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Part 1: Including Children in the Worship Service

Introduction

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Mark 10:13-15)

Jesus is still opening His arms and inviting children to come to Him, and one time that happens is when His "Bride" gathers together to worship Him.

It has been more than 50 years since the two of us were "growing up" in the church. At that time, it seemed that most church-going parents and their children understood that they should attend the church service together. None in our circles considered an alternative service for children or proposed strategies for helping children participate in the worship service...families just did it.

Today in many churches, especially larger ones, the idea of including children in the corporate worship service of the church feels countercultural. How did we get to this point in time when including children in an "adult" worship service seems like a radical idea? In a blog post titled, "Sunday Schooling Our Kids Out of Church," Tim Wright gives us part of the answer.

About 40 years ago a profound shift took place in many Christian congregations across the country...for all the right reasons...with one troubling unintended consequence: In the 1960's and 1970's, my generation, Baby Boomers, rebelled against the "institutional church" just as we did with every other institution our parents built/supported. We rebelled by dropping out: 2/3rds of my generation dropped out of church.

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In the late 1970's/early 1980's, innovative pastors and congregations of all sizes and denominations looked for ways to draw Boomers back to church. They began to create worship experiences based on the unique "personality" of the Boomer generation. These churches went "contemporary," "seeker," and/or "seeker-friendly." Because these were the primary parenting years for Boomers, these congregations recognized the need to not only provide Boomer-friendly worship experiences for adults, but the need to create dynamic experiences for their children as well, knowing that if the kids wanted to come back, the parents were more likely to come back.

So began a shift from kids worshipping with the big people for one hour followed by all ages attending a second hour of Sunday School, to churches creating Sunday School experiences for kids that ran concurrently with their parents' worship service. In other words, kids and parents were separated from each other, having different Sunday experiences.

Again, the reasons were right...or so we thought. Because these new Boomer services had a sense of evangelism about them (trying to win Boomers back to the church) we didn't want anything to interrupt their focus...like squirming or crying or screaming kids. Church leaders sensed that Boomer parents wanted the one hour break from their kids—that they wanted to focus on their own spiritual life for an hour away from the distraction of their children. And, again, we assumed, reasonably so, that worship targeted to adult boomers would not be all that engaging for kids. So dynamic Sunday school programs were created to engage the kids at their level in their language while their parents were in worship. In fact, some churches didn't (and don't) allow kids into big people worship at all.

*The result: Many of these innovated congregations had a positive, significant impact on the lives of disenfranchised Boomers and their kids. Many saw their congregations and their children's ministries grow exponentially. The evangelism imperative to reconnect with Boomers seemed to work. But there was (and is) one huge unintended consequence: We have raised the largest **unchurched** generation in the history of our country.¹*

¹ Tim Wright. "Sunday Schooling Our Kids Out of Church," August 5, 2014, patheos.com/blogs/searchingfor-tomsawyer/2014/08/sunday-schooling-our-kids-out-of-church/

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Wright's last sentence is startling and sobering. While there are certainly other reasons contributing to the decline in church attendance among young people in our country, there does seem to be a significant connection between the rise of alternative "experiences for kids that ran concurrently with their parents' worship service" and the unprecedented numbers of young people dropping out of church. In our well-intended efforts to reach our children at their level, have we unwittingly hindered our little ones from coming to Christ?

Children and the Corporate Gathering of God's People: A Biblical Norm

As we consider the question of children and their participation in the corporate gathering of God's people, it is helpful to observe how the Bible addresses this question, and then how it has been addressed historically in the church.

Not surprisingly, there is very little specific biblical instruction on this topic, most likely because it was a non-issue. The presence of children was assumed whenever the people of God gathered. In his well-researched book, *Children in the Early Church*, Dr. William Strange notes this:

...in asking questions about the place of children in the church, we are not going to find out all the answers we might want because we are posing questions about matters which do not seem to have been a problem to the earliest Christians...This does not mean, though, that we can discover nothing at all about children in the early church, only that what we discover will be drawn from inferences or from passing references.²

What we can conclude from these "inferences" and "passing references" is that children were present, both when Israel gathered in the Old Testament and when the church gathered in the New Testament.

Children and Worship in the Old Testament

We can point to several Old Testament passages that indicate the presence of children in the corporate gathering:

² William A. Strange. *Children in the Early Church: Children in the Ancient World, the New Testament and the Early Church*. (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 1996), 66.