



Children in Worship

| *How does your congregation include children in the worshiping community?*

A Vexing Dilemma

Until the boom of church attendance in the 1950s and 1960s, little can be found about the inclusion of children in worship. It wasn't an issue. Sunday school was not held at the same hour as congregational worship; church nurseries didn't exist. But when church buildings, particularly in the suburbs, were too small for this influx of families, the scheduling of worship and children's education happened simultaneously. Generally this included at least one other hour for worship, and often two hours of church school at the same time as the services of worship. But the people over the years learned something that wasn't intended: Why spend two hours at church when we can do it all in one? After all, adults don't really need education and worship isn't really for children. Hence today we often meet adults who were never in worship as children and have no reason to believe their children are included in the worshiping community. So let's take a step back and think about what worship is and who the worshipers are.

What Is Worship?

A distinct feature marking the Christian church today is the weekly gathering of God's people to worship God. This act sets the church apart from other community groups, such as the YM/YWCA, service organizations, or social groups. The worship of God is primary to our existence; all else grows from it.

From the early days of the church when Christians gathered in homes to give thanks to God, to share a meal, and to tell one another the stories of faith, worship has been included. "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and



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ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:46–47). The apostle Paul urges the groups of believers in Ephesus and Colossae, when they gathered, to sing hymns and psalms with gratitude in their hearts for God who had sent Jesus Christ.

Take a poll of any congregation on a Sunday morning and you will probably hear a variety of reasons for attending worship. Some people come to worship to find a quiet respite from the rest of the week. Many find that gathering with other Christians in worship nourishes their connections with God and the people of God. Still others may come in search of something to sustain them for the week ahead. A few even come because that is what they do on Sunday mornings, and without gathering to worship God, they would feel incomplete. But this myriad of reasons aside, what is worship?

One way of describing worship is that it is the work of the people as they gather to praise God and remind themselves that they are the people of God, called to represent God's love to the world. The word "liturgy," a term for the organization of our corporate worship,

comes from a root word for “work.” This reminds us that we are participants in worship, not observers. We are the congregation at worship, not an audience.

Worship includes many elements, such as prayer, song, offering, sermon, and Bible readings, but the purpose of it in its parts and as a whole is to worship God. Thus, the subject of worship is God, not the worshiper. Our focus is on God and God’s saving grace. We worship God because we are filled with gratitude, just as we love others because God first loved us.

Who Worships?

When we gather for worship, we gather as the people of God, a people called by God, a people with whom God has made a covenant. This covenant community began with God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah to be their God and they would be God’s people. It was a covenant not just for this couple, but for their family and the generations following them. It is confirmed and reasserted throughout the story of the Hebrew people. When the people forgot the covenant, prophets were called forth by God to remind the people of it. God’s people are to praise and worship God, God alone. That covenant was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. As Christians, the people continue to recognize the covenant with God as we live in and as the church.

God did not make the covenant with a select group within Israel, but with the whole people. Remember when Joshua asked the people to choose whether they would serve God or other gods (Josh. 24:15–25)? The whole people responded, “We will serve the Lord.” Years later the people strayed from God and the covenant and the consequence was life as exiles in Babylon. After they returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the wall of the city, the priest Ezra read the law of Moses to the gathered people, to “both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” (Neh. 8:2). And when Moses was near death and had much to say to the community, he said, “Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns” (Deut. 31:12a). Everyone—children, men, and women—is included in the people of God, the people of the covenant. Therefore, everyone is called to worship God. When we deny participation in worship to any age or group within God’s people, the covenant community is splintered, broken, fractured. When we plan our primary activity, the weekly worship of God,

A CHILD’S RESPONSE TO GRACE

As we began to sing the Kyrie Eleison following the Assurance of Pardon, a flash of color in the balcony caught my eye. I looked up and saw a girl about four years old dressed in a tutu over her shirt and pants, twirling in time to the music. Would that the rest of the congregation could show such joy in receiving God’s forgiveness.

we would do well to remember Jesus’ words: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matt. 18:5).

So the question is not, “*Should* children be included in the worshiping community?” but “*How* do we help children be a part of the worshiping community?” Learning to worship with the congregation might be compared to learning any other skill, whether knitting, playing tennis, or riding a bike. You can watch others all you want. You can read illustrated step-by-step directions of how to do it. But until you sit down with the knitting needles and yarn, pick up the tennis racket and ball, or get on the bike, you have no idea what doing it is all about. We can teach children the Lord’s Prayer or Doxology, but until they pray that prayer in unison with the covenant community or sing the Doxology with the worshiping congregation, they have no real experience or knowledge of what praising God as the covenant community is all about. However, we include children not only because they belong, but because when they worship with us we adults also gain a clearer understanding of God’s covenant community.

The Children in the Covenant Community

All this theology and Bible talk may be well and good, but some may suggest that children today are quite different from previous generations of kids. Indeed, life for all of us is quite unlike what we know of living in tents in the desert or in the city of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus or even when our grandparents were children. Many people have studied and observed how children grow and are nurtured in faith and their spiritual lives. A simple description that works well for our purposes



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is John Westerhoff's tree trunk analogy as described in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (rev. ed., [Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000], 85–96). He points out that a one-ring tree is just as much a tree as a 50-ring tree. So too is faith. The child in the first stage of faith is just as much a part of the covenant community as the adult in the fourth stage of faith. Here is how Westerhoff describes the first two stages, the two where we generally find children:

Stage 1: experienced faith. In this opening stage, children learn by doing and participating, by being present and observing others. Westerhoff is not speaking here of busyness or activity, but of the experience of being in the faith community. The foundations for future stages of faith are set now. Just as in the tree trunk, one stage is not replaced by the next but lives along with it. The important ideas of love, acceptance, and trust are what the child needs to experience, long before the child can read or define these words. The questions we might ponder are: How do children experience the Christian faith when we gather for worship? How are we helping them build the necessary meanings for love and trust so they can grow in their understanding of the love of God and the trust that we place in God?

Stage 2: affiliative faith. When the child's horizons broaden beyond the family, we see the move to add affiliative faith. They want to belong. This too is a faith stage

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

In my files is a slip of paper with these words spoken by a child, age unknown: "The church is where people who love children tell them stories about Jesus."

that stays with us throughout our lives. Affiliative faith builds on experienced faith as children not only seek to be accepted within the covenant community, but also want to participate and contribute to the life of the community. They look for ways to identify themselves with the community and to foster relationships with members of the community. The story of the church becomes their story, a way to understand what it means to be in the body of Christ. The questions we might consider are: How do our children contribute to the life, including the worship life, of our congregation? What story are they hearing from us? How are we telling and showing them that they belong to the covenant community?

Welcoming and Nurturing the Children in Jesus' Name

Too much time is spent blaming others for excluding children in congregational worship. Parents are blamed for not teaching their children how to behave in worship. Older members are blamed for looking toward the source of distracting noise with a scowl across their faces. Clergy and worship leaders are blamed for planning worship with only adults in mind. Surely there is blame enough to go around. So let's stop the blame game.

If we can agree that it is important for children to worship with us, let's think about how we (the congregation, parents, worship planners and leaders) can work together to nurture our children to be a part of the people gathered for the worship of God.

The congregation. Whether your sanctuary seats 75 or 875, the space is enormous to young children. When the faces look unfamiliar, simply walking a few steps to a pew is daunting to a child. The central task of the congregation in the pews is to welcome the children. Smile at them. Be polite to them. Assure them (and their parents) that you are glad they are worshiping with the congregation. Include them in passing the offering plate or passing the peace rather than looking over their heads. How do you welcome an adult to the service of worship? Welcome children in the same way.

As you get to know children, invite one to sit with you in worship. It takes some convincing for parents to accept this invitation, but persevere. When sitting with a child, ask the child to find the hymn. Encourage the child's participation by pointing out where you are in the printed

order of worship. Introduce the child to people sitting around you. Be a good worshiper model for the child. But if you can do nothing more, welcome the children.

Planners and leaders of worship. Remember the children. Remember the children when you select or write prayers that the congregation reads together. Avoid too many long words. Print the lines in the order of worship so the breaks indicate a pause for breath. Remember the children when you select music. Include at least one hymn that has a refrain or a part that is repeated for the children to sing, even if they can't read the words of the rest of the song. Remember the children when you prepare the sermon and include examples from their lives.

Congregational worship that includes children is not watered down to the lowest common denominator. Rather it is held to the highest degree of theological integrity. Because our worship life together is the most important thing we do, we wouldn't want our children to think that the time together was worthless and unconnected to them. Begin today to remember the children.

Parents or grandparents and other significant adults. Lest you think sitting with your children in worship requires extra consideration only in the United States, let me hasten to assure you this is not so. A few years ago I was vacationing with a friend in Sweden. We went into more churches than I can count. In one sanctuary I picked up a four-page brochure prepared for parents with children in worship. Fortunately my friend spoke and read Swedish and could translate it for me. I have seen similar brochures in churches in the U.S. Without trying to include all the suggestions, here are some to start you thinking:

- Get ready the night before so you and the children are rested.
- Arrive in time to get settled, but not so early that your child gets fidgety.
- Have your child stand when everyone stands.
- Have your child find the hymns in the hymnbook.
- Teach your child responses at home and encourage the child to say or sing them with the congregation.

- If your congregation provides worship bags (cloth bags with such things as drawing supplies, Bible storybooks, and bookmarks), have your child take one.
- If no worship bags are available, create one with a soft toy, a Bible storybook, and drawing supplies for your child to bring to church.
- As the child gets older and can participate in more of the liturgy, limit the time for drawing or reading to during the sermon. Even then your child will surprise you by how much she or he hears while seeming to be occupied with another activity.

Just as you train your child to act politely at the movies or to set the table, you will be training your child to worship God with the body of Christ. This nurturing of your child is your task, but you are not alone. The congregation and worship leaders, who rejoice that you and your children are present, surround you and support you. Today, think about how you can nurture your child as a worshiper of God.

Conclusion

Worship is the work of the people, all the people. When a congregation and its leaders are thoughtful about how best to include children, they soon find that everyone else feels more included too. Large-print bulletins for young eyes also makes the reading easier for aging eyes. Smiles for the child in the pew are naturally extended to the stranger across the aisle. Explaining an element of worship for the children means adults too embarrassed to ask the question are learning about it too. Now is the time for you—worshiper in the pew, parent, worship planner and leader—to ask: What more can be done to include our children as we worship God together? Your answers will surely be ways to nurture everyone.

About the Writer

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