

CHILDREN & WORSHIP SERVICE



Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come
unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 19:14)

This topic has been a great concern in my pastoral heart for a long time. It is my strong biblical conviction that we must let our children join the main worship service with the adults as early as possible. There is no biblical warrant for separating children from the main worship, especially those who have grown beyond their toddler stage. Verily, there is immense godly wisdom in integrating our children into the main worship, especially those who are 8 years old and above. In fact, most children can be trained to sit through the main worship service from the age of 6, and some even earlier.

Biblical Evidence of Children in the Main Congregation

In the Scriptures, when God's people were required to come together to worship the LORD in the hearing and exposition of the Law, the children came together with them. Children were neither excluded nor segregated from the adults who came for worship. The following are some examples of adults and children coming together to hear the Word of God.

In the Old Testament

At the renewal of the covenant in Deuteronomy 29, Scripture specifically tells us that the "little ones" were present together with all the adults and even dignitaries. "Ye stand this day all of you before the LORD your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water: that thou shouldest enter into covenant with the LORD thy God, and into his oath, which the LORD thy God maketh with thee this day" (vv. 10-12). Note that the

word translated as "little ones" refers to little children.

Similarly, we read from Scripture that at the sabbatical year convocation, men, women, strangers and children were instructed to gather together. "When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. 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: and that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it" (Deuteronomy 31:11-13).

Then again, in Joshua 8:35, we are told that "There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them." And again we read of similar gatherings during the time of Jehoshaphat – "And all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children" (2 Chronicles 20:13).

Furthermore, in Nehemiah 8:2-3, we read that "Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law." Here, the phrases "all that could hear with understanding" and "those that

could understand” are not referring to adult men and women, since the latter two have already been mentioned earlier in the same sentences. Rather, these would refer to children who were able to perceive what was being read from the Law and also their exposition. So, this provides further evidence of children being involved in the biblical proceedings of the main congregation.

One more example from the Old Testament will suffice. In Nehemiah 12:43, we are told of a thanksgiving service held in the house of God. Children are mentioned along with the adults as rejoicing before the Lord – “Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.” Compared to the modern church scene, all these worship gatherings of adults and children together were rather remarkable, not least for the fact that all these happened long before the day of cushioned pews and air-conditioned sanctuaries!

In the New Testament

What’s more, in the New Testament, during the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, we see no segregation whatsoever of children from the adults when people gathered to hear them preach or for worship. The entire family would worship the Lord together. When the people gathered to hear our Lord, the young children were usually present too (cf. Matthew 14:21; 15:38). On one occasion, we are told that the people began bringing their young children to the Lord to be touched by Him (Mark 10:13). For some reason, the disciples tried to stop them; they even rebuked the parents. “But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and

said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

There is little doubt that the practice of having children in the worship service was the norm in the early church. This is corroborated by the fact that the apostolic epistles, which were read during congregational worship in the early church, addressed the children directly (cf. Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20; 1 John 2:12; etc.). In general, the biblical pattern is that the Christian family ought to worship together.

Modern-Day Misguided Exclusion of Children from the Main Congregation

However, in many churches today, bringing children into the full session of the main worship seems to be postponed as long as possible. After “Junior Worship”, children are provided with “Teen” and “Youth” worship services, which are conducted separately from the main worship service. As they grow up, they are rather unwilling to participate in the Scriptural form of worship. They look for fun and entertainment, such as what they have been given in their “Children” and “Teen” worship services. They dislike the solemnity of biblical worship, rather preferring a light-hearted and entertaining worship service.

In this modern age, one may be considered impractical or even radical for advocating the integration of children into the main worship service. This is hardly surprising as over the past 50 years, parents were used to being segregated from their children during worship time, which the church has short-sightedly and misguidedly been encouraging. If that is

not bad enough, in not a few churches, children are left at home alone while parents go for prayer meetings!

By the grace of God, as a pastor, I have undoubtedly seen the blessings upon parents in the church when they encourage their children to join in the main worship, and even prayer meetings. Though there are difficulties, it is possible to overcome them if we (parents and the congregation as a whole) are willing to train the children to worship our sovereign God, with patience and forbearance. Can we teach our children to worship God in the same way that we teach them to walk, talk and tie their shoes-laces? Certainly! But first, we must see it as a biblical pattern to which we must be committed.

In adherence to the biblical model, a good working guideline would be that children who are in primary 4 and above be present in the public meetings of the church, especially on the Lord's Day (though there need be no arbitrary distinction as some younger children might well be able to be present at an earlier age). In conjunction with that, parents should also consider bringing children to midweek prayer meetings, as much as possible. The children should sit quietly and attentively, endeavouring – to the best of their ability – to participate reverently and intelligently in the various exercises of worship. To attain such a goal requires that parents be diligent and thorough in preparing their children for attendance at and participation in the public meetings, certainly not excluding them indefinitely from the main congregation!

Practical Guidelines for Children's Involvement in the Main Congregation

In order to help parents and the church accomplish their biblical responsibility, do consider the following guidelines, which can act as an aid to such preparation. (The ideas reflected in the following sections have been adapted from various books and articles, with selected changes to suit this writer's congregation.)

For All Children in General

- Conduct family worship daily. This can be just a 15-minute spiritual discipline for the family, where everyone sits together to sing a song, read the Scriptures and pray. This spiritual exercise is a good avenue to teach your children the behaviour expected of them during the Sunday Worship.
- Seek to order things in your home so that children have adequate rest on Saturday night. We ought to be at least as concerned that children get enough sleep as on a school night, and have adequate time on Sunday morning to prepare to leave the house, so that they are in every respect "ready for church".
- Aim to arrive in good time (perhaps 10-15 minutes before the service begins), and be in the appropriate place for worship as soon as reasonably possible. Remind your children in advance of the behaviour that is expected of them in Sunday

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school, the worship service, the prayer meeting, etc.

- Accomplish necessary tasks (such as getting a drink or using the toilet) before the start of the service. Advise your child not to run in and out of the worship hall, because leaving the worship (even for legitimate reasons) is a distraction, at least to those nearby. Such a departure will also disrupt your child's and your worship of God. It will impair your ability to follow, understand, and therefore fully benefit from the preaching of God's Word. The logic and continuity of biblical preaching is lost when there are interruptions in the hearing of it. Seriously consider the possibility of refusing your child's desire to leave the meeting place.
- Train your children to be good listeners. Instruct them to sit with good posture and focus their eyes on the one leading the service or preaching. When the Scriptures are read, have them turn to the text and follow in their own or your Bible. Likewise, help them turn to each hymn and follow from the hymnbook, helping them as required. With older children, consider such means of helping them to concentrate as taking notes.
- Encourage children to continue behaving well (e.g. not making excessive noise and shouting), even immediately after a public meeting. Help children to behave politely to one another and to adults (holding open doors, helping with tasks, etc.), and to behave in a friendly fashion to visitors, particularly children who are visiting.
- As much as possible, follow up on the preaching and teaching with your children (during the drive home, lunchtime, or family worship), by asking them appropriate questions.
- Remember also the power of our parental example (good or bad) in preparing for and participating in the public meetings of the church. If we have not been the best of example, we need to humbly correct ourselves. If necessary, explain to our children why correction is needed and how to make the correction. This is the only way you and I can guide our families to a better worship of God.

For Nursery to Primary 3 Children

- In this category, most of the older ones (Primary 1-3), if properly guided, will be able to sit through the worship without causing disruptions. Right now, we have a special Junior Worship lesson conducted for this group during the sermon time, so that they may be taught the Word in a way they can comprehend.
- While they are present during the first part of the worship service, they must be instructed to have the proper attitude and behaviour. If the parents are unable to attend to them, let the Junior Worship teacher or another adult sit with the children to guide them.
- It is important that we insist on good attitude during worship. If your child becomes restless or behaves inappropriately, remember to deal with him in a way that will not disrupt the focus of the other worshippers. There is no need to

leave the worship at the first sign of disturbance from your child; the congregation should appreciate that a very young child does not always behave perfectly. If there is no alternative, take your child out of the service. Ensure that this is not seen as a ‘reward’ for disobedience. If possible, deal with the particular issue appropriately and immediately, and then return to the meeting room to continue participating in the public worship of God.

- If it is predictable that you will need to take your child out of a service to train or discipline him, aim to take seats near the doors of the meeting room, where you can get in and out with least distraction to others. When leaving or entering, try to do so with a minimum of fuss and noise. Other members of the church – ushers, for example – might be able to render a helping hand to you. Return to your seats as soon as possible with minimal distraction.
- Remember that the children are to participate intelligently in worship. Diversionary activities (drawing, writing, reading other children’s books, playing, etc.) are not part of the worship of God. Neither is eating nor drinking (except for the Lord’s Supper). All these can be distracting for the child, yourself and others. These things will undermine a child’s active and intelligent involvement in the worship of the infinite and thrice-holy God.

For Infants and Toddlers

- Toddlers are often restless and fidgety. They are also prone to cry aloud. Parents of infants and

toddlers are invited to use the “cry-room” section. If you are in the main worship hall, please be seated near the door, so you can easily exit the worship hall to attend to your child who is crying. If your child is getting unusually restless, please consider using the “cry-room”. Or you may take your child out of the worship hall with as little disturbance as possible. Please seek help from the ushers, if you need assistance. Quietly return to your seat as soon as possible after attending to the child.

- Parents who are in the “cry-room” must remember not to engage in conversation or activities that will distract others from concentrating on the worship. Let us endeavour to keep the solemnity of worship at all times. As much as possible, make sure that your movements and activities are least disturbing to others around you. Let all parents be mutually helpful and forbearing.

The Lord calls out to all our children, saying, “Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD” (Psalm 34:11); “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts” (Isaiah 28:9). Certainly, this teaches us that the “target group” close to the Lord’s heart are the vulnerable, mouldable, and therefore most precious children. It goes without saying that upon the shoulders of Christian parents rests this privileged responsibility. Parents, come with your children to worship the Lord, and pray that our children would grow up to be a generation that will worship the Lord in spirit and in truth!

