

Little Children and the Worship of God

By Pastor Randy Booth

Introduction

Should little children participate in the worship of God? Well, in one sense the Bible says that we are all little children, as Jesus indicated when He said to His disciples: “Little children, yet a little while I am with you” (John 13:33). Therefore, in principle, it is clear that little children must worship Him. But there is another sense in which we speak of “little children,” and that, of course, is in reference to infants or toddlers. What, if any obligation do they have to worship God and, more particularly, what, if any place do they have in the corporate worship of God?

As God’s people, we should rejoice over hearing infant noises in our midst. This is an indication of His covenant blessings and of His gift of life. God thereby adds to our number and advances His kingdom through the generations. But does this mean that without exception children must always be present with their parents in the congregation? This booklet seeks to offer some biblical direction for both the parents of small children as well as the congregation of corporate worshippers.

The Youngest of Children are Capable of Learning Great Things

Little children are sponges when it comes to soaking in new information. In Luke 1:44 the Bible reports this statement from Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, when she heard Mary, “For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.” Even when they seem not to be paying attention, the youngest of children often surprise us when we hear them recite the very thing we thought had passed them by (sometimes to our delight or chagrin). From the moment a child is born (or perhaps even before that), parents begin to teach their children by speaking, singings and living out before them a Christian life. The fact that they cannot articulate or emulate immediately all that we impart to them does not cause us to stop teaching them. We know that soon they will pick it up and mimic what they have been taught. Even if the child does not understand all that he is doing, he is learning that these are the things God’s people do. In time he will understand why.

There is nothing more important for a child to learn than the worship of God, both privately and corporately. This is one of the chief obligations of all God’s creatures. As we teach our children to walk and talk, at the same time we should diligently teach them the Scriptures and how they should worship God when they “sit in their house,” when they “walk in the way,” when they “lie down,” or when they “rise up,” (Deut 6:6-7). We have a clear biblical example of the importance of this very early training found in 2 Timothy 3:15, where the apostle Paul writes to Timothy saying, “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word for “child” in this text is the word used to describe a “nursing babe.” No doubt, the infant Timothy heard the word of God from the mouths of his faithful mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois from the time he was born.

Being grown-up is no guarantee that one will learn or comprehend the truth of God. Jesus is thankful that truth is revealed even to the immature: “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, ‘I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight’” (Luke 10:21). While it may be a mystery to adults, nevertheless God is clearly capable of communicating with and receiving praise from even nursing children. In fact, we read the prophecy in Psalm 8:2 that this would, in fact, be the case; a prophecy that was fulfilled in Matthew 21:15-16: “And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He [Jesus] did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David;’ they were sore displeased, and said unto Him, ‘Hearest Thou what these say?’ And Jesus saith unto them, ‘Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?’” While Christians should not be mystics, nevertheless, neither should we dismiss the fact that there are mysteries in the ways of God, and that the Spirit, like the wind, “blows where it wishes.” (John 3:8).

Children are Members of the Covenant Community

We should first be clear that all of God’s covenant promises belong to “you and your children.” Covenant children are members of the covenant community and are entitled to its benefits. Just as circumcision was an advantage for Jews—“much in every way” (Rom. 3:2)—so too, those who have received the covenant sign and seal of baptism have all the covenant privileges. Paul especially points to the fact that their chief privilege is having been given “the oracles of God.” In other words, God’s Word is given to all the members of the covenant community, including the little children.

When Moses assembled the congregation of the Lord, whereby God established them as His covenant people, the congregation was all-inclusive:

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: That He may establish thee today for a people unto Himself, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He hath said unto thee, and as He hath sworn unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; but with him that standeth here with us this day before the LORD our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day. (Deuteronomy 29:10-15)

God’s covenant with His people obviously includes not only their little children, but even those yet to be born. This covenant continues in the New Covenant where the promise is reaffirmed on the day of Pentecost: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). Even the New Testament epistles are often addressed to the constituent members

of the covenant household i.e., husbands, fathers, wives, mothers, children and slaves (cf. Eph. 5-6; Col. 3:18-25).

Children were central to the work of the Old Covenant and, since the New Covenant is but an expansion of the Old Covenant, they continue to be central to God's redemptive work among His people. At the heart of God's covenant with Abraham was the condition that God placed on Abraham: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him" (Genesis 18:19).

Should Little Children Be Included in the Public Assembly?

This is an important question. We find biblical precedent for both affirmative and negative answers, or perhaps better put: sometimes yes and sometimes no. Often, when the Bible refers to the assembly of God's people or to the congregation, it includes the youngest of children. For example, in 2 Chronicles 20:13, "And all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children"; and in Joshua 8:35, "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." Likewise, in Joel 2:15-16 we read: "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet." Soon after this trumpet call in this prophecy (2:28-32), Peter tells us that Joel was speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

Jesus Himself thought it was appropriate for children to be brought into His presence: Mark 10:13-16, "And they brought young children to Him, that He should touch them: and His disciples rebuked those that brought them. 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. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.' And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them." Again, the Greek word used here is for "nursing babes." It seems to be a mistake to forbid even the youngest of children to participate in the worship of Christ.

As a rule, covenant children should be present with the congregation for worship. They are part of the corporate body and therefore should be part of the corporate worship. This is of the essence of who they are as covenant children. Nevertheless, this is not the same as saying that it is always necessary that these little ones be present in every kind of congregational meeting. Some meetings may not be appropriate for very young children. In the Old Testament we see that three times a year only the males appeared before the Lord, and in Nehemiah 8:2 we read, "And 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." Some meetings may be especially geared to men, or pastors, or some other special occasion. They may be too

long for small children, as in the case of conferences with multiple sessions, or (as in the case cited above) it is simply beyond their comprehension. However, these meetings are primarily for instruction rather than worship.

Training Children for Worship

When children are brought into the corporate worship service it is essential that parents be conscious of the fact that it is not enough for them simply to be present, but that they must also be trained in the proper way to worship. Children should be taught to sit still and be quiet out of respect for their parents and others, and they should also learn that the reason for this is the honor and worship of God. Parents likewise have an obligation toward the other worshipers and toward God Himself not to allow their children to distract from worship. It is the parents' responsibility to teach, discipline, and maintain control of their child in the worship service. The goal is to train the child to exercise self-control and learn how to worship.

Parents must clearly establish the rules of behavior for their children as well as helping them understand the reason they are in the worship service. During this training process children will inevitably cross the lines and need further teaching, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). I mentioned in the introduction that congregations "should rejoice over hearing infant noises in our midst." One of the sounds they should rejoice over are the sounds of discipline—a child being quietly corrected by father or mother, or even the occasional sound of crying as they are being led out of the sanctuary for a more intense form of reproof.

Parents with very young infants, and those with children in the process of being trained, should sit near an exit and be prepared to quietly exit the sanctuary if their child begins to cry or otherwise becomes distracting to others. An occasional whimper or coo is normal and usually does not require much more than being picked up and rocked or patted on the back. However, if this fails to quiet the child, parents should, out of courtesy and respect for others and for worship, take their child out of the assembly until they have been quieted.

Toddlers pose a different challenge for parents. They should have been trained at this point to understand what "no" means and should be expected to sit through a service quietly. Failure to do so should be treated as any other willful disobedience (i.e., sin) and the appropriate discipline should be enforced. We all understand that they are "little children," but remember, our responsibility as parents is to bring them to maturity by teaching them what is expected and insisting that they obey. If a child is cranky because he has been sick, is cutting teeth, or has some other legitimate reason for not feeling well, then perhaps he is not equipped to be present with the congregation that day. However, even tired or sick children should not be allowed to sin.

Some practical suggestions for the parents of toddlers are:

1. Be sure you have made the rules of behavior clear to your child concerning what is expected of them during the worship service (e.g., no talking, making other noises, wiggling, rustling papers, turning around in their seat, etc.)
2. Teach them what worship is for, using terms appropriate to their age. Have “practice” for public worship during your family worship—teaching them to be quiet when the Bible is read, to listen to the preacher, and to sing psalms and hymns. If you have regular, orderly worship at home, you should have no problem at public worship on the Lord’s Day.
3. Parents know what their children’s needs are. Some kids need to burn off a little energy (e.g. running and playing), while others do better if they do not get wound up before or between services. In either case, parents are responsible to help their children be prepared for worship and children have a duty to obey their parents and conduct themselves in a respectful manner.
4. Take them to the restroom and to get a drink before or between services.
5. If your child breaks your rules during the worship service, and a minor correction does not bring about conformity, then parents should take the child out, discipline him and bring him back in. Simply taking them out of the worship service or taking them to the nursery without discipline will not work. They will simply learn that their bad behavior enables them to manipulate their parents.
6. When parents consistently teach their child that they mean what they say and will consistently punish him for it if he does not obey, he will be more inclined to heed the whispered correction during the worship service.
7. Parents should keep in mind that “toddler worship” is going to look different from adult worship. They may hold the hymnbook upside down, or say amen at the wrong place. Moreover, this will vary from child to child and they will not all learn in the same way or at the same pace. The important thing is that they are learning how to worship.

What About Nurseries?

Of course Scripture is silent about what we have come to call nurseries. The key biblical principle that governs this issue is the fact that parents are responsible for their children. The church is under no specific obligation to provide childcare, though certainly works of mercy or necessity may call for volunteer help under special circumstances. We are all sympathetic to the burdens of a new mother or mother with several children. Sometimes she feels overwhelmed by her responsibilities and may think, “it’s not even worth going to church if I have to deal with these young children.” Perhaps the following suggestions will be of some help:

1. Fathers should provide some time-off for mother during the week by caring for the children himself or at least making sure his wife has some other form of assistance from her constant labors. This will avoid having Sunday seem like the only time that she gets a break.
2. Regular church members should bring their children into the worship service immediately to begin training them in one of the most important things God calls on us to do—worship.
3. Fellow church members or relatives may be called upon to assist with this task of helping with the children during the worship service, especially when there are several children to attend.
4. Deacons should make sure that seats near the exits of the sanctuary remain available for parents with young children in order to better facilitate any needed exit.
5. Deacons, where possible, could provide a “Crying Room” for mothers and their infants. This room could be equipped with sound, video or a two-way mirror so that mothers could still receive some portion of the worship service if they have to excuse themselves temporarily.
6. A list of voluntary nursery workers should be maintained for special needs, especially for visitors whose children may not be under control or prepared to sit through a worship service.

Conclusion

Clearly, little children should be a part of the corporate worship. They are ready to participate with the congregation as soon as parents assume the responsibility to teach, train and discipline their children for worship. Certainly, there are exceptions where it is either unwise or inappropriate for very young children to be present in a congregational meeting. In such cases, while parents are still responsible for the care of their children, a volunteer nursery may prove of genuine Christian service to meet these temporary needs.

When parents take seriously their responsibility to train their children to participate in the corporate worship of God—respecting the needs of the others present—then their little ones will be a delight to everyone—especially the Lord. Likewise, the patience, prayers and help given these parents and children by the rest of the congregation will facilitate the preparation of covenant children for the worship service. This labor will be well worth the effort as another generation of children is equipped to faithfully serve and worship our glorious God.