

“Let The Children Come To Me” in Worship

by David Michael

CHILDREN AND THE CORPORATE GATHERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE: A BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL NORM

CHILDREN AND WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Feast of Booths-Deuteronomy 31: 10-13 And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, **and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God,** as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”

After the Fall of Ai, Joshua 8:34-35 And afterward he 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 commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them. Jehoshaphat calling for fasting and prayer. 2 Chronicles 20 After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. 2 Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar” (that is, Engedi). 3 Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. 4 **And Judah assembled** to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.

Verse 11: behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. 12 O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you

Verse 13: Meanwhile all Judah **stood** before the LORD, **with their little ones**, their wives, and their children.

Verse 15 “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s....17 You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.”18 Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and **all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem** (assume “with their little ones, their wives and their children”) fell down before the LORD, worshipping the LORD.

“Let The Children Come To Me” in Worship

Ezra Mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles--Ezra 10:1

*“While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, **a very great assembly of men, women, and children,** gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly.”*

Gathering at the Water Gate-- Nehemiah 8

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, **both men and women and all who could understand what they heard**, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate **from early morning until midday**, (about 6 hours) **in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand**. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and **as he opened it all the people stood**. 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Matthew Henry commentary on Nehemiah 8:2

“Masters of families should bring their families with them to the public worship of God. Women and children have souls to save, and are therefore concerned to acquaint themselves with the word of God and attend on the means of knowledge and grace. Little ones, as they come to the exercise of reason, must be trained up in the exercises of religion”.¹

CHILDREN AND WORSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Feeding of the 5,000--Matthew 14:21

And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children

Who is the greatest? Matthew 18:1-4 (also Mk 9:36-37)

“ At that time he disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”

To such belong the Kingdom. Matthew 19:13-15

when the: “...children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away.”

1. Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume* (634). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Children obey your parents--Ephesians 6:1-3 (cf. Col. 3:20)

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

Children and Worship in Church History

Martin Luther 1483-1546--The Table Talk of Martin Luther

When I preach, I sink myself deep down. I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom are here in this church above forty; but I have an eye to the multitude of young people, children, and servants, of whom are more than two thousand. I preach to those, directing myself to them that have need thereof. Will not the rest hear me? The door stands open unto them; they may be gone.

John Bunyan 1628-1688-- Family Duty: A Father’s Duty to His Family

You should also labor to draw them out to God’s public worship, if perhaps God may convert their souls. Said Jacob to his household, and to all that were about him, “Let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress” (Genesis 35:3). Hannah would carry Samuel to Shiloh, that he might abide with God forever (1 Sam. 1:22). . . .

If they are obstinate, and will not go with you, then bring godly and sound men to your house, and there let the word of God be preached, when you have, as Cornelius, gathered your family and friends together (Acts 10).

Matthew Henry 1662-1714 Remarks in his commentary—1st Samuel 1:19-28

“Little children should learn...to worship God. Their parents should instruct them in worship and bring them to it, put them upon engaging in it as well as they can, and God will graciously accept them and teach them to do better.”

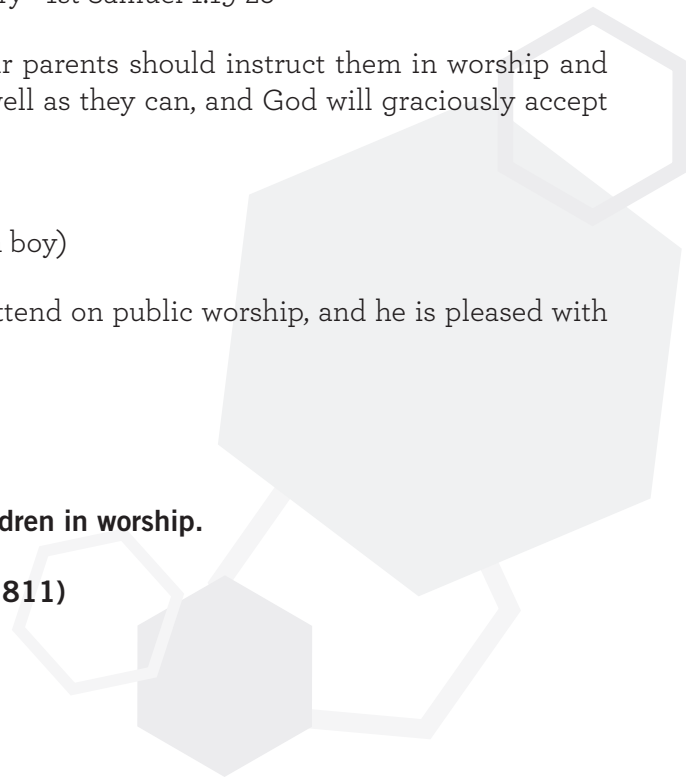
Comments on Luke 2:41-52 (Jesus in the Temple as a boy)

“It is for the honor of Christ that children should attend on public worship, and he is pleased with their hosannas.”

A Philosophical Shift

Four major Influences in the shift in thinking about children in worship.

1. Sunday School Movement “Robert Raikes (1736-1811)



2. **Shift to Age-specific Learning John D. Philbrick (1818-1886)**

3. **“The establishment of adolescence—G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924)**

4. **Pursuing “Unchurched Harry”**

“one huge unintended consequence”, namely We have raised the largest unchurched generation in the history of our country. He admits that “there are many reasons why each generation in our culture is increasingly distanced from the church. Some have to do with societal shifts that have nothing to do with the church. Some have to do with the inability of the church to articulate the Gospel in compelling ways” but then, Wright wonders if one of the reasons is because we have “shifted kids out of the main worship experience, enculturated them in their own program, and robbed them of any touch points with the rest of the body of Christ. Another way of saying it: by segregating our kids out of worship, we never assimilated them into the life of the congregation. They had no touch points. They had no experience. They had no connection with the main worship service—its liturgy, its music, its space, its environment, and its adults. It was a foreign place to them. And so...once they finished with the kids/or youth program, they left the church. He concludes by saying: “With good intentions we attempted to raise kids to be Christians, but we didn’t raise them to be Churched Christians. And perhaps that, in part, is why so few of them attend a church today”.²

An Important Note of Clarification

2. Wright, Tim, Sunday Schooling Our Kids Out of Church, Blog Post August 5, 2014

Why should children participate when the church gathers for worship?

1. There is spiritual benefit for children who participate in the worship service.

- The Holy Spirit is present when the church is gathered

Matthew 18:20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

John 16:13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...

- The Word of God is powerful.

Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

- There are intangible aspects in the service which children pick up on and learn from even if they are not understanding all the words.

“There is a sense of solemnity and awe which children should experience in the presence of God. This is not likely to happen in children’s church. Is there such a thing as children’s thunder or children’s lightning or the crashing of the sea “for children”?³

A deep sense of the unknown and the mysterious can rise in the soul of a sensitive child in solemn worship—if his parents are going hard after God themselves. A deep moving of the magnificence of God can come to the young, tender heart through certain moments of great hymns or “loud silence” or authoritative preaching. These are of immeasurable value in the cultivation of a heart that fears and loves God.”

- Children are learning more than we think are

“Children absorb a tremendous amount that is of value. And this is true even if they say they are bored.... Music and words become familiar. The message of the music starts to sink in. The form of the service comes to feel natural. The choir makes a special impression with a kind of music the children may hear at no other time. Even if most of the sermon goes over their heads, experience shows that children hear and remember remarkable things”⁴

3. Piper, John and Noel, “The Family: Together in God’s Presence” Article, January 1, 1996 <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-family-together-in-gods-presence>

4. Ibid.

2. It involves children in the most central, most regular, most valuable, and most corporate activity of the church.

- It communicates to children that they are a part of the congregation
- The presence of children in the worship service is a reminder to the church of their responsibility for nurturing the faith of the next generation
- Excluding children from corporate worship fosters a detachment from the church
- Good habits and spiritual disciplines that are established in childhood are more likely to continue into adulthood

“...unless we teach them otherwise, (children who grow up regularly attending the worship service) will grow up thinking: ‘This is where I belong on Sunday morning...’ It will never enter their heads that not being there is a possibility if we expect it of them.”⁵

We do not believe that children who have been in children’s church for several years between the ages of 6 and 12 will be more inclined or better trained to enjoy worship than if they had spent those years at the side of their parents. In fact, the opposite is probably the case.⁶

It will probably be harder to acclimate a 10- or 12-year-old to a new worship service than a 5- or 6-year-old. The cement is much less wet, and vast possibilities of shaping the impulses of the heart are gone.⁷

Teenagers in our culture often balk at attending corporate worship. But how many of our teenagers have we setup for this reaction, because we did not consistently include them in worship until they were a teenager? If attending church for years has always meant coloring Bible pictures, singing songs to a cd, playing games, and doing crafts—then we should not be surprised that our young people find worship to be odd, uncomfortable, and even boring. I love good children’s songs—they ring through my house. I love good children’s Christian crafts—they decorate my study. But if this alone is the rhythm of church life we have set up for our children week in and week out, we have done them a great disservice. They must see, know, and learn that the singing of the great hymns of the faith, the preaching of the Word, reading of confessions, corporate prayers, etc. is anything but boring. It is the gathered life of the community of faith. It is our weekly rhythm—appointed by God, designed by Him, established for the ages—this is what we want them to know, because we want them to know and worship Him.

“Worship is the most valuable thing a human can do. The cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad between the ages of 4 and 17 is incalculable.”

5. Piper, John *The Children, The Church, and the Chosen* Bethlehem Baptist Church, Sunday Evening Message, September 22, 1980 <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-children-the-church-and-the-chosen>

6. Piper, John and Noel, “The Family: Together in God’s Presence” Article, January 1, 1996, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-family-together-in-gods-presence>

7. *Ibid.*

8. Helopoulos, Jason *Children in Worship—Let’s Bring it Back*, Posted by Kevin DeYoung March 6, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung>

3. It provides children with an intergenerational experience and thus the opportunity to be influenced and benefit from the example of others especially their parents.

- Our children are more likely to cherish the worship of God if they witness that heart for worship in us.
- Children will observe genuine worship in adults which can stir their hearts to worship. They see them bow their heads in earnest prayer, or lift their hands in praise.
- Children can observe a hunger for the Word of God which can stir their own hearts to hunger for God's word.

“What a benefit there is when children witness their mother or father singing with conviction, praying in reverence, listening intently to the sermon, or receiving the Lord's Supper in joy. In these moments a child witnesses the importance of faith and worship. There are few greater encouragements to a child's faith than seeing their parents worship God with reverence and joy.”⁹

*Emphasis is on what they see you receive from the pastor and worship leader and worship team—what are they seeing and hearing around them and how it affects the people around them*¹⁰

4. It facilitates the discipleship of our children

- Bringing children into the worship service is an opportunity for them to learn how to worship God and discover the joy of what they were created for
- Children can be taught to listen and engage with what is being said even if they do not understand everything.
- The content of prayers, songs, and sermons give parents the opportunity to discuss, explain and teach truths to their children
- They learn how to sit quietly and to submit to their parents

“..the desire to have children in the worship service is part of a broader concern that children be reared so that they are “submissive and respectful in every way” (1 Timothy 3:4). To sit still and be quiet for an hour or two on Sunday is not an excessive expectation for a healthy 6-year-old who has been taught to obey his parents. It requires a measure of discipline, but that is precisely what we want to encourage parents to impart to their children in the first five years.”¹¹

- Children do understand great truths from the sermon and especially if they are trained to listen well can become astute students of the Word.

9. Helopoulos, Jason *Children in Worship—Let's Bring it Back*, Posted by Kevin DeYoung March 6, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung>

10. Burk, Bud *The Generations in the Worship Service*, Seminar, *Children Desiring God National Conference*, May 03, 2013, Audio Recording: http://ethomasmedia.com/cdg/audio/2013Conference/Burk_Generations.mp3

11. Piper, John and Noel, “*The Family: Together in God's Presence*” Article, January 1, 1996 <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-family-together-in-gods-presence>

Leading toward this Vision—A few ideas

1. Pray that God would open a door
2. Be careful and sensitive—proceed with winsomeness and grace
3. Begin with vision
4. Educate the congregation and the parents
5. Discuss issues, concerns, burdens with the leadership
6. Take a long view—“baby steps”



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