

CHILDREN AND CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP: WHEN, WHY AND HOW?

At some point every Christian parent faces this question: At what age should my children begin participating in the corporate worship service of the church? For the parents who not only want the best for their child, but also recognize the spiritual importance of the gathered worship community, this is a question that bears serious consideration. The purpose of this article is to explore the issue, offer some biblical insights, suggest a solution, and then offer some tips on making the corporate worship experience a meaningful one for you and your children when they reach that point in their life when they begin participating in the gathered worship of the church.

THE ISSUE

Everyone agrees that, at some point, participation in the corporate gathered worship of the church is essential. Hebrews 10:25 exhorts the believer not to forsake the gathered meeting of the church. It is in the corporate meeting that the people of God enter his presence in a unique way as they blend their voices together in praise and prayer, and are instructed by Christ through the preaching of his Word. It is in the gathered meeting that the Lord's Supper and baptism are celebrated, greatly encouraging the believer's heart as he participates in the reality of Christ's promised mystical presence (I Corinthians 10:14-17). It is in the congregation that the individual is reminded that he is not alone, that he is in loving relationship with others who have been saved by grace alone, and that this united company is called upon to be the visible face of the invisible God before the watching world. Throughout church history it has always been a point of agreement among God's people that the gathered, corporate meeting is essential, not only to the individual but to the mission of the church in this world.

But at what age can we reasonably expect our children to reap the benefits of the corporate worship and preaching service? Before answering, it must be said that attendance in the church service will never damage a child, regardless of his or her age, providing the service is done in a manner worthy of Christ. However, it is proper to ask at what age may a child best be benefited by participation in the corporate worship service? As we begin our search for an answer, we must first ask if there are any biblical texts that give us instruction in this area.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

While children are seen to be vitally important to God, and occupy an honored position in the ministry of Jesus (see Mark 9:36-42; 10:13-16), there is no direct biblical statement on when children should participate in the corporate worship service of the church.

However, there are several passages that describe preaching and teaching events, and list children as in attendance (see Deuteronomy 31:12-13; 2 Chronicles 20:13; 31:18; Nehemiah 12:43; Matthew 14:21; Acts 20:9-12). In fact, there is not one passage that describes an occasion where the children were taught separately from the adults in a setting of gathered, corporate worship. What is clear is that the instruction of children was everywhere assigned to the home, with the father as primarily responsible (see Exodus 10:1-2; 12:26-27; Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Proverbs 1-7).

The fact that the biblical examples show that families gathered together with other families to worship the Lord and be instructed does not necessarily answer the question for us today. For nowhere is there a prohibition against teaching children by themselves. In fact, one passage in Nehemiah gives some valuable insight into the question we face today: "The priest Ezra brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month" (Nehemiah 8:2).

From this text it appears that there is one consideration that we may make regarding the presence of children in the corporate teaching service: Can they listen with understanding? It is apparent that, at least in the situation described by Nehemiah, some of the people were not included in the corporate teaching time because they would not understand what was being said. In the context of Nehemiah it must be remembered that the people had been in captivity

for many decades in Babylon and Persia. During that time a whole new generation of Hebrew children grew up in a culture that spoke a language other than Hebrew. It could be that Nehemiah 8:2 suggests that those who will benefit from the teaching of Scripture will be those who possess the necessary language and reasoning skills. While this may not suggest a particular age, it may prove useful to us as we search for a solution to our question.

Now we turn to the history of the church to see how this question has been handled historically.

CHURCH HISTORY

As with biblical history, the history of the church demonstrates that families worshiped together. Unlike the Jewish synagogue, the early church was occupied by both genders at the same time, and welcomed children (see 1 Corinthians 14:34; Acts 20:9-12: Here a lad is mentioned but it is also mentioned that he fell asleep during the sermon. And it cost him his life. Graciously, God gave him another one!) Along the way in the history of the church the question of teaching children gave rise to the use of catechisms. These consisted of a series of questions and biblical answers that could be used by parents to teach their kids the fundamental truths of the Bible and Christian theology. The consistent pattern of the church was that the instruction of children took place primarily in the home.

In the latter centuries of the church, the Sunday school movement began (nineteenth century) in response to the growing secularism of the nations. No longer did parents take their children to church, much less train them at home in the ways of God. In the early years of the movement it was not unusual for Sunday schools to begin in cities and draw hundreds of children even before a church was officially founded. Out of this came the wise practice of creating age-specific teaching situations for both kids and adults for the purpose of further instructing them in the things of the Christian faith. These Sunday school classes were meant to supplement the corporate worship/preaching service, not replace it. The genius of the Sunday school came to be seen in that it offered a teaching opportunity that complimented the learning experience of the gathered worship service. In the gathered service, the majesty and holiness of God, were proclaimed in the use of music and prayer, while the mysteries of God were explored in the sacraments and sermon. The Sunday school offered a life-on-life setting where instruction could be combined with personal interaction, and the whole event could be tailored to meet the special learning needs of various ages and groups. Used together these two church settings – Sunday school, and the worship service – offered the family a well-rounded opportunity to grow in their knowledge of Christ, and their connectedness to other Christians.

Today, we are seeing the balance between Sunday school and church erode. What was always meant to be taken together has today become optional. Many people attend one or the other and never realize that they are depriving themselves of a necessary component of Christian living. But what is most discouraging is when Sunday school becomes the only area in which an individual participates. For while Sunday school provides a necessary component to the maturing Christian, it does not provide the sufficient components of worship and praise, Word and sacrament that the Bible declares are essential for the believer.

Now you may be wondering just what this has to do with our question regarding the participation of children in the corporate worship service. Just this: As good as Sunday school is, it can never provide for us that which God extends to us in the various elements of corporate, gathered worship. When we come to grasp this firmly, we will come to see that as parents, we must look forward with great urgency and excitement to that day when our children can be part of the corporate worshiping community with us. Rather than put it off further and further, we must work hard to hasten the day when our children can attend “with understanding” and reap the spiritual benefits God offers us as the gathered Body of Christ.

Before going any further, let’s summarize what’s been said so far. First, the Bible and history agree that the primary responsibility for the instruction of children rests on the parents. Second, the church can and should assist in the teaching and training of children by providing age-appropriate learning opportunities. Third, as beneficial as these are-specific classes may be,

they do not provide those essential elements of Christian worship that make up the corporate preaching/worship service. Fourth, since corporate worship is of great benefit to God's people, we must look forward with great anticipation to the day when our children can join us. This all adds up to this: The responsibility of parents in teaching and training their children to love Christ must include an intentional plan to prepare their children to participate in corporate worship as soon as they can.

A PROPOSED SOLUTION

Before going on to give my personal answer to the question posed, let me state categorically that this is *my* answer. Unlike the cardinal doctrines of the church which can be affirmed on the basis of direct biblical evidence, my answer here does not come with the weight of "thus saith the Lord." It is simply my studied opinion, taking into consideration the way the church has dealt with the question historically, what we have come to understand about children, and my personal, though limited, experience with kids in church.

Take Responsibility. The place to start is to recognize that as a parent, you are the one primarily responsible for the spiritual instruction of your children. Regardless of what classes and programs they are involved in, the Scripture is clear that God expects you to superintend the religious instruction and moral training of your children. This may mean that you have to become more knowledgeable yourself, and that you have to spend time with your kids discussing the truths of Scripture, and the ways God wants us to live. What you will find is that, as you work hard to teach and train your children, your own understanding of Christ will grow, and you will look back to see that God used your kids to bring you further down the road of true discipleship.

Take Advantage. Busy parents in a chaotic world need help! That is why our churches offer a full children's program. We encourage people to take advantage of the many wonderful age-specific learning opportunities for their kids, and for them. Programs like AWANA are specifically designed to help kids memorize Scripture, and Sunday morning classes for every age provide excellent learning opportunities.

Take Action. Bring your children with you to the worship service as soon as they can reasonable be expected to sit quietly and benefit from the experience. The specific age at which this will happen may differ from family to family, from child to child. But, at the risk of offending some, let me suggest that third grade is not too early for some; fourth grade is probably about right for most, and certainly all but some special-needs kids should be in the worship service by the time they enter fifth grade. Let me give you some reasons why:

By the fourth grade children are universally expected to sit attentively for long periods of time in school.

They have reached a level of mental development where they can think analytically and develop solutions to story problems.

They have gained sufficient vocabulary and language comprehension to be able to read a newspaper, listen to a television newscast, and, increasingly, install and operate complex software programs and games (usually long before their parents have even a cursory understanding!).

They already have strong opinions regarding right and wrong, and are beginning to form opinions about moral absolutes.

They are increasingly susceptible to peer pressure, and have begun needing more than the simple explanations they were given as young children regarding things like evil, murder, pain, sex, and family problems.

Perhaps even more important, our children have; by the age of nine, been exposed to more humanistic philosophy, more crime, more sexuality, and more sin than any generation in history.

It is widely accepted among educators that children are able to take in and understand much more than they can communicate. Children can absorb truth that is seemingly beyond their years. An example of this is that many pastors and missionaries testify that they felt God's call on their lives as very young children.

We must make our churches very much "kid-oriented." By that I mean we must understand what having kids involved in our church means, and be excited about it! As a congregation, we must value the presence of kids in our services and fully expect that they will whisper and fidget. We need to see this as a sign of life.

For all these reasons and more, we must think seriously about using every spiritual advantage God gives us to strengthen our children's understanding of the holiness of God, his righteousness, the glories of Christ, and comfort of his Word, the nature of the church as the Body of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to stand against the increasing temptations of a sin-infested society.

Further, around the age of nine or ten (and some much earlier), children who have come to trust savingly in Christ Jesus begin to ask questions regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is as it should be. As parents, it is our great joy to explain the precious meaning of these sacraments. As our children come to understand them, it is also appropriate for them to begin to participate in them with the corporate worshiping community. The significance of the sacraments rests in that they demonstrate not only our union with Christ, but to a great extent, our inclusion in the body of Christ and our union with one another. It would be quite inappropriate to consider that a child could be old enough to celebrate the sacraments and yet not ready to participate regularly in the worship service.

Take Time. One of the best things about having our children in the worship service is that it opens up a whole new opportunity for meaningful discussion with them. To prepare your child for the coming Sunday, take time to pray with him or her, asking God specifically to give you both ready minds, open ears, and soft hearts to commune with the Lord, praise him worthily, and accept the instruction of the Word. It also helps to read the text of Scripture to be taught that morning during the week. As your kids watch what they observe, and brainstorm some questions with them. Then, come expecting to get some answers. Help your child remember the context, and any important principles taught in the past weeks, as well.

Take time also to lay down some "Sunday morning rules." Think of how your family can best arrive at the service with their hearts and minds focused on the Lord. One rule I have found effective is "no television on Sunday morning." We try our best to keep the atmosphere of the home focused on the Lord and use good Christian music, instead of other forms of media, to keep us on track. Other rules you might consider: curbing Saturday evening activities so children can be well rested; setting consistent wake-up times, and establishing routines for getting ready without rushing on Sunday morning, and spending a few moments in prayer as you leave your driveway.

After the service is over, take time with your children to see what they learned, and what questions they have. Allow them to express themselves, and be careful not to curb their natural curiosity. Take advantage of the time to encourage their spiritual thirst by allowing and encouraging their questions. Remember that all of us have been stumped by the simple direct question of a child. Don't be afraid to say "Won, Honey, that is a great question, and I am going to think about it, and do some study, and I promise I will have an answer for you real soon." Then, get busy!

So let's review. If we correctly understand the benefits of gathered, corporate worship, we will see the advantage introducing our children to it as soon as possible. Some families may choose to bring their children to the worship service at a very early age. And it must be understood that there is no harm in doing so, either to the child or the congregation. Others may choose to wait until their children reach an age where they can better understand and

actively participate. I suggest that by the second grade parents should have a plan for training and preparing their children so that in the next few years the children can join in corporate worship.

THE BENEFITS OF INCLUDING KIDS IN WORSHIP

In addition to the general benefits of kids coming to see themselves as part of the Body of Christ, there are many specific benefits to having children in the corporate worship service:

1) As they see their parents worshipping, listening and learning, children come to learn that loving God is a worthy, serious, lifelong pursuit. Educators often remind us that there are two kinds of learning: that which is taught, and that which is modeled. Facts and figures can be taught anywhere, and they certainly are essential. But the attitudes of life are best taught through the model of a faithful life. When it comes to learning how to worship our God in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:21-24) it is essential that our children grow in their understand of the “facts and figures” regarding God. But this alone is not enough. They must also learn the attitudes of the heart that are the foundation of true worship. And this is best learned as they watch their parents and other adults in the gathered setting of corporate worship.

2) As they participate in the singing, the prayers, the sacraments, and the scriptural instruction, they begin the process of learning how to worship in spirit and truth. It is important that we not make the mistake of thinking that the worship of the Almighty is a simple, or easy task. A careful reading of Exodus and Leviticus and other Old Testament passages shows that God intended his people to take great care to worship him. He demanded that they prepare themselves, that they approach him correctly, and that they expend themselves in a careful, diligent pursuit of his glory. Learning to revere God, to approach him in both reverential awe and joyous celebration takes effort. As with all the essential things in life, we must help our children gain the necessary knowledge and skills needed to be the true worshipers God himself is seeking.

3) Through the music of praise and worship children begin more fully to understand that God is great and greatly to be praised. The church has always considered music a grand part of its worship heritage. Yet, today many children have little if any appreciation for the great hymns and songs of Christianity. Where else will your children gain a knowledge and appreciation for excellent music designed to bring glory to God?

4) Through corporate prayer children come to understand that prayer is more than just a way to let God know what they want. It is a way to demonstrate our humility before God, our dependence upon him, and our complete confession that he alone is holy, majestic, sovereign, and the fountain of eternal life.

5) Through the focus of the worship service children come to see that God, and not man, is the center of all things. One of the benefits of age-specific training classes is that material is brought down to the kid's level. Yet, while this facilitates learning it also has the effect of allowing the child to think that he or she is the focus of God's attention, that God exists to love him/her and take care of him/her.

In a way, this is not wrong, but left uncompleted, this view of God is dangerous. God is the center of all things. We exist for him. We are the debtors who owe him all things, and are called upon to love and serve him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. A corporate worship service, properly organized, serves to focus the mind on the greatness of God. Such a fundamental understanding of God, and of our place in his universe is essential to faithful Christian living. The best place to reinforce it is in the corporate worship setting.

6) Through participation in the Lord's Supper and baptism, children come to understand their equal standing in the body of Christ as redeemed sons and daughters of the King.

7) Through the systematic teaching of God's Word, children grow in their knowledge of God and Scriptures, even through they may not recognize it. Here I draw on my personal experience

as a preacher's kid. Growing up, I sat in the preaching services every Sunday morning and night, listening to my father teach through the Bible. If you asked me to describe any of those thousands of sermons, I could not do it. But when I entered Christian college and aced the general Bible knowledge test required of every freshman, I realized that somehow, those hours of listening to the preaching of the Word had filled me with a knowledge of the Bible that few of my classmates had. I am convinced that kids hear more, and retain more, than we as parents think they do.

8) Before going on to address some of the specific questions about children and worship, let me suggest one other advantage to having them in the worship service. As stated, it will help our young people in their spiritual progress, as well as push the parents in their own understanding of the faith. But it also will have a pleasant effect on the congregation. First, it is a delight for us to see children worship the Lord, to hear their voices blended with ours, and to be reminded that the body of Christ is not restricted to adults only. Second, the presence of children ought to impact the way we do church. It must make us accountable, as we plan and carry out the services, to keep the message clear and accessible for all. Personally, I believe this would bring an increasing freshness to our worship times, and though challenging, would make our services more of what God desires for all of us.

SOME QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIONS DESERVING ANSWERS

1. *My big fear is that my child won't understand what is going on, and will become discouraged and learn to hate church. What should I do?*

First, let's be honest. In my church, we're talking about seventy-five minutes a week; just slightly longer than the sixty-minute television shows today's kids watch every night.

To believe that sitting quietly while God's people gather to sound his praise, engage him in corporate prayer, demonstrate their union with Christ in the sacraments, and listen to the Word preached will be detrimental to the child's spiritual progress is simply not true.

Given the thoughts and attitudes that stream into our children through the media, the schools, and their peers, seventy-five minutes devoted to the worship of Almighty God provides a much-needed respite for our kids even if they didn't understand a single thing. But I am convinced that even this is not the case, for kids catch a lot more than we think, even in church.

Second, you must understand that your child's attitude toward God, toward his truth, and toward corporate worship will, in large measure, be shaped by yours. If, as you raise your children, a high view of God – his holiness, his worth, and his worship – permeates your home and produces in you as parents an excitement toward corporate worship, your children will develop a healthy perspective toward worship as well. But if Sunday is just another day to you, and getting up and going to church seems to be one hassle after another, don't be surprised if your children begin their corporate worship with an attitude that it just isn't worth the effort. Think about it: "Attitude is contagious: Is yours worth catching?"

Third, it is not a bad thing if your child does not understand everything, or even most things. Let me explain. In the Old Testament, there are many passages like Exodus 12:24, 26-27a. In commanding the people of Israel to celebrate Passover, the Lord says: "You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children... And when your children as you, "What do you mean by this observance? You shall say... "God is saying that the kids of Israel, in participating in a rite that they did not understand, would be moved by curiosity to ask their parents for help in understanding the truth. In fact, this seems to be built into the system: the natural curiosity of kids, when confronted with new things that they don't understand, leads to the best learning situation of all – hearing from Mom and Dad as they explain the things of God.

Imagine the possibilities with your own kids: Mom, why do we sometimes stand when the Scripture is read in church? Why do we sing songs about the Lord? Why does the pastor only preach from the Bible? What do the juice and the bread mean? Why do we pray in church?

Frankly, the idea that our children will not understand something ought to fill us with great anticipation, as we encourage their natural curiosity, and answer it with the truth of God. This is a wonderful opportunity to encourage your child to learn. It is a well-known fact in education that we all, both adults and children, learn best when we are hit with new information that demands our attention. What a wonderful privilege is before us as parents to be actively involved in the spiritual nurture and growth of our children in the things of God.

Fourth, let's be careful to give our children credit. They may not get everything (does anyone?) that is done on a Sunday morning, but they *can* understand many things, and they can grow in their learning as they attend over time. In many ways it is like taking your kids to an air show. As you walk around looking at all the types of airplanes, you can be sure that your child does not understand the physics of flight, the engineering specifications that enable the different airplanes to do different things, or anything about the sophisticated electronic gear that modern planes require. Yet, kids love things that go fast, and make a lot of noise, and when the planes start zooming overhead, they know what to look for! Now, would an aeronautical engineer get more out of it? Sure, but that doesn't lessen the things that the child gets. So it is in church services where God is honored and his Word is preached. Some folks come in with a bucket, some with a cup, and some with a thimble. Regardless, as God showers us with his grace and truth, everyone can go home full, from the greatest to the least. Our great joy as parents is to challenge our children to learn, and assist them in the process through preparation before the service, and conversation after.

2. My child complains that he is bored in the worship service. What should I do?

First, don't fall for the idea that simply because the child says he is bored that you need to change his situation. What do you do when your son says he is bored with school? What do you do when he says that he is bored with his chores? You do what I do – you don't change the situation, but you work with him, trying to broaden his perspective on school, or the chores, so that he sees it as a benefit both to him, and to others.

It is my experience that very seldom does boredom in kids mean anything more than "I'm just not willing to do what I am supposed to do with a good attitude!" Since they know they can't say that, they say "Daddy, I'm bored," and we parents, who seem to have fallen for the myth that kids must always be happy and entertained, hustle to bring some excitement into their lives. Quite frankly, the idea that life always has to be exciting, and that periods of inactivity, quiet reflection, or serious thought are enemies to our children is not only wrong, but dangerous – especially to our kids.

Second, get involved in your child's life by explaining what worship is, why we do it, and why we do it the way we do it. If you don't know the answers, find them, and begin the process of training your child to be a diligent, hardworking worshiper of God.

And don't be afraid of a little boredom. If your child learns how to sit quietly and remain in control even when things are not happening the way he would like them, he has taken a great step forward in learning self-control. He is developing a strength of character that refuses to allow circumstances to dictate his actions. It used to be that kids learned this at an early age. Today, as more and more we are giving our kids all they ask for, they are growing older and older before learning that sometimes you don't get what you want, and you have to remain in control of yourself with a good attitude anyway!

3. I appreciate the worship service for many reasons, but one of them is that I don't have to worry about my kids since they are not there! Having to keep them still and entertained would ruin the service for me.

Certainly as a parent you must be the judge of when your child is able to sit in the service and not be a distraction, both to you and to others. However, there is a difference between small children who are wiggly and noisy by nature, and older kids who, through insufficient parenting,

simply have not learned how to sit respectfully in a church service. As a parent it is your responsibility to train your children to obey your direction, both at home and at church functions.

While every parent can identify with the peace that comes when the kids are elsewhere, it must be clearly stated that the church service is not the place to escape from your children. When they are very young the service may not be a suitable place for them. But as they grow older, and as we train them to obey and act in a way that is respectful and courteous, it becomes a privilege to have our children with us in public. If having your older children with you in the service is a burden to you, the question is not about the proper time to bring your kids in, but a question of parental consistency in the area of raising obedient children.

4. How should I begin preparing my child to sit in the worship service with me?

First explain it as a privilege to worship the Lord with the whole church body, and present it as a challenge that you are going to help your child meet.

Second, pray with your children often about their spiritual progress, including a request that the Lord give them eyes and ears to see and hear what he has for them in the worship service.

Third, develop a plan for helping your children learn one or two “big ideas” from every service.

And last, let your kids know up front that there will be many things they don't understand, and that you welcome their questions. Then, get busy so you can answer their questions in a clear and meaningful way.

Reprinted with permission from author, David Hegg. Article first appeared in:

REFORMATION & REVIVAL

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 10 – Number 1 – Winter 2001

Author

David Hegg is senior pastor, Corona Evangelical Free Church, Corona, California, and the author of *Appointed to Preach: Assessing a Call to the Ministry* (Christian Focus, 1999). He has previously contributed to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He is married and the father of three children.