

# Gather The People To Me

*Children in Church*

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### **Introduction**

In this brief instruction addressing the role of children in church I will be seeking to present four points: First, what is the purpose of the church service? Second, how do we determine the order of the service? Third, what is the role of the children in the service? Fourth, what are some of the common concerns and questions regarding having children in church?

### **I. The Purpose of Church**

What is the purpose of the church? I ask this question regarding the organization known as the church. It is an organization described in the Scriptures containing elders, deacons, membership, etc. The first clear descriptions of an order of worship come quite early in Scripture.

**And Moses said, "We will go with our young and our old; with our sons and our daughters, with our flocks and our herds we will go, for we must hold a feast to the LORD" (Exodus 10:9).**

**"Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children" (Deuteronomy 4:10).**

Leviticus through Deuteronomy contains very detailed instruction pertaining to the purpose and order of worship. Although the order of worship would be altered while moving from the old to new covenant, the purpose of the church would remain the same.

Question sixty-three of the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards asks, **"What Are the Special Privileges of the Visible Church?"** The answer being

**The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government;<sup>a</sup> of being protected and preserved in all ages, not withstanding the opposition of all enemies;<sup>b</sup> and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation,<sup>c</sup> and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved,<sup>d</sup> and excluding none that will come unto him.<sup>e</sup>**

a. Isa. 4:5-6; 1 Tim. 4:10. b. Ps. 115:1-2, 9; Isa. 31:4-5; Zech. 12:2-4, 8-9. c. Acts 2:39, 42. d. Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 9:4; Eph. 4:11-12; Mark 16:15-16 e. John 6:37.

In short, the church is God's special instrument, under God's special protection where His saints have communion with Him and each other and is the ordinary conduit of God for the salvation of souls and grace to those in attendance. In other words, the church is God's primary means of grace. It is the place where

His victory is proclaimed, His praises are sung, His sacraments are administered, His name is glorified, and His people receive His grace.

## **II. Determining the Order of Worship**

How does the church determine the order of worship? What is the best way to accomplish the purpose already determined? Clearly the new covenant repeals many of the practices of the old covenant.<sup>1</sup> And since there is no book of Leviticus<sup>2</sup> in the New Testament we are left with a bit of a difficulty. Has God left us to our own ingenuity or imagination to achieve the clear goal, or purpose of church? It doesn't seem reasonable to assume that something God determined so critical and detailed in the old covenant (how He is worshipped) would no longer be an issue in the new covenant.

### **Implied Continuity and the Regulative Principle**

There are two principles that must be understood at this juncture. First, the principle known as implied continuity. Implied in this principle is the notion that the laws of God, once given, should be considered binding unless God repeals them. For example, God has told us not to sacrifice animals but He hasn't told us to quit reading His law. And it is worth noting that God is not capricious regarding what He abrogates. Though we do not sacrifice animals (which foreshadowed Christ) we are now commanded to partake in communion, which is a remembrance of Christ.

The second principle is the regulative principle. This principle asserts that God has determined how He is to be approached. He is to be approached with the singing of hymns, prayers, sacraments, confession, and reading of His word—all in the name of His Son. He is not to be approached with strange fire (Leviticus 10:1, 2). God has given commandments as to how He is approached. We are not to add or subtract from His commands (Deuteronomy 4:2). The way someone is approached tells you a bit about the person. Royalty is approached a certain way. God views a violation of this as an attack on His holiness (Leviticus 10:3). It is no wonder we have, with today's contemporary and casual liturgies, an impotent view of the holiness (separate-ness) of God. He is both imminent and transcendent. But we must not forget the transcendent.

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<sup>1</sup> We no longer sacrifice animals, have priests, have dietary restrictions, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus would be the most liturgical book in the Old Testament.

## Determined by Scripture

This being said, the point here is for us to realize that God has determined how His people are to approach Him in order for His purpose (as stated earlier) to be achieved. God has graciously not left us at the disposal of our own ability (or Freudian-based psychological development theories) to organize systems of sanctification and grace for ourselves. In the Scriptures God has revealed the purpose of His church and the method by which the purpose is achieved.<sup>3</sup>

### III. The Role of Children in Church

Recognizing that God has determined the purpose and order for His church, what has He to say regarding the children? In the early days of the church Moses records,

**“All of you stand today before the LORD your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel,<sup>11</sup> your little ones and your wives—also the stranger who *is* in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—<sup>12</sup> that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today,<sup>13</sup> that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and *that* He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Deuteronomy 29:10-13).**

As God’s people entered in covenant with Him, His command was that the little ones (literally *toddlers*) be present. It is important to note that this command was never repealed in the new covenant. We are God’s covenant people. We are a people He has established for Himself. We are reminded of this as often as we gather. And as lofty a concept this was and is, the little ones were to be present.

Two chapters later we again read of the gathering of God’s people and the request for the presence of the little ones.

**Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who *is* within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully observe all the words of this law,<sup>13</sup> 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 which you cross the Jordan to possess” (Deuteronomy 31:12, 13).**

After the Exodus and Joshua’s great military victory, we read,

**And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings.<sup>34</sup> And afterward he read all the words of the law,**

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<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that there are liberties and necessities within the system. For example we have the liberty to meet at 10 AM or 10:30; it is necessary to pass out the communion elements but the Scriptures don’t explain precisely how that is to be done.

**the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. <sup>35</sup> There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them (Joshua 8:31, 34, 35).**

The little ones were present at the sacrifices and the reading of the entire Law of Moses. Again in Nehemiah,

**Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off (Nehemiah 12:43).**

Joel again calls for the gathering of God's people.

**Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; <sup>16</sup>gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room (Joel 2:15, 16).**

With the possible exception of the gathering of elders or Nehemiah 8, we seldom, or never, see God gather His people and exclude the little ones, even those nursing. His grace is much deeper than we realize. As with David who wrote,

**But You *are* He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. <sup>10</sup> I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You *have been* My God (Psalm 22:9, 10).**

And in the New Testament, regarding John the Baptist, we read,

**For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15).**

Although we recognize the Christian faith to be a message which must be preached, understood and obeyed, we must also recognize that the grace whereby which the heart is circumcised to obey may be applied much earlier than we realize. And if God's primary means of grace is His church, we ought not to neglect His command regarding the children's participation...even though we assume it is of no avail because of our outward observation.

### **New Testament Accounts—Coming to Jesus**

To further buttress the role of children that we read of in the Old Testament, the practice clearly continues in the New Testament.

**Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. <sup>14</sup> But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. <sup>15</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." <sup>16</sup> And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16).**

How can we argue against Jesus being a walking, talking church service? He is the grace that all the means of grace lead us to. If Jesus were present in our church service, would we dismiss the children? Clearly not! Why? What if they made it difficult for the rest of us? It wouldn't matter; we wouldn't rob our children of this.

### **A Marriage Supper**

What we must realize is that the church service is the most concentrated and protracted representation of the person of Christ that God has ordained for His people in history. It is not so much a lecture, or a time to sing or pray or meditate, etc., as it is a time to be in the presence of God and His people in a unique and consecrated way. More than a lecture or time of personal pietism, it is a meal;<sup>4</sup> it is the marriage supper of the Lamb. And in the same way we desire to have our children at our dinner table, for food fellowship, and discussion, rather than eating in their own rooms—distractions and all—God desires His entire family be present when He gathers His people.

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<sup>4</sup> This is not referring merely to the Lord's Supper (although it includes the Lord's Supper), but is my effort at illustrating the family nature of the event.

## Households--Timothy

We continue to see the emphasis on family in the New Testament with the baptisms of households (Acts 16:15; 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). And Paul's comments to Timothy are worth noting also.

**But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them,<sup>15</sup> and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14, 15).**

All this and more inspired Matthew Henry to write,

**Masters of their family should bring their children and their wives with them to the solemn assembly for religious worship.**

In summary, the argument is really quite one-sided. There is simply no biblical precedent for excluding children from the worship service. Any argument against their participation will depend upon entirely upon human counsel. But since human counsel, questions, thoughts, and concerns are not always entirely without merit, we will address them now.

### IV. Common Concerns and Questions

#### **Won't the kids be a distraction?**

Yes, the kids will be a distraction to their parents, others and the pastor. They must have been so in the early church and the Old Testament church as well. But if God has determined the children be present, we must assume that those distractions are His ordained music for the service.

#### **How good do the kids have to be? Can they play with toys, draw, etc?**

Certainly the goal will be for the children to be a fully active participant in the church service. At the same time there are degrees of maturity. Many adults can be a bit more mature in their participation. Eating a cracker or having a bottle would be better than exiting the service. A little drum set or game-boy probably wouldn't be good.

### **What if they're completely out of control?**

In the same way we recognize our kids have difficulty sitting still at dinner, we also recognize that there is a level of disturbance that must be contended with. We must trust that parents will recognize when the situation has reached a fever pitch that requires their undivided attention. In such cases they may have to get up and remove themselves from the assembly for a time. This should primarily be the job of the fathers. If it is a single parent situation (like the pastor's wife), you may need to develop some relationships with people who will be of help.

### **Do we want to turn the church into a place children associate with discipline?**

We certainly don't want to turn the church into a place that has negative connotations for the children. Discipline must not be austere and it must be mixed with positive encouragement. The same question can be asked about our homes. Some people have ill thoughts toward their youth because of the heavy-handed disciplinary actions of stern parents. A church or a home with no discipline or poorly administered discipline should be avoided. The church service should not merely be a practice field for discipline—encouragement, love, instruction, etc. should all be implemented. Keep in mind that we are not reinforcing a positive connotation toward church by keeping the kids out.

### **Isn't it the job of the church family to help shoulder the responsibility of the kids?**

We're not necessarily anti Sunday School and will still be providing Sunday School (with a deeper involvement of the elders) which should be more profitable for the kids. At the same time, the biblical model seems to place the responsibility for the children on the parent's shoulders almost entirely (kids in the church service being the place where the church actually begins to shoulder the church's responsibility). It is our goal to help the parents understand their biblical role and become more excellent at fulfilling this responsibility.

### **What about the parent's edification?**

A forty-minute sermon on Sunday should not be the only source of information for Christians. Family worship and study is necessary for edification. We must come to realize that, for some people, the edification of their church service will involve the handling of a little soul.

Again, there is an entire mindset regarding Sunday morning service that must be addressed. We tend to view (myself included) the service, especially the sermon, in a sort of lecture hall mentality. And though there should be a certain respect for the word preached and the grasping of the word, it may be healthier to view the service as a meal. The father is leading a family discussion while the family listens, eats, and involves themselves in the necessary distractions of the meal. There may be a time to just study without eating (seminary or even Bible studies or quiet times, etc) but the church service should be thought of more as a meal that feeds the entire family.

**What about parents who are not spiritually mature enough to grasp this?  
Are they on their own?**

Part of our adult Sunday school curriculum will be helping parents grow in their maturity regarding this area. In the mean time, we will do all we can to help. We must keep in mind that it was the norm from the inception of the church for kids to attend the church service in its entirety. If having children in church is biblical, it must be best in every conceivable way. If it is not biblical then we are certainly in error and we will have all these problems and more. However, we do believe it is the biblical model.

**Aren't your sermons a bit long for little ones?**

Sometimes they're a bit long for the big ones. It is always important to be sensitive to the learning capacity and attention span of listeners.

**Will the kids get anything out of church?**

Clearly if God has commanded us to bring the children to church, there is some benefit for them. As mentioned earlier, the church service is the most concentrated and protracted time of interaction with God that people have; at very least, the children's observing of their parent's participation in this (though distracted) will very likely play a significant role of influence in their lives.

Tuesday morning at my Bible study at the retirement home, I asked the ladies (all 70 through 100) how many of them sat in church as little ones (down to infancy) they unanimously (nine of them) sat in church, including the sermon, their entire lives. And here they are, still walking in faith at twilight.

During the week when I prepare sermons I consider the level of understanding and strengths and weaknesses of the listeners. Although I don't intend to write children's sermons, I will now be considering toddlers and teens more than before.

**What sayeth the Scriptures?**

These and many more questions can be asked and hopefully answered. But the real question for the elders is, "What sayeth the Scriptures?" If the Bible teaches that God would have the little ones in the worship service, it would be the height of human hubris to think we have a better idea than He. As human boards are apt to do, we may be reading the Scriptures amiss, but that is the question. The board of our church, and most churches in history (both Romish and Protestant), has also interpreted the Scriptures as to include the children. But even that does not make it right. Your conscience is not bound by the decisions of this church or the decisions of any creed, confession or counsel in history except to the extent that they agree with the Scriptures. The Scriptures alone bind the conscience. In terms of children in the worship service, we have appealed to God's word to the best of our understanding. You are invited to the same pages.