

WORSHIPPING TOGETHER

**WHY WE WANT OUR CHILDREN
IN THE WORSHIP GATHERING**

BY JOSH KING

To Bethany

*My helpmeet, who far better than I,
embodies this wisdom with grace and strength.*

and

To Meridian Church

*I love worshipping together
with you worshipping together.*

*Worshipping Together:
Why We Want Our Children in the Worship Gathering*

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PROLOGUE

Why do we want our children in the worship gathering?

Why wouldn't we?

It is our conviction that we ask the question only because we have grown acclimated to seeing things from a false perspective. Arguing for little children to be part of the regular worship gathering of the church is *not* like arguing for a flat earth. Rather, it is like arguing that the earth is a sphere... at a flat earth convention.

Worshipping with our children is a world-changing thought because our idea of the world is so flat. This booklet is a call for three-dimensional worship. It is a call to set our feet on the ground of Scripture. Viewed from this perspective, we believe that worshipping with our children is seen not to be surprising, but sensical.

The church should not be another flat earth convention. We should not make the mistake of thinking that the world understands the world. Their view of children is thin and flat. The Biblical view is robust and round. Unfortunately, we have acclimated to such thin views far more than we realize. This is why the surprising seems sensible and the sensible seems surprising.

But if our feet were truly grounded on God's globe, we believe it would be our expectation that our children would be found alongside us when the church gathers. We would be worshipping, not on opposite sides of a thin crust, but in the same spherical space. It is not that it is outlandishly sinful to have children's church, but that it is Biblically sensible not to.

1.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Before we address children in the worship gathering, we need to intentionally put our feet on solid ground. This ground concerns what the Bible says about parenting in general. It will do no good to build an orthodox practice on a foundation of sand. We cannot allow good actions to float. They must be grounded.

Parents are to be the primary and fundamental faith nurturers of their children. Ephesians 6:4 commands that fathers “not provoke their children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Dad and mom will be held accountable to God for how they shepherd their children. Fathers bear chief responsibility as the heads of their families. Dad, feel this burden and realize that you cannot delegate this duty.

Deuteronomy 6:4–6 was something like Old Testament Israel’s John 3:16, which is to say that it was a very familiar passage to them. It is known as the *Shema* (the Hebrew word for “hear”). It might sound familiar.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.”

When asked what the great commandment was Jesus replied with the *Shema* (Mark 12:29-30). Parents, is your parenting an obedience to this overarching command? Immediately following this command we read:

“You shall teach them [God’s words] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:7–9).

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Parents, school is always in session, the world is your classroom, the Bible is your textbook, your children are your pupils, and your objective is that God’s glory be feared and delighted in. Parents, you are your children’s greatest influencer. Frequently, what you worship, they will worship. This should couple the burden of shepherding with a happy hope. Parenting has immense potential for the glory of God.

To assess how you are doing ask your children this question, “What do you think daddy (or mommy) loves more than anything else?”

Have your children caught your zest for fishing but not for worshipping? They will formulate their answer by seeing what you are most passionate about, what you give your time to, and what you sacrifice for. Now, standing on this ground, let us ask our question again.

2.

WHY DO WE WANT OUR CHILDREN IN THE WORSHIP GATHERING?

Do your children observe you worshipping God? When we really enjoy something we invite others into it, especially those closest to us. If dad loves football, his son will likely catch his enthusiasm. Worship is contagious. It is caught as much as it is taught. Sadly, the biggest obstacle to overcome in bringing children into the worship gathering isn't children, but parents. John Piper writes:

“There are several reasons why we urge parents to bring their children to worship. But these arguments will not carry much weight with parents who do not love to worship God.

The greatest stumbling block for children in worship is that their parents do not cherish the hour. Children can feel the difference between duty and delight. Therefore, the first and most important job of a parent is to fall in love with the worship of God. You can't impart what you don't possess.

I think a healthy, Biblically-saturated, Christ-intoxicated mind will reason like this, ‘I’m worshipping —why wouldn’t I want to share that with my children.’”¹

We immerse our kids in our loves and by this they often come to love our loves. If this is true for a hobby or a sport, how much more should it be true of our worship of He who is altogether lovely and worthy of our adoration?

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This helps answer the objection, "But they won't understand anything." The little one who watches baseball with his dad doesn't perfectly understand the game, but he does *begin* to understand more and more. Bit by bit he starts to grasp the vocabulary and the point of the game. The child who worships with their family won't immediately catch everything, but they will catch something. Chiefly they will catch that dad and mom are (or are not) in awe of God. Children will catch if dad and mom take God seriously by how dad and mom behave in church and by how they deal with their children's behavior in church.

Further, not understanding is not a barrier to church; it is an opportunity for home. Not understanding the sermon is an opportunity for a lesson at home. Ask them questions. Let them ask questions.

Family integrated worship is not only an inference from the *Shema*, it is a clear deduction from God's pattern for worship as laid down in the Old Covenant. There is a strong Biblical precedent for children to be part of the worshipping assembly. In Deuteronomy 31 the nation of Israel is commanded to assemble every seven years with their children during the Feast of Booths to hear the public reading of the law (meaning either the Pentateuch or the book of Deuteronomy). Imagine trying to keep your children quiet for

that service! Why would God command something so difficult? Why not just assemble the adults who could “really” understand it, and understand it better free of distraction? The answer is the glory of God in their children learning to revere Him.

“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” (Deuteronomy 31:12–13).

This was not an exceptional occasion. Deuteronomy 12 speaks of regular temple worship saying, “And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and *your sons and your daughters...*” (Deuteronomy 12:12). When Joshua renewed the covenant at Mount Ebal, reading all the book of the law, it was before “all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and *the little ones*, and the sojourners who lived among them” (Joshua 8:35). When the Moabites and Ammonites threatened Judah under king Jehoshaphat, he proclaimed a fast and Judah assembled to seek help from Yahweh (2 Chronicles 20:1–4) such that “all Judah stood before the LORD, with *their little ones*, their wives, and *their children*” (2 Chronicles 20:13). That such occasions included even the youngest is clear when Joel declares, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the *children, even nursing infants...*” (Joel 2:15–16).

Worship for the nation of Israel under the old covenant was regularly a family affair (Deuteronomy 12:10–12). Can any good reason be given why this should not be the case for the church?

We cannot isolate this pattern to the Old Covenant. Most of Paul's letters were addressed to specific churches. These letters would have been read when the church gathered (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). In some of these letters, Paul directly addresses children (Ephesians 6:1–3; Colossians 3:20). When the letter to the Ephesians was read to that church, Paul not only assumed that children would be there to hear it, but that they could understand it.

**The Christian
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We are not naïve as to the difficulties this may present, but we believe the rewards far outweigh the cost. The Christian life isn't lived because it's easy, but because it's glorious. Still, we want you to know that we are here to help and support you. We want a church culture that depends on God's grace to do hard things. We want a church culture that extends grace as we stumble in our attempts to do hard things. We want to create a church culture where we value and celebrate children, yes, even in "our" worship gathering.

3.

HOW CAN WE WORSHIP TOGETHER?

Yes! But *how*? Good convictions seek good practices. Too often though we emphasize the how of the hands over the how of the heart. How can we worship together? With love, patience, grace, and faithfulness. To best prepare *our* children for worship, we must be constantly preparing ourselves. To best prepare for *other's* children in worship, we must constantly be preparing ourselves. We must walk with our feet on the ground of Scripture, learning to love as God loves. The most important how is your own heart. We want to teach holiness unto the Lord, not hypocrisy before the Lord.

One of the best ways to bring the how of the heart and the how of the hand together is by regular family worship. Ten minutes in family worship each weekday well prepares little ones for an hour in corporate worship. If you have never practiced family worship, I recommend that you start simple and then *keep* it that way. You can start with “storybook Bibles” like *The Big Picture Story Bible* by David Helm or *The Biggest Story Bible Storybook* by Kevin DeYoung. Follow this with praying together, and singing a hymn or song. As the children age you can read a

“A holy, well-governed family is the preparation to a holy and well-governed church.”²

—Richard Baxter

short portion of Scripture and then discuss it. You may also want to rehearse a catechism at this time.

Family worship is normally best if kept to around five to twenty minutes. Pick a regular time—after dinner or before bed is probably optimal for most families. Require your children to sit still and be attentive during family worship. If they do not obey, administer discipline and try again. Be firm, be consistent, and do not give up. Family meals are another good opportunity to teach children how to sit still and not play. Learning to sit with self-control is a big lesson that little ones are able to learn at a young age that will bless them all their years. Scott Brown writes,

“People in our culture think, ‘You cannot expect a two-year-old to obey.’ Unfortunately, this principle is usually a prophesy. You pretty much get what you expect. Those who believe it is impossible for young children to be obedient in church, for them, it *will* be impossible.

Here is a dose of reality: when a child can sit still, he is teachable, under authority, and able to exercise self-control. This is a pathway to success in later years. But more importantly, it is the pathway to beholding the ‘beauty of the Lord.’”³

Family worship on Saturday is a prime opportunity to prepare for Sunday. We make available on our website a weekly “Worship Prep” that, among other things, gives the sermon text and some song suggestions. Utilize this to guide your family worship time on Saturday evenings. Let your children hear you pray with longing that our Triune God sanctify the saints and save sinners. Let them hear you pray for the salvation of their souls. Let them hear you pray with contrition for sin, thankfulness for the gospel, and joy to be able to gather with the saints and sing His praises.

Your children are a garden that left unattended will certainly produce weeds. Work is required. The work is hard,

but the fruit is sweet. Diligently pull worldly weeds and plant Scripture seeds. Know that a lot of heavy work early on bears fruit for years to come. It is worth it. Here are a few seeds that cannot be sown too early. Do not underestimate how much little minds can comprehend or how much little hearts can receive.

- *Reverence*: “God is holy. There is a time and place for everything. This is a holy time and a holy place. ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.’”

- *Readiness*: Get clothes and shoes ready the day before. Lay out Bibles and other materials so they are not forgotten. Use the “Worship Prep” for family worship. Get to bed early on Saturday evening. Take them to the restroom shortly before the gathering begins. These actions build anticipation, communicate seriousness, and prevent frustration.

- *Respect*: “Say hello.” “Pick up your mess.” “Don’t scream.” “Don’t run indoors; you might knock over someone who is frail and hurt them.” “Pay attention and focus.” Practice how to sit in worship with how they sit for family worship. Consistent 5–10 minute drills at home can pay big dividends during Sunday mornings.

- *Rejoicing*: Joy is contagious. If your child’s attitude toward church is sour, first check your own. We plant what we bear. Don’t keep your love for the church a secret. Share it and foster it.

Replanting these kinds of seeds each week as you drive to church is a great way to till the ground for the preaching of God’s word. Have a pregame prep talk. Remind them of your expectations. This communicates to them that the church gathering is not like any other gathering. We gather to hear God’s covenant words, to partake of His covenant feast, to draw near through the blood of the new covenant to the Holy God of heaven with our prayers and praises. This is why we come with reverence and rejoicing. This is why we want the

kind of atmosphere John Piper describes as one of “gravity and gladness.”

We should be raising our children to mature and grow, not to remain children. Not every moment needs to be catered to them and full of entertainment and fun. We do a disservice in insulating them from the serious and the solemn. For instance, there was a time when it was not uncommon to see well-behaved little ones at funerals. Now, we can neither imagine exposing them nor trying to maintain them during such an occasion. Consider afresh the gravity of the worship gathering in these words from Joel Beeke.

**“Teach your
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—Joel Beeke

“Teach your children that every sermon counts for eternity. Salvation comes through faith, and faith comes through hearing God’s Word (Romans 10:13–16). So every sermon is a matter of life and death (Deut. 32:47; 2 Cor. 2:15–16). The preached gospel will either lift us up to heaven or cast us down to hell. It will advance our salvation or aggravate our condemnation. It will draw us with the cords of love or leave us in the snares of unbelief. It will soften or harden

us (Matt. 13:14–15), enlighten or darken our eyes (Rom. 11:10), open our heart to Christ or shut it against Him. ‘The nearer to heaven any are lifted up by gospel preaching, the lower will they sink into hell if they heed it not,’ wrote David Clarkson. ‘Take heed, therefore, how ye hear!’” ⁴

Having prepared your hearts and theirs for such a moment, here then are a few of strategic pointers for those fighting this good fight in the trenches on Sunday mornings.

- *Divide and conquer.* Seat the youngest or hardest kid to deal with in between mom and dad. Put those older and better on the outside of mom and dad with the most mature children on the other side of them to help. Know which kids you cannot sit next to one another and which ones can. Think “strategic seating for the salvation and sanctification of souls.”

- *Don't use all your ammunition early in the fight.* Wait until the sermon begins to break out coloring sheets, paper, snacks, etc. Before then, have them greet and visit, stand and sit, and sing and pray with you. Be purposeful in what you give them to do. Discipleship, not distraction is the target. It is best to avoid toys and electronics as much as possible. If you allow the youngest non-readers to color, try to find coloring sheets that are related to the message. One option is to use the “Sermon Notes for Kids” sheet available in the foyer. Looking at a Bible Storybook is another option. Combine the two and have them copy or trace a page from the storybook Bible. You might purchase a specific one to use only for Sunday mornings.

- *Give commands.* During the service prompt them to participate appropriately (i.e. clap, sing, stand, pray). Draw their attention to the words on the screen. Consider bringing a hymnal so they can follow the words with you (when available we list the hymn numbers for *Hymns of Grace* on the screen). Share your Bible with the youngest ones and point to the words of the text as they are read. Can you conceive any better way to sneak in a reading lesson than singing His praises and reading His word? Encourage them to take notes during the sermon. For the youngest ones this could be drawing a picture of something they have heard.

- *Discipline.* Children will misbehave. We understand this. This is no cause for embarrassment, but an opportunity for discipleship and instruction. If your child becomes disruptive, you are free to withdraw to a classroom to administer discipline and rejoin the service or maybe sit out in the foyer to view the service on the monitor. What is critical is that you don't inadvertently teach your child that if they are

disruptive, they get to escape and play somewhere else in the church. Do not reward disobedience. There are seasons where you may have to do this more often. If you are in one of those seasons and suspect you will have to leave at some point during the service, consider sitting where it will be convenient to make an exit with less distraction.

- *Know the terrain.* Nursing mothers may utilize the cry room at the back of the assembly hall. For crawlers, parents may want to consider using our self-serve nursery. If so, remember, you can always listen to the sermon again and this is only a season and normally a very short one. Most kids can probably be acclimated to the assembly hall very soon by using our training room. This room is best utilized not for punishment if a child is unruly, but for training and acclimating a child. Use this little room as your basic training camp and graduate to the big room when they are ready. If a child becomes disruptive in the training room, treat it as though you were in the assembly hall. Make an exit as best you can to instruct them and give correction. Then return when ready.

- *Debrief.* On the way home or over lunch, converse about the worship gathering. Ask questions. Ask if they have any questions.

Worshipping with our children is not impossible. It will require work, but it is a rewarding work.

EPILOGUE

When grandchildren come to visit, grandparents may understand they need to make child-proofing adjustments, but they do so with delight. Parents, this is a short but formational time in the life of your children. Sacrifices may need to be made, but let us make them with joy. Our infants and toddlers only come to visit—their time as little ones is short. Our time with them as such is short. Let us make it purposeful. A few years of labor have the potential to reap decades of multiplied fruit. Sow early and reap big. Set the tree while the branch is tender and pliable. By seeking more for ourselves immediately, ultimately we get less. Yes, we could easily make the service all for the adults, but then would it be all for the glory of God?

APPENDIX: TESTIMONIES

The following are testimonies of some who were initially skeptical about worshipping together with their children.

— Peyton and Kaley

When we were considering joining Meridian Church, there was only one thing holding us back. They didn't do children's church. After sitting through a few sermons while dealing with a loud and very active toddler and trying to minimize distraction, we thought there is no way we could keep doing this week after week! We needed children's church! At least we thought so at the time.

As we continued to go, we began watching the small children of other parents. Some would sit still and be quiet, while some would move a little bit, but if any became unruly or rebellious, the parents quietly took them to the training room (a room provided for parents with big glass windows so they could still see, hear, and be a part of the church service, while also training their little one(s) on how to behave in church).

Then it hit us, "That's *our* job: to 'bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord' (Ephesians 6:4)." This was our season to spend time training our child. Sure, we would miss half of the sermon (or all of the sermon!) from time to time, but that was a sacrifice we were called to make.

As I look back, I see that I was being selfish. I didn't want to miss the sermon to train my child. I thank God that he showed me how important it was to invite my children to worship the Lord with us. Forget that they are small, needy, and fussy right now, don't you want them to worship the Lord with you? We haven't regretted it since.

— Roy

When I started attending Great Plains Reformed Baptist Church I was over fifty years old and pretty much set in my ways. I had been in church all my life and thought I had a pretty good grasp on how churches operated. I had even been a deacon at the last church I attended. Being over fifty years old my hearing is not what it used to be. I can still hear ok, but if there is any background noise going on I have trouble distinguishing where words are coming from and which conversation is which. I just can't understand what is being said. When the children in the service were talking, crying, or making any kind of noise, I was having trouble understanding what David was saying. It was to the point that I was wanting some kind of relief. I didn't want to quit coming to church because I was learning so much, but I was to the point of telling parents to keep their children quiet. It was a major distraction to me.

I talked to David several times about my situation and he always assured me that having children in the sanctuary during worship was Biblical and that is what we were going to do, because we are a Biblical church. He would always give me pointers on what might help me to hear the sermon better.

After we moved into a new building, God convicted me through a sermon and put a Scripture on my heart. God changed my way of thinking about the situation I was in with a verse from Matthew, "whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he drowned in the depth of the sea." Wow! What a harsh verse.

You might have noticed that there has been a lot of "I" in this testimony. God showed me that church and everything in life is not about "I." It's all about God! I told David one Sunday morning about what God had been teaching me. I told him that if I was causing any of my brothers or sisters or their children to stumble, then I would stay home and not come to church. David assured me that God had changed my way of thinking about the situation and that I should keep coming to church.

Since then, the worship service has been a lot better for me. The distractions don't bother me and my hearing seems to be better during the service. What I have realized is this, I don't come to church anymore, Roy, a slave of God, comes to church.

NOTES

1. John and Noël Piper. “The Family: Together in God's Presence,” January 1, 1996, desiringGod.org/articles/the-family-together-in-gods-presence
2. Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, Vol. 1: A Christian Directory* (Ligonier, Soli Deo Gloria Publications) 425–426
3. Scott Brown, *The Family at Church*, (Wake Forest, Church & Family Life) 103
4. Joel Beeke, *The Family at Church*, (Grand Rapids, Reformation Heritage Books, 2008) 21–22

FURTHER READING

Books:

- *The Family at Church* by Scott Brown
- *Children and the Worship Service* by David and Sally Michael
- *The Family at Church* by Joel Beeke
- *Family Worship* by Joel Beeke
- *A Neglected Grace* by Jason Helopolus

Online Articles:

- “The Family: Together in God’s Presence” by John and Noël Piper
- “11 Reasons to Worship with your Family” by Jason Helopoulos
- “The What, When, and How of Family Worship” by Jason Helopoulos
- “Training Children in Worship” by Daniel Hyde

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