

Children and Public Worship

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It is fairly common practice in the church, broadly speaking, that children will either not go to church with their parents and, instead, go to ‘children’s church,’ or perhaps go out of the service to Sunday School at some point, but at least before the sermon. The reasons given are usually along the lines of children’s attentions spans, the sermons are above their understanding, maybe even to help visitors, whose children may not be used to sitting through a service, feel welcome, or even simply cope with the service.

I have some sympathy with the latter sort of reason. The first two are aspects of our culture or simply a characteristic of childhood which, while one can sympathise with, I believe we need to counter. I would like to consider two lines of thought. What does the Bible say? And then, a matter of pedagogy (how we bring up our children).

In certain respects, Scripture does not say a great deal directly to the subject, but what it does say is important and clear. Before seeing what Scripture says directly, we need to back up a little and consider what a Worship Service is. We are not told explicitly how a New Testament Worship Service is to be conducted but as we study history, we find the basic outline of our Worship Service goes right back to the Jewish synagogue of Jesus’ day and Jesus blessed Synagogue worship with his presence: “He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and as was his custom, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath.” (Luke 4:16) By the same token, he also blessed Temple worship with his presence. Indeed. But he also abolished it. When he left the Temple for the last time he declared, “Behold, your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:38); “your house ... desolate” – no longer “my Father’s house ... a house of prayer for all nations.” As well as pronouncing that judgment upon the Temple itself he abolished its very purpose at Calvary when he fulfilled perfectly all its sacrifices and functions. But Synagogue worship continued – in its Jewish ‘heirs’ right down to today; and, in its true heirs, the Christian church. You can study the liturgies down 2,000 years, in all the major branches of the church, and see the same elements and order of ‘christianised’ synagogue worship, right down to today. This is important because of the basic shape of that Worship Service. The Worship Service is essentially a covenant renewal (or reaffirmation) ceremony, as we see from the following outline of our usual morning Worship Service:

God calls us to worship; we acknowledge we are there by grace; he greets us; we sing his praise; he reminds us of his covenant requirements; we confess our covenant-breaking; he grants us renewed forgiveness & cleansing; he reasserts his covenant requirements (the Law as a rule of life); we respond in thankfulness and rededication; now we may bring our congregational cares and concerns to him in prayer (and, please, a bit wider than our congregational concerns!); we present our tithes and offerings; he speaks to us of his covenant at more length in the Scripture reading and sermon; we request he apply it to our hearts and lives; we sing his praise once more; he gives us his covenant blessing; and what can we do but conclude with a doxology.

Jesus blessed this service and by his Spirit guided his church in so continuing to worship him to this day.

Given that the Worship Service that we inherited from the Synagogue is a covenant renewal ceremony, we find there is some explicit biblical material that is relevant, for we read of a few covenant renewal ceremonies in the Old Testament. We note only those that contain information relevant to our subject.

Before Israel went across the Jordan into Canaan, Moses led them in one such ceremony and we read; “You stand today, all of you, before the Lord your God: your chiefs, your tribes, your elders and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your alien who is within your camps,…” Deut.29:10ff..

After the defeat of Ai (which was, in turn, after the defeat at Ai because of Achan’s sin), Joshua “read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them” Joshua 8:24f..

When Judah was threatened by Moab & Ammon, “Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord; and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So all Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord ... and all Judah was standing before the Lord, with their infants, their wives, and their children” 2 Chron.20:3-4,13. Cf. also Neh.12:43.¹

From the information we have, we ought to conclude that when God calls us to formal, public worship, he calls us as families, for children too are members of his covenant.² This information is important to us, because the NT church is simply the OT church

¹ There is one instance that may appear to give contrary evidence, Ezra 7:73 – 13:3, where it speaks of *the presence of men and women, those who could understand*, and other similar phrases (8:2-3; 10:28). However, this seems to be an exceptional case, for quite a number of reasons.

1. While the other occasions quoted also took place at historical turning points, this is even more so, as is indicated by the fact that it covers five chapters and took place after Judah had significantly fallen back to the old sins, so very quickly, for which they had already been sent into exile, including marrying non-Israelites & blatant Sabbath-breaking (10:30-31) for example;
2. the whole proceedings covers a period of several weeks, beginning on *the first day of the seventh month* (8:3) and going through to at least *the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month* (9:1ff., the Great Day of Atonement);
3. it included the Feast of Tabernacles which took eight days (8:14,17-18);
4. *the book of the Law* was read every day of the eight days of Tabernacles (8:18);
5. on two occasions at least on which everybody assembled, the proceedings were very long: on the first day the Law was read *from early morning until midday* (8:3), and on the Great Day of Atonement, the Law was read *for a quarter of the day and for another quarter they confessed and worshiped* (9:3);
6. from much of the material in the five chapters, it is plain that all the arrangements for re-establishing Temple worship and the support and supplies of the temple were being arranged – a lot of very detailed administrative matters;
7. we might also wonder if there is something significant about the fact that in 10:29, they took *on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law* (which might not be appropriate for children? – even as some would argue it would not be appropriate for younger children to take on themselves vows of profession of faith, considering it would make them self- confessed believers and subject also to the possibility of persecution/martyrdom).

Even so, on one occasion of communal worship, the children also were present (12:43), as they would also have been during much of the Feast of Tabernacles.

² Gen.17:7; Acts 2:38f.; HC, Q&A.74. Jesus also said, in Mark 10:14, “Permit the children to come to me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” That occasion was not a worship service and no doubt Jesus spoke to those children, then, at their level. However, Jesus’ general point is very important: “Let the children come to me;” and today it is in the Worship Service that Jesus is especially present and speaking to his people.

come of age (Gal.4:1-6). When Peter speaks of our place in the church in 1 Pe.2:9-10, he quotes Moses' description of Israel in Ex.19:5f. to do so: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Hence, in his epistles, which he commanded to be read in church,³ Paul, just occasionally, addresses the children specifically (Eph.6:1-3; Col.3:20).

The second set of reasons has to do with pedagogy, the science/art of teaching children. There are several ways we can come at this. We shall note the following;

1. People are concerned that their children understand what they are doing in worship. So we ought to be. Protestants do not believe the Roman Catholic doctrine of implicit faith. We do believe in teaching children authoritatively, but we don't want them to believe just on authority; not long-term, at any rate. We want them to believe because God has enlightened their minds by his Holy Spirit and they understand the teaching of the Bible. And on that score, we can easily underestimate just how much children can hear and understand.⁴

But my real concern here is that there is more to life and learning than understanding. There are also stages in child development. Rote learning is not in vogue at present. Yet it has a place – in the church context, for memorising Scripture or the Catechism or Psalms and hymns and songs. When children are young, their minds are like sponges. They soak up material like that and store it away in the memory. Learned early like that, it stays there for life. Maybe they don't understand so much when they first learn; but over time, as the mind turns it over, as it is drawn back to mind in other teaching moments, understanding grows. Further, just by observation and participation as they are able, and as they gradually learn to read, the shape of the worship service is lodged in their minds, the words of the liturgy,⁵ how to pray, the words of the Psalms and hymns are gradually absorbed. And a mindset is gradually developed.

Further, there is more going on in a Worship Service than what involves the intellect directly, or first of all; such things that children learn about God and faith and devotion by observing, perhaps even at a sub-conscious level, the expectation with which the adults come to worship, the earnestness – and perhaps many emotions – on the adults' faces, the reverence with which we sit,⁶ the very fact that the people come,

³ Col.4:16; *And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part, read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.*

⁴ And after all is said and done, if you think of our other church activities, most of them are aimed at youth. Don't forget either that Jesus was only twelve years old when he debated the 'doctors' in the temple. That was not a miraculous function of his deity. As a human child "he grew in wisdom" (Luke 2:42-52). On this score, Jesus was only just exceptional. While Jesus was uniquely perfect, similar levels of intellectual maturity in fourteen year-olds was not unusual up until less than a century ago.

⁵ Forms for Baptism, public Profession of Faith, the Lord's Supper.

⁶ An article appeared in the Manawatu **Evening Standard** several years ago that well illustrates this point. A Palmerston North man, Ronald Thomas, was talking about his experiences as a seven-year old in NZ during WWII, in the course of which he said, *My parents and my school had instilled in me the meaning of war and its horrors, and the benefits enjoyed from peace. And hadn't I, after all, sat in*

mum and dad, with everyone else, and come regularly and without fail, when sometimes the Service is uplifting and inspiring, at another time challenging, maybe even difficult,⁷ at another time just so so. But they come. As the family meal and Bible reading is the heart and centre of Christian family life, so the Worship Service is the heart and centre of church-family life; and, as Neil Diamond has it, we “pack up the babies, grab the old ladies, everyone goes.”⁸ Some things are better caught than taught; and often if they are not caught at that impressionable age, they are much more difficult to be taught – and really learned – at all.

2. Let’s not separate this out from the general upbringing of our children. What are we seeking to bring up our children to be? Mature adults, able to stand on their own in the world, under God. What is the best way to do this? By modelling to them mature adult behaviour. But how will we do that if we at all times provide for them at their level? Further, where do we model adult behaviour to our children in modern life? As civilisation ‘advances,’ life becomes more complex and fractured and some scriptural injunctions become more difficult to obey; yet they still stand. For example, Deut.6:6-7;

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

That is a base-text for every Christian parent, but how difficult it is to fulfil in the modern world. In Moses’ day and for many centuries later, little Johnny trotted out to the field with dad and, until he got too tired and dad popped him down under a tree to sleep for an hour, he plodded alongside the plough with him. And so Jane with mum. They not only learned Scripture from mum and dad as they worked alongside them; they also learned to work, to be an adult. Their peers were not their model; mum and dad, adults were their model, and so they learned to be mature adults. Even in more recent times, children would have accompanied their father to the saleyard, for example – they saw how it worked, they observed how men interact with men, how they strike a bargain, how they are held to account for their word, how they work around each other in the carpark, how they resolve disagreements.

Of course, there is a time just to be children. Paul too spoke about “childish things” – not disapprovingly – for children (1 Cor.13:11). But where in the modern world do our children observe adults go about their lives, as adults, as was easier in the past in different kinds of societies and economies? Perhaps only on TV – and what perverted models they get there most of the time. Why, they cannot even watch or listen to Parliament and see adults act maturely! Scripture gives us this as a – perhaps the – basic principle of child-rearing; see also the book of Proverbs. And what is the cry of those in the world concerned about young people? They need role models, especially male role models.

silence during the evening news, night after night, and watched father scowl and mother weep? The news itself meant little, but the solemnity induced by the broadcast is well remembered.

⁷ Maybe the church goes through a difficult, unhappy time, when it is plain hard even to worship at all; or, they hear the dead silence when a discipline notice is read.

⁸ ... to *Brother Love’s Show*, in a song on revival meetings in the Bible Belt of America; but it’s a nicely descriptive line!

Worship is the highest 'activity' mankind can engage in. Let us teach them how to worship using the fundamental scriptural method.

3. But let's carry that a little further: can you think of one adult activity in life in which children accompany their parents and are expected to fit in with the adults? Let's use only the word 'expect.' Educational and child-rearing theory today is dominated by the idea of putting the child at the centre. And we wonder why we have so many self-centred people; so many people who never seem to 'fit' anywhere. I am certainly not promoting uniforms or mindless conformity. It could equally be argued that there is far too little individuality. But children today are taught that the world revolves around them; everything must be fitted to them and their peculiar needs at their particular stage of development, or according to their desires. Not to go too far from our immediate subject, but one wonders what on earth happened to parents and educators who require children to learn what they, in their greater experience of life and wisdom, know the children need to learn.

We should not see having our children, of all ages, in worship as something our children must just put up with; it's inconvenient but it's the best we can do. It can be difficult at times and parents can go through periods when they find it difficult to worship. Our family has had those times too. (So let the rest of us be patient with parents of young children and bear kindly with some inevitable childish noises and interruptions at times.) But I would suggest also that you think whether it may be the best favour you can ever do your children, along with saying no to them occasionally! From the most impressionable age, expect and require them to worship together with the congregation, however much, on an intellectual level, they understand. For in addition to everything else we have said, they will learn another enormously important lesson as well: life does not revolve around their felt needs of the moment; life revolves around the worship of God; and he calls all his covenant people together to worship him as one body; therefore we must all be there. Life (and church!) is not about my felt needs and desires; it is about God and what he wants. What greater lesson could we teach our children? If we don't teach them this lesson, and this is certainly one that will be better caught than taught, they will not just not have learnt this lesson; they will inevitably have learned its opposite: life revolves around me and my felt needs or abilities and capacities, etc. That is one of the great problems of our age in general and of the church at large. Has there been a more immature and dissatisfied generation than the last couple whose particular needs and desires have been catered to so assiduously? Let us save our children from that, by God's grace.

So what about the concern for visitors? Certainly we want to make visitors feel as welcome as we can. I don't know all the answers to this. Perhaps there are things we can do surrounding the worship service to help. But bear in mind the following:

1. The worship of the church is first of all the worship of the church, the covenant community. Whatever we need/may be able to do to help visitors feel welcome and thus help us in evangelism, we won't achieve it, certainly not long term, by making the worship service something else than a covenant-renewal ceremony; nor by removing from it those who ought to be there which includes, by the way, teachers, not just children.

2. We tend to feel bad sometimes because maybe visitors come, but only once, because, as they may put it, we don't have a programme for the children. We haven't catered for their needs/situation and we are made to feel/tend to feel it is to do with us. In a sense it is. How do we think about this? It seems to me, first off, that such people are also the product of their age and all the 'expert' advice on bringing up and educating children. So, of course, they think like that. But it seems to me that, if we were to 'cater' to these people in the manner in which they 'demand,' are we not only compounding the problem? By and large, how you catch 'em is how you keep 'em; which is to say, if we 'catch 'em' by catering to their felt or immediate needs, we already confirm a mindset which is completely contrary to Christianity at its core. And we will find that we will only 'keep 'em' by continually responding to their next 'felt need.' In other words, we would be doing with them what we would be doing with our own children if we went in that direction. And here is an interesting thing: some churches that have gone in this direction are beginning to see this and do a rethink. There was a small news clip in Faith in Focus about two years ago which spoke of someone connected with the Toronto Vineyard churches having serious second thoughts. Of course, we must be 'seeker-sensitive' in the sense Paul meant it in 1 Cor.9:22: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some." But Paul never broke any principle to "become all things to all men."

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