

Children in Worship: A Covenantal Approach

By Rev. Barksdale Pullen

"I didn't get anything out the Worship Service," exclaimed a mother, "because my four year old kept squiring during the service!"

"I didn't hear a word that the pastor said, because those kids behind me kept making noise," grumbles another man, "you need to do something with them during the Worship Service."

After visiting churches our family decided to come here, "one mother said surprisingly, "because our son wanted to be with us during Worship rather than with room full of children."

At the recent *Reaching the Millennials Conference* sponsored by CE&P, Susan Hunt challenged the participants to think through an issue theologically, because our ministry is a reflection of our theology. "One of the implications of that statement is the place of children in the Worship Service, an issue that can be potentially disruptive to a congregation. What follows is a brief on what I perceive to be the position on children in the corporate Worship Service from a covenantal approach. Simply stated, I believe that God invites the covenantal community, which is composed of believing families, to Worship Him. To encourage parents, in any form, to be separate from their children during corporate Worship is a violation of God's Word. As we examine the issue the question is raised of why it [worship] should matter? Is worship really all that significant in the formation of Christian children? Fundamentally, we must recognize that every action of our lives molds our character. .An environment of humility, reverence, obedience, and eagerness (some of the most prominent reactions of biblical characters when they encountered God or His messengers) will train children in essential aspects of a faith-full disposition."¹

This statement takes an heightened importance when we realize that the only thing that the Church does that no one else can do is worship the triune God. Therefore, if we want to raise children to rejoice in being members of the Christian community, what we do in worship is critically important. Both *parents and congregations* have enormous –but enormously worthwhile –work to do to train our children in the habits and practice of worship' (emphasis added)²

What is the Covenantal Community (Church)?

A fundamental theological question is what is the nature of the covenantal community, the Church? Does the church consist of a collection of individual believers? The Covenantal view is that the church is composed of believing families. As we refer to our confessional standards, which are built upon the Bible, we see that children are considered a part of the covenantal community. They are part of the covenantal community based not on their own belief, but on the belief of their parents. (WCF XXVIII) Thus as members of the covenantal community, under their parent's authority, they are entitled to the rights and privileges (WCF XXVII, LC Q62)) of the church. The Biblical evidence supports the traditional covenantal view. A cursory look at the Old Testament shows that children participated in the Passover meal, and in

¹ Dawn, Marva, *Is It a Lost Cause?*, p.68

² Ibid., p. 65

various feasts (Ex. 12:1-4; 16:9-17). Parents were to ensure that their children kept the Sabbath holy, which included Sabbath worship (Ex. 20:8-11). Children were to be instructed in the law of the Lord, particularly by their parents (Deut. 6:7). Entire families were commanded to listen to the reading of the law every seventh year (Deut. 31:9-13). In Joel 2:16 the Lord invites "nursing children" to gather with the rest of God's people in sacred assembly.

The covenantal community consists of *consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children*: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God ... (emphasis added)

What is Worship?

Worship is *God's people gathering to give all praise, honor and glory to God according to the truth of His Word.* Worship is central to our Christian faith. Worship is not for us, the people, but it is our service directed toward God through the words and actions of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and commitment. Worship is composed of individual acts, usually combined in group experience, in which we respond to God as revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in which we recognize God as holy, loving, and present with us. The essence of worship does not change with the age of the individual.³ My presupposition is that everything done in worship must have a biblical/theological basis. However practical a certain practice may seem, it ought not to be included in worship unless it is consistent with Scripture. This is simply the Reformed regulative principle of worship. (WCF XXV,2) If we add anything to Worship, then we must prove that Scripture, by example or explicit teaching, approves the practice. For example, if we adopt children's church without Scriptural warrant, we are doing one of two things. First, we might choose to deny the validity of the regulative principle. Or, second, we might accept the regulative principle, but adopt a practice that Scripture nowhere allows. Both of these alternatives involve serious acts of disobedience to the Lord of the Church, whose Word is our only rule of faith and practice. (WCF I)⁴

Worship, as defined by our confessional standards is giving glory to God. (WCF XXI) The stress is giving praise to God, not what we receive from God. Who is to Worship? Again the WCF XXI and LC Q118 guides us in that families, individuals, and the assembly are to engage in Worship of God. One aspect of Worship can be seen as the gathering of the Church. Again, who is the church? The church is a collection of believing families.(LC Q62) Therefore, corporate Worship involves the assembling of believing families. To have children's church, even if it is voluntary, implies that the children are not full members of Christ's Church. Children's church creates fissures in the familial structure of the Church. Thus, children's church is inconsistent with a Reformed/Presbyterian view of the Church. To refuse this invitation of Worship is an insult to the One who issues it.

What is the Connection between the nature of the Church and Worship?

Do you notice that when there was an important prayer meeting, when the Word of God was to be read, or God wanted to speak to His people, it wasn't only the adults who gathered – the children came too, even the little ones! This actually means the toddlers! The Hebrew word for *little ones* is *taph*. The term comes from the tripping gait or short steps of little children. It is the little toddlers whom the adults don't want in the midst because they can make a distraction! But God wants them there. Deuteronomy 31:11-13 says, *'When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord they God in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all*

³ Sandel, Elizabeth. Including Children in Worship. P. 23

⁴ Leithart, Peter. Unpublished paper on Children & Worship

*Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and children (the Hebrew word here is *taph* meaning the little toddlers) . . . 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 . . . may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God.*⁵

A cursory reading of Scriptures shows that when God calls His people together, it includes the men, women, and children.

There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.

(NIV) Joshua 8:35

All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD.

(NIV) 2 Chr 20:13

They included all the little ones, the wives, and the sons and daughters of the whole community listed in these genealogical records. For they were faithful in consecrating themselves.

(NIV) 2 Chr 31:16-18

"Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. Deut 31:9-13

Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants. (NIV) Joel 2:16

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.(NIV) Ps 8:1-2

Turning to the New Testament, children heard Jesus preach (Mt. 14:13-21; cf. Mk. 6:30-44). Jesus encouraged people to bring their children to him and indignantly rebuked those who prevented children from coming to Him (Mt. 19:13-15; Mk.10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17). Several facts are particularly significant about this episode. First, the Greek word for little children (**paidion**) may mean "infant;" the same word is used of a newborn in John 16:21. This word is important because there is another Greek word for child (**teknon**) that refers explicitly to an older child. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the use of **paidion** in Matthew 19 and its parallels includes very young children, perhaps even nursing infants. Second, the parents brought these very young children to be blessed by Jesus, even though the children themselves would not understand the blessing. And Jesus did bless them, objectively, even though the children did not understand a word that he said. More will be said on this point below. Finally, this episode is significant because Jesus uses children as a model for adult believers. Children's church implies the opposite! It implies that children must become like adults before they can enter fully into the life of the kingdom.⁶

The rest of the New Testament corroborates, at least indirectly, these conclusions. Peter's words on Pentecost may imply that children were present during his sermon (Acts 2:38-41).

⁵ Campbell, Nancy. Should Children be in Church?

⁶ Leithart, Peter

Moreover, Paul's letters, which were read to the Churches during worship services, include specific applications to children (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20). The quite obvious implication is that the children were present to hear the exhortations.

The children's ministry should be a reflection of our covenantal theology. Robbie Castleman has a wonderful quote in her book, *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship*, which describes this process of training our children to Worship. She writes, "God invites families to be still and know him. Jesus desires the praise and worship of children. He delights in the songs of infants. God calls us to worship him; he *commands* it. In fact, so serious is this to him that if we humans fail to worship, rocks may take our place. (Luke 19:37-40) She then concludes, "Parenting in the pew is the process of putting a few rocks out of work!"