

## Children in public worship

One of the more controversial aspects of historically reformed worship in our modern world is that of children being present in what some call “big church”.

The reason for this practice is rooted in the biblical pattern, as the psalmist says “ We will not hide them from their children (the works of the Lord), but will tell a future generation the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, his might, and the wondrous works he has performed (Ps 78:4).

This means young and old, and all in between belong in the church. For many people, this practice is the hardest to adapt to since most people are used to some form of “kids’ church” or “Sunday school” that takes place during corporate worship.

### Why, then, would we insist on having kids in worship?

1. *It is the pattern most consistent with the scriptures.* Children, in both the Old and New Testaments, were present during corporate worship (Ex 10:7-10, Dt 31:12-13, Ezra 10:1, Eph 6:1-4, Col 3:20).

*In Joel 2:16, we see that Jehoshaphat called together an assembly of the people of Judah, and children are reckoned as being in that multitude (2 Chr. 20:13). Joel prophesying of the coming “day of the Lord” calls for a solemn assembly: “Gather the people; sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the infants, even babies nursing at the breast. Let the groom leave his bedroom, and the bride her honeymoon chamber.)”*

The children of believers are a part of the gathered assembly because they are “holy” (1 Cor 7:14). This does not mean that they are saved but it does mean that they are set apart and have the great privilege of having access to the oracles and promises of God. This is a kindness that we must not take lightly.

2. *Corporate worship acts as a “nursery of faith” (Hyde, 2018) . Ordinarily, God works salvation among his covenant people (Ps 22:30-31, 45:16-17, 78:5-7, 145:4).*

God speaks to his covenant people in corporate worship and here he saves and sanctifies through the word, baptism, the Lord’s supper, and prayer (BC, Q93). God especially blessed the preaching of his word in “convincing and converting sinners” (BC,Q94; Rom 10:14).

How then, can we remove our children from the place where they are most likely to be converted?

### But what about?

There are many objections to this practice, but the most common objection is that kids cannot understand a sermon and need teaching appropriate to their age. The kids will learn more and so will the parents without the distraction of their kids.

One advocate of this view, Paul carter, says that “*there is a reason that very few schools place grade 8 students in the same classroom as grade 2 students.13-year-olds and 7 years olds are very different people and they tend to learn in very different ways. Therefore, to maximize their learning potential, it seems to make sense to us as a society to split them up into different learning environments. If we do this in every other arena of life, why would we not do it in church?*” (Carter, 2019)

## A response...well 4 of them

There are 4 responses to this that I'd like to make in challenging this position.

1. *We don't take our cues from the world.* We are the church, a people called out by God to worship Him in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24). We are to be those shaped and renewed, not by the ideas and practices of the world but by the very word of God (Rom 12:1-2). The apostle Paul warned us of embracing a philosophy that has but "an appearance/reputation of wisdom" (col 2:23) and yet is rooted in the "elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" and is in fact "according to human tradition" (col 2:8).

As those within the protestant tradition, we embrace the principle of "sola scriptura". The 1689 Baptist confession of faith states that "*The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.*" (1. 10). As Baptists, we are known as people of the book. This is something we must hold on to dearly.

The church father Tertullian captures the essence of this first critique when he famously asks "What has Athens have to do with Jerusalem?"

2. *Sunday school is a historical novelty.* The modern Sunday school movement only began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Robert Raikes. This was invented only as a means of outreach to non-Christian children and not as a tool to disciple the children of believers (Brown, 2011:27). It is interesting to note that Sunday school was very controversial back in its day and encountered much opposition. Rev Thomas Burns objected to Sunday school in 1798 saying:

*My great objection to Sunday schools is that I am afraid they will in the end destroy all family religion, and whatever has a tendency to do this I consider it is my duty to guard you against. I might also show that these schools are hurtful to public religion, for it consists with my knowledge that children stay at home from church to prepare their questions for the even; and their families are divided when they ought to be together.*

It is clear that Sunday school, in the hearts of many parents, has in fact become the primary form of discipleship for children. Regrettably, the fears of reverend burns were fully justified (Brown, 2011:28).

3. *We underestimate the learning capacity of children.* One of the primary reasons people argue for children's church is that people think that much of corporate worship cannot be understood by children.

In response to this, John Piper says that corporate worship "is supposed to be over their heads". He draws a great analogy to learning how to speak. He says this:

*"They (children) are beginners. The English language is over their heads when they come out of the womb, but we do not say, "Well, let's put them with other children in their own situations and limitations so they can understand a word or two." No. We immerse them in the English language every day. For a while, they do not understand most of it. But we hope and expect them to grow up into joyful use of the English language. Long before children fully understand the words said and sung*

*in the service, they are absorbing tremendous amounts of valuable experience. This remains true even if they say they are bored. Music and words become familiar. The message of the music starts to sink in. The form of the service starts to feel natural. Even if most of the sermon goes right over their heads, experience shows that children hear and remember remarkable things. The content of the prayers, the songs, and the sermon gives parents an unparalleled opportunity to teach their children the great truths of the faith. If parents would only learn to query their children after the service and explain things to them, they would sow enormously valuable seeds for their long-term growth in the knowledge of God.” (Piper, 2016)*

This was the experience of Jen Wilkin. She notes that during the Covid19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, church services was suspended, and her church resorted to streaming services. For the first time, her little kids would sit through all the elements of “big church” alongside her and her husband. To her surprise, her children started asking questions about baptism and the Lords supper. Her children understood more than she thought they could. (Wilkin, 2021)

Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that children can understand every element of the service. I am not even saying that there is no place for age-appropriate learning. I believe there is. However, corporate worship on the Lords Day is not the place or time. This is an assembly called by the Lord and the Lord calls us-and our children to worship him.

4. *Children are not a distraction.* I have heard Christian parents say that having children in corporate worship is a distraction to true worship. For many parents, Sunday school or kids church is a welcome break where the adults can worship and learn uninterrupted. Parents express great joy that they can experience this hour of bliss and yet forget that this comes at a price. There are Sunday school teachers who sacrifice corporate worship and the means of grace for this apparent bliss. I find this incredibly problematic but that’s a topic for another day.

I want to acknowledge that having children in the service is without a doubt harder than not having them in the service. It is self-evident that it is harder to achieve an emotional high through the singing of a song when your child is arresting your pockets in order to find a sweet. Let me remind you, however, that worship is not about you ascending into the third heaven to achieve emotional ecstasy. Worship is about God calling us, cleansing us, consecrating us, communing with us, and commissioning us into the world. God is not all that concerned with whether we have goosebumps during the opening song or not.

Yes, children can be distracting but they are not a distraction. There are occasions where children can scream or bring about chaos in a church. If this is happening, it is the responsibility of the parents to remove their children from worship for a time with the aim of instruction and discipline so that they can sit quietly in worship. This is the parents responsibility. For those of with who have been blessed with children, we must take seriously the call to raise them up in the fear and instruction of the Lord and a part of this “raising them up” is training them to understand the weightiness and glory of public worship.

However, there is also a responsibility that adults without children must embrace. The responsibility for you is to focus even amidst distracting noises. We must keep in mind that the crying child and embarrassed mom are trying to honour the Lord as best as they can. You must remember that children truly are a gift from God and that even in our midst, God is raising up a new generation to worship him.

As parents of small children, we must be considerate of those outside of our family and not allow our children to run riot. At the same time, those without small children need to be supportive and

burden bearing of others looking at the little ones with the eyes of faith and seeing them as potential brothers and sisters in Jesus.

## References

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