

## **Train Up a Child: Teaching the Next Generation to Worship**

Scott Aniol

### **Worship: the Means of Transmitting Biblical Christianity**

#### **Worship is the primary way Christianity is conserved.**

As a conservative Christian, I believe that there are transcendent principles of truth, goodness, and beauty that must be preserved and passed on to future generations. To put it another way, there are certain beliefs, moral standards, and affections that we find in Scripture and are charged with passing to our children. There are many ways a conservative Christian transmits these principles to future generations, but I believe the primary way these ideas are transmitted is through worship.

#### **Ordered worship is the primary way Christians are taught to worship.**

The purpose of corporate worship is not just a group of Christians gathering praise the Lord—although it is certainly that; one of the primary purpose of worship is to teach the congregation how to worship the rest of the week. Many people incorrectly assume that Christians instinctively know how to worship. While it is true that Christians are new creatures with new hearts and new desires, ingrained habits, misguided assumptions, and remaining depravity prevent anyone from simply “knowing” how to worship. Many people assume that worship comes naturally—that people should just worship with whatever language is most comfortable to them. But this is simply not the case. If the Scriptures and church history reveal anything to us about worship, it is that left to themselves, even God’s people will worship poorly. They must be taught to worship.

This is one of the purposes of ordered worship. Those with more Christian maturity structure worship in such a way that it shapes the affections and teaches others how to worship rightly. This is certainly true for all people, but it is perhaps most important with children.

In Dueteronomy 6, God commands his people to teach their children how to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and might. In essence, he is commanding his people to teach their children how to worship. This is clearly a trans-dispensational principle, but if there is any doubt, we find a similar command in Ephesians 6 where Paul commands fathers to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The bottom line is that it is the responsibility of families—and, by extension, church families—to teach children, not only what to believe and how to live, but also how to worship.

People must be *taught* to worship, and what better time to do so than when a child's heart is free from so many influences that will give his worship an accent—when his heart is ready to be shaped.

## Children and Worship: What is at Stake

**Children learn *how* to worship long before they learn *whom* to worship.**

It is my fear that most Christians do not recognize that before a child can even comprehend facts, his affections and imagination are already being shaped. In fact, I would suggest that most Christians never really even consider the moral imaginations of their children. Sure, we say we are targeting their hearts, and by teaching them biblical doctrine their hearts are certainly influenced.

But do we realize that a child's imagination is shaped far before he or she has the capacity to comprehend doctrinal facts? In other words, far before a child can comprehend his need to love the one true and living God, before he or she can comprehend the concept of a god at all, the child learns *how* to love. Far before a child can comprehend his need to fear and reverence God, the child learns *how* to fear and reverence. Far before a child can comprehend his purpose to worship God, the child learns *how* to worship.

What happens with most parents, though, who see only the need to teach their child's *head*, is that in order to teach such truths, they are willing to use almost whatever means necessary to do so. So they use puppets to teach Bible stories, never realizing that their children are learning to view biblical truth as something light and trivial. Or they use cartoons to teach moral lessons, never realizing that their children are learning to view morality as something silly or "adventurous."

This problem is seen most acutely with children's music. Christian parents, educators, and publishers have the noble goal of teaching their children about God, his Word, and how to obey him rightly, but they set such truth to irreverent, trivial, or even downright banal music, forgetting that far before their children learn these truths, they must learn *how* to express themselves rightly toward those truths.

I do not question the noble motives of these people for an instant. But I do question their understanding of how children are taught to worship. Children learn to worship God primarily through participating in rightly ordered worship. Children learn to love God by first learning how to love. Children learn to reverence God by first learning how to reverence. Children learn to fear God by first learning how to fear.

Here is an example. We've checked out some children's French DVDs from our local library, and each day he watches the DVD. It's a silly little story that is spoken entirely in French. It comes with a little book that has screen shots of the different scenes and the translation into English (for the parents).

The other day Caleb sat down on our couch with the book and began reciting the entire story in French from memory as he looked at the screen shots of the scenes he had been watching.

Now, Caleb doesn't understand what he is saying for the most part; he does know what some of the words mean either from their context in the story or if we've

told him what they mean. But what he is learning is (a) pronunciation and (b) the flow of basic French phrases.

What's very interesting is his accent; Caleb can make sounds that are unique to the French language that *I* certainly can't make. His vocal mechanisms are not completely developed yet so that he can reproduce with his mouth what his ears hear from the DVD. "They" say that the ability to learn to pronounce such unique sounds ends around age 9 so that even if someone learns a new language after that, he will always have an accent.

At this point, I'm not so concerned that he understand what he's saying. Rather, he is learning more *how* to speak French at this stage than *what* exactly he is doing. He'll eventually pick up what some of the phrases mean, and then some day, if he studies French more thoroughly, these skills will be natural to him.

As I've thought about this, and marveled at a four-year-old's ability to learn how to speak a foreign language, I've come to realize how similar this is to learning to worship. I see several important parallels:

1. The language of worship is something best learned at an early age. Before a child is shaped by other influences, and before his sensibilities are hardened, he should be taught to worship. The earlier this happens, the more natural right worship will be.
2. Worship is learned best through immersion. Just like with learning a language, more is "caught" than "taught" with worship. A child learns to worship best by participating in the gathered worship of the Church.
3. A child will learn *how* to worship rightly before he will necessarily learn *why* or *what* he is doing. But that's OK. The main point is that if you wait to teach a child *how* to worship until he has the capacity to understand *what* and *why* he is worshiping, his sensibilities will already be shaped by something else. He will worship with an accent. It is important, of course, to teach children why and what they are worshiping, but the *how* is most important in the early years.

**Teaching children to worship is primarily a training of their imagination of God and affections toward him.**

**Consequences of failing to teach our children to worship at a young age:**

1. Their default will be to worship themselves.
2. What we do give them during church will shape their expectations for what to expect in worship.
3. If we do not worship at home, they will see through our hypocrisy.

### **Family Worship**

Ultimately, teaching children to worship must be a regular part of the home. Regular family worship is essential to the spiritual life of children and the family as a whole.

## Practical suggestions

1. Get started.
2. Find a regular time.
3. Keep it relatively short.
4. Be flexible.
5. Maintain a warm, but reverent atmosphere.
6. Develop a regular order.
7. As much as possible, shape your family worship after your church's worship, including as many of the same elements as you can.
8. Use a catechism.
  - a. [kids4truth.com](http://kids4truth.com)
9. Teach your children hymns.

Allow me to give a few examples from personal experience, not because I have any special insights or great success, but because this is something I was taught very recently and have fervently tried to implement with my children.

From the time our first son, Caleb, was born, I began to sing hymns to him (We have begun these things with our daughter, now, by the way). Not children's sacred songs, mind you, but hymns that we regularly sing in gathered worship. Among other times, each night before bed I sang him the same five hymns:

- All Praise To Thee, My God, This Night
- God Moves in a Mysterious Way
- Holy, Holy, Holy
- I Sing the Mighty Power of God
- Come, Christians, Join to Sing

Each afternoon before naps, I sing to him the same three hymns:

- Sun of My Soul
- O Thou In Whose Presence
- How Sweet and Awful

And each evening during our time of family worship, we sing various hymns together, usually of Caleb's choosing.

At about 9 months of age, Caleb could sing the tunes to several hymns. Did he comprehend the words of the hymns? Not at all. Was his mind being affected at that point? Hardly. But he was learning to love right expressions of ordinate affections. He was learning *how* to love, *how* to reverence, *how* to worship.

Today (Caleb is almost 5), Caleb can sing about 25 hymns. Even still, I am certain that he does not comprehend most of the words let alone the truths beneath them. But I am not concerned about that at this point. What I do know is that he is learning to distinguish between *kinds* of emotions and when certain emotions are appropriate.

I know this is the case because Caleb enjoys singing other songs as well. Fun, children's songs like "Ring Round the Rosie," "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and other similar children's folk tunes (which, by the way, I also believe are expressions of noble affection, although not appropriate for worship).

Yet when he is asked what he would like to sing after our time of Bible reading, he has never chosen one of those songs. Not because we have limited his choices, and not because we have explicitly taught him which songs are about God.

He just knows.

Also from the time Caleb was born, I have prayed regularly with him. Each night before bed, I pray The Lord's Prayer. Not because there is something magical about praying this prayer, but because I am using it as a teaching tool just as our Lord did. Does Caleb (even today) understand all of the words or the concepts of the prayer? Hardly. But he is learning *how* to pray.

At other times during the day, I pray with Caleb as well. I do not water down my prayers, although I do sometimes choose a bit simpler vocabulary (*some* times). I do not speak in a silly voice or a child's voice or any differently than how I would pray in any other circumstance.

Why? Because I am not, at this stage in his life, concerned about what Caleb understands in terms of vocabulary or truth content (although I certainly trust that he will come into that understanding soon).

I am concerned that Caleb learns *how* to pray.

And I know that it is working. When he was about 2 years old, Caleb began asking if he could pray before meals, during our family worship, etc. And so we have let him pray.

He began with the word, "Fader" (Father), the way his Daddy always begins. He bowed his head and spoke in a soft, slow tone of voice. He mumbled through words that we could hardly understand; it was mostly gibberish, but it is now much more clear as he has grown. He soon began to throw phrases in like "Thank you," and we heard words like "Mommy," "Daddy," "Kate," "Caleb," "God," and "Jesus." His prayers were never short, never silly, never loud. He closed his prayers with "In Jesus' [something], Amen." And now, of course, his prayers are much more mature than then.

was Caleb praying intelligible sentiments? No. Did he really comprehend to whom he is attempting to speak or even what he is doing at all? I don't think so.

But I was not concerned about that at that stage in his life. What I am encouraged by is that Caleb seemed to understand that prayer should be characterized by reverence and awe, not because I have taught him what those concepts are, but because he has witnessed them repeatedly in the 2+ years of his life.

## Worship as Families

Not only is it important to teach our children how to worship in our homes, but this must take place in our churches as well. In my opinion, it is a very dangerous phenomenon that in most of our churches today, children are segregated into their peer groups for most if not all of the events of the church.

I am not against age appropriate teaching sessions *per se*, but this practice is dangerous for two reasons:

1. Most children's gatherings are filled with silly songs, games, crafts, and other activities that teach a child to expect entertainment in church.
2. At the end of the day, the only way a child will grow to appreciate well-ordered, "adult" worship is if he experiences it.

### **Teach children hymns.**

If you do have dedicated times of instruction for children, determine to use those times to prepare them for active participation in corporate worship. Among other things, teach the children the same hymns that are sung in your church services. Again, I am not necessarily opposed to songs geared toward children, but at least in church, determine to have one body of song that the whole church sings. This prevents unintentionally implanting into the child's mind the idea that each generation should have "their own songs." Instead, it reinforces the unity of the body, shapes the sensibilities of the children, and accomplishes the goal of passing on biblical worship to future generations.

I remember several years ago when I eliminated all of the "fun" children's songs from the children's meetings in our church and began teaching the children "adult" hymns and how to use a hymnal, some of the parents initially objected. They wanted their children to have fun, to "enjoy" coming to church. But I, as their pastor, stood firm.

A few months later, as the children grew to really love singing hymns, enthusiastically belted them out in our worship services, and chose them as favorites in our congregational favorites services, one of the fathers who had initially objected said to me, "My children sing hymns now in the car and at home. They *love* singing hymns. I realized that now, when they get older, they will chose a church that sings these same hymns."

Exactly.

Here are just some of the things that I did in our church to move toward eliminating silly children's songs and teaching our children hymns.

1. I first felt a burden for this when, at a men and boys campout, I realized that none of the young boys knew a single hymn. When asked for favorites around the camp fire, all they could come up with were silly children's songs.

2. The first point I stressed was our church's goal of encouraging unity among the congregation. I emphasized the fact that our church should be all singing the same body of hymnody. There may be a place for simpler children's songs, but it is important that our children be comfortable singing the same things as their parents.

3. The second point I stressed was the fact that by entertaining our children regularly in church, we are teaching them to expect entertainment, and we cannot expect them to change when they grow older.

A friend once pointed out to me that the stages in life when we often lose our young people is at the transitions from childhood to adolescence or adolescence to adulthood. Part of the reason for that is likely the fact that they are shocked with all of

the “new stuff” they are expected to participate in, new “adult” music being one of the primary ones. In other words, it really is no wonder that teenagers think hymns are “old and fuddy-duddy” and want more entertainment in church – they’ve been entertained in church for all of their childhood, haven’t they?

4. The third point I stressed was the fact that sacred things should not be treated as silly. There may be a place for children to be silly, and there may be a place for silly children’s songs, but not *sacred* silly songs. God deserves more than that, even from our children.

5. Finally, I stressed that church (even in children’s meetings) was a place for singing about God and his Word. There may be a place for songs about discipline and character, but church is for God.

6. I met with those leading singing in our children’s meetings, and stressed each of these points. Initially, I asked them to limit what they sang songs about God. I even further limited that later (more on this in a moment).

7. The next important step, which may not be possible in every situation, is that I took over leading our Wednesday evening children’s program. The first 15 minutes had always been dedicated to singing, and so I took advantage of that time.

8. I progressively began to teach the children (3 years through 6th grade) to use a hymnal. I taught them what things on the page meant, how to use the index, how to find hymns, etc. The older children helped the younger children, and after a while they began to enjoy using the hymnal.

9. We began learning one new hymn per month. At first I just randomly chose hymns, but after we began using the Kids4Truth program, I started choosing hymns that fit the doctrinal theme of the month.

10. With these practices, I got some real resistance from both the children and their parents at first. But I held my ground, continued to stress the principles listed above, and I also stressed pastoral authority in something as important as the music that was sung in church.

11. Eventually (after several months), the children began to *love* singing hymns. It wasn’t long before they knew two dozen hymns by heart, knew how to use a hymnal, and when asked for favorites would choose songs like “I Sing the Mighty Power,” “All Creatures of Our God and King,” “A Mighty Fortress,” and “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted.”

12. The parents soon came along. One father who had originally expressed some resistance soon said to me, “My kids are singing hymns together in the car! I realized that now when they grow older, they’ll look for a church that sings these same kinds of things!” Exactly.

13. Another important thing that I did was to sing a non-sacred silly song at the beginning of each Wednesday evening. I wanted to teach the children that it was OK to be silly, it was OK to sing non-sacred songs, but it was not OK to be silly about God. I think they got it.

14. During each bi-annual children’s program for the adults, we made a big deal about the hymns they had learned. The congregation was amazed.

15. The congregation began to notice that the children (as young as 6 years old) were opening their hymnals in church services, and belting out the hymns they knew. It became a real highlight of our church life.

16. Eventually, I put together a list of the hymns we had been learning and were planning on learning in the future, and distributed it to those leading children's singing in other venues, asking them to use those hymns. Even so, when the children now were asked for favorite in those venues, which had been a regular practice, most of the time they'd choose hymns. In fact, the other children's sacred songs that they sang in Sunday School, for instance, were usually chosen by the teacher and not the children!

17. All in all, the whole musical culture of our church changed through all of this, I think. As the children began to learn and enjoy singing hymns, their parent and others in the congregation began to follow. It was wonderful to see.

18. At our going away fellowship on our last Sunday in Rockford, they gathered all of the children together to sing a hymn as a farewell. One of the older ladies in the church looked at me and said, "This is your legacy." I couldn't have asked for more.

### **Welcome children into the "adult" worship service.**

When Caleb was 2 we began bringing him into the Sunday morning corporate worship service in our church. We began by bringing him in just for the music portion (and having to take him out during prayers and lengthy Scripture readings), and after a few weeks he now sits in the entire service (not perfectly at all; it's a lot of work to keep him quiet; but he does).

"But he would comprehend so much more truth in a Junior Church service at his level," some may object. Likely so (although our church doesn't even offer a Junior Church service).

Yet what he might gain in terms of intelligibility of intellectual truths does not justify what he would lose by being in a room of his peers, by being separated from the corporate worship of the adults of the Church.

At 2 1/2 years of age, my son could not really benefit from very much intellectual teaching, no matter the level.

At that stage in his life, he was learning *how* God is to be approached, *how* he is to be revered, and *how* he is to be loved.

And let me tell you, there is nothing – *nothing* – more joyous than to hold your 2 1/2 year old son in your arms in a corporate worship gathering, and have him enthusiastically sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" right along with everyone else in the congregation; to have him bow his head with the rest of the congregation for a lengthy intercessory prayer; to have him sit quietly as two full chapters of the Bible are read publicly before the congregation.

Does he misbehave? *O, yes!* Do I still have to take him out once in a while? There is a reason we sit in the back!

But my son is learning how to worship *by worshipping*.