Now that we have taken a flyover on children and parenting, we can circle the runway to land on Scripture’s guidance about children in worship.

No specific Bible story explicitly answers our main question about children in church. Unfortunately, we cannot open to Acts 29 (which doesn’t exist!) and find that as the early church was established, great discipline prevailed among Christian families who controlled their children and kept them silent for an hour of public worship.³ We don’t have a transcription of Epaphras’

dynamic children’s sermon. Nor do we hear that Paul warns the foolish Galatians to send their crazy kids to Sunday school during worship so they can listen better to the gospel they were so quick to abandon.

We don’t hear these things. But we can learn much from what Scripture tells us. The more we ponder the topic of children and worship, the more we find insights in God’s Word. The Lord inspired a lot for us to think about regarding children.

Start in the beginning with Cain and Abel. They were born in the image of their newly-sinners parents, separated from God and dead in sin. So how would they know about giving offerings to God? How did they know offerings would give him glory? How did they know what was a pleasing and acceptable (Abel) and what was not (Cain)? Since they were born sinners separated from God, they must have been taught by Adam and Eve how to worship in this way! So also today: parents teach and model worship for their children.

So also today: children internalize worship from years of sitting with their parents.

Jump ahead to Abraham and his terrifying test of faith. As they walked up Mt. Moriah, Isaac noted that he was carrying wood while his father carried the fire and knife. But where was the lamb for the burnt offering? Similar questions could be asked. Isaac didn’t ask Abraham why they were carrying wood, knife, and fire. Isaac knew what they were going to do. How did he know the elements of sacrifice? How did he know a lamb was needed? How did he attain such a thorough knowledge of what was necessary for proper worship? Just as with Cain and Abel, this sinful boy was taught about worship. Theoretical instruction about sacrifices in a Sabbath school classroom down the hall wouldn’t have cut it though. Isaac must have participated in sacrifices in the past to understand this form of worship so well. So also today: children internalize worship from years of sitting with their parents.





We can find many such stories where we would ask many such questions and likely come to many such conclusions. When God's people would "call on the name of the Lord" and offer sacrifices in worship, children always seemed to be present as they participated and were taught by their parents.

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Note also the time of a more formal worship—a style that God himself commanded. Consider the dedication service for Solomon's temple. When the ark arrived, when Solomon blessed the people, when he spoke his beautiful prayer, we hear the repeated note that those in attendance consisted of "the entire assembly of Israel."

All Israel was at this dedication service. And why not? Who wouldn't want to be there for such a momentous event? Why wouldn't parents want their children to see the house of God they had desired for ages? Why wouldn't parents want their children to see the glory of the LORD seeping out of the temple? Why wouldn't parents want their children to see and smell 120,000 sheep slaughtered in a you'll-never-forget-this moment pointing toward the paschal Lamb to come? So also today: children can benefit from being with adults in worship.

The Old Testament reports several similar examples. Consider the reforms of Josiah. When he rediscovered the Book of the Covenant, he read it in the presence of "the men of Judah, the

people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest." While that common phrase "least to greatest" could refer to status or importance rather than age, it is worth considering whether hearts renewed by the Word of God would want to bring their children to such a rededication. It seems most likely the people would.

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Another time of reform came many years later. When God's people returned from exile, their New Man was ultra-sensitive to God's Law. Recognizing their sins, Ezra the priest prayed and confessed sin on behalf of all the people. We receive this specific information about the event: "While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly" (10:1). It is interesting to note that children were participants in this repentant worship—something our culture might not consider "age appropriate" for children.

Would this mean that preschoolers, toddlers, and infants were left behind with servants or siblings? Was it too grand or too grave an event for the youngest children? And if so, was this always the practice among the Israelites? This confession of Ezra event would seem to suggest otherwise. So would verses from Joel. As Joel encourages the people to "rend your heart and not your garments" in repentance, he gives this command:

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast (2:15ff).

We gain similar insights from the New Testament. We know the most famous instances of parents letting their children come to Jesus. Though we won't equate such events with Sunday worship, we can certainly compare bringing children to the physical feet of Jesus back then to bringing children to the feet of Jesus who is present where two or three gather in his name. Clearly, parents saw the importance of having their children with Jesus.

Consider events like the Sermon on the Mount, the feeding of the 5,000, the feeding of the 4,000, or others. Would we assume that men and women would leave behind their children to listen to that great hillside homily? Of course not! It's more obvious with the other two events as Scripture clearly tells us that children were present at the two famous feedings. Again, not corporate worship, but this point: when it came to being around Jesus, parents considered it important to have children with them.

The New Testament doesn't describe much about public, corporate worship. We gather principles about worship from the New Testament, but we don't see descriptions of worship as we do at the dedication of Solomon's temple. But consider the story

of Jesus in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4). Jesus unrolled the scroll, the Word of God, and proclaimed the Gospel—himself. Were children present? We don't know for sure. It doesn't specifically say. Yet it would be hard to imagine children *not* present considering how seriously and literally the Israelites took the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 6.

The first Christians also teach us about children and worship. Peter sets the tone in his Pentecost sermon. He instructs that the promise of the Holy Spirit creating faith and granting forgiveness is a promise for adults and their children. Every time they gathered to worship, to confess and absolve, to baptize, they could be confident that the Holy Spirit would bless anyone of any age. Immediately after the record of this Pentecost sermon we hear in a description of everyday life in those early days that “all the believers” were devoted to the Word, to gathering, and to each other.

These men and women had hearts that burned within them. They followed daily rituals of private and public worship. They actively used the means of grace in private and in public. It would be absurd to assume that children were never present. When parents went to the temple courts or gathered in their homes, surely children were present—just as surely as God added children to the number of those who were being saved.

Finally, it is fascinating to consider how Paul indicates his letters are to be read in the corporate gatherings of early Christians (e.g., Colossians 4:16). What makes this interesting is that the same letter addresses children about obeying their parents. It seems safe to deductively assume then that if A) the letters were read in worship much like Epistle readings today, and if B) Paul addresses children in his letters, then C) Paul was expecting children to be present at worship.

Concluding and Summary Thoughts

What have we gathered then from Scripture regarding parents, children, and children in worship? Parents have been given primary responsibility among all adults in the disciplining and discipling of children. Of utmost priority is training children in the ways of the Lord. Surveying Scripture, it appears that parents took up this responsibility of spiritual training in every aspect of life—both at home and in corporate worship. So we gather from Scripture that children have always been present for public worship. No matter how long the event, how gruesome (sacrifices), how big or small, children were with their parents in worship as they observed, learned, and participated.

We gain insights from biblical descriptions even when they are not prescriptions. We certainly have been given freedom in many matters by our Lord Jesus. But consider some questions. Is it a

matter of freedom for children to be worshipping? Is it optimal for children to be trained to worship by someone other than their parents? Is it really the best strategy to usher down the hallway those Jesus brings to the center as examples of faith when other strategies can assist their parents to train them for worship with the entire congregation?

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It is understood that there are many ways to answer such questions with evangelical hearts and Christian freedom. It is understood that some contexts will require patient instruction and training before “best practices” can be implemented. However, it seems clear in Scripture that children were regularly with parents in worship. While granting freedom for a variety of practices, we can also affirm that the biblical and historical pattern of children with parents in worship is not obsolete—children, parents, and all other adults worshipping together as one body of Christ.

The next issue will focus on practical ways to carry this out. How can we help parents and their children? How can churches facilitate children's participation and engagement in worship? We will focus on a variety of ways so that the body of Christ can work together to train children in the way they should go as we tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord.

¹ Available online <https://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/worship-the-lord-practical-series/> (PDF) and <https://wels.net/news-media/blogs/worship-blogs/> (blog).

² Granting the foundational ideal, we recognize that many single parent families have faithfully raised Christian children.

³ If you missed it, see the second article for anecdotes about quiet and well-behaved children in other cultures.

