



Suffer the Children?

WHY KIDS BELONG IN CHURCH

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Many of us grew up with the King James phrasing of Mark 10:14, where Jesus's embrace of children is translated as "suffer the little children to come unto me." Newer translations replace "suffer" with "let," so we know that Jesus was talking about permission rather than pain.

But when it comes to children in worship, most of us think that "suffer" got something right. Parents struggle to tame wiggly toddlers. Children complain that church is boring. Some churches give up entirely, making worship an adults only activity. It's as if Jesus said, "Let the children come to Sunday school, and then take them to the nursery. But there'll be suffering indeed if you try to bring them to worship."

I believe that children belong in our worship every Sunday. Their presence is not a problem to be solved but a two-fold promise. First, it is a promise we receive, the promise of blessing. If we bring children into the midst of our worship, they will be blessed and we

In Mark 10, the problem was not that Jesus could not or would not bless the children; it was that the disciples were keeping the children away from Jesus. We should not imitate their mistake. Yet we do if we think about God's blessing only in terms of a *message* that children are too young to understand.

On the other hand, even if it were true that children don't get anything out of worship, that's only half the story. If worship is also our service of God, then we should think it just as important to ask whether God got anything out of our worship. From this perspective, even weary parents and boisterous children can bless God through praise and petition, in prayer and song, but most basically by their presence. Our

Worship is one of the most important places of Christian formation, whatever our age. It is a mistake to require a certain level of formation before we allow someone to worship with us. We don't ever say to an adult visitor, "You aren't yet mature enough in Christ to worship with us." We shouldn't say or imply this to children either.

Assuming that children must be old enough to understand the sermon or to read the words in the bulletin in order to participate is a mistake as well. Surely all of us can get something out of worship even if we can't understand the sermon—perhaps a deep sense of Christ's peace or the Spirit's joy.

How does worship form faith? Answering requires us to acknowledge

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will be blessed and God will be blessed. Second, their presence is a promise we keep. We make this promise at baptisms and dedications when we pledge "to share in your child's nurture and well-being." We keep this promise by bringing children to Jesus in worship.

Can it really be true that children bless and are blessed in worship? Absolutely. The German term for worship is *Gottesdienst*, which means "the service of God," with the "of" pointing in both directions at the same time. In worship, we serve God and God serves us. Blessing is a two-way street. In worship, we come to "bless the Lord, O my soul" (Psalm 103). And in worship, God comes to shower blessings on us all.

Yet we have difficulty imagining that children can participate in this economy of blessing. Though we hesitate to say it, the common claim that children don't get anything out of worship suggests that God can't or won't bless children through worship. That considerably underestimates God. God can and God will bless children, if only we will bring them.

gathering together blesses God.

A pastor told the story of watching one Sunday as her congregation shared the peace of Christ with one another. A four-year-old clambered up onto the pew to hug a woman who had just that week learned that she had terminal cancer. Into her fear and grief came a child to minister Christ's hope. In that moment, through that child, she was blessed! So was the child, and the pastor, and the congregation, and God. Suffer the little children. They belong in worship.

FORMING FAITH IN WORSHIP

The Christian life is a process of being formed in faith. But forming faith in Jesus Christ is not the only game in town. By age eighteen, the average American child has seen half a million commercials whose only purpose is to form desire and behavior and identity. Movies, music, and magazines may have other purposes besides formation, but one of their central effects is to shape what kids believe and how they behave. Formation is serious business.

that faith is far more than just believing certain things to be true. Faith has three key dimensions: believing, behaving, and belonging. Faith includes who we trust, how we act, and where we are at home, but not necessarily in that order. With children, it's usually the other way around.

A child's faith typically begins with a sense of belonging. Sunday after Sunday, we bring them to church, where they discover who and whose they are (their identity), and where they belong (their community). They begin to say, "This is my church," or to feel, "I belong here." Belonging is often where faith starts.

Belonging leads to behaving. Children begin to act like those around them in worship. A three-year-old holds a hymnal to sing, or a two-year-old bows his head in prayer. I hope you've heard a four-year-old say, "Peace be with you," or noticed a fifth grader welcome the Scriptures by responding, "Thanks be to God." ➤

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Such imitation is how we learn to be Christians, for Christians are people who praise God in song, converse with God in prayer, greet one another in Christ, and receive the word of God with thanksgiving.

Behaving opens the door to believing. As children learn how to worship, they will begin to ask, “Why do we do this?” and “What does it mean?” Answering such questions is a lifelong journey. But we begin answering children in Sunday school and confirmation and conversation at home or in youth group. But we shouldn’t try to answer during worship. In worship, we don’t explain it, we do it.

We all have a role to play. Belonging begins with parents who bring children. Behaving can be coached by parents, but parents rightly expect the rest of us to form their children’s faith too. Belonging grows as we greet children in worship with our smiles, words, and hugs. Behaving needs a half-dozen Christians around each child, worshipping God with all their heart, mind, and strength. If children get belonging and behaving down, then by the power of the Holy Spirit believing may take care of itself. Because fervent faith and joyous worship are usually caught before they can be taught.

COACHING CHILDREN IN WORSHIP

One way to help children to participate in worship is to coach them. Coaching worship suggests that worship resembles a game—it does. Games are a form of structured activity; so is worship. To understand basketball, you need to know its goal and rules. To enjoy soccer, you must know its skills and strategies. Worship is no different. Like games, worship has a purpose—to glorify God. Like games, worship also has structure—we gather, proclaim, respond, and go forth. Like games, worship requires skills—greeting, singing, praying, offering—which means that it can be coached.

Worship is not a spectator sport; it requires our participation. We don’t go to church to watch and listen, but to worship and pray. We are not there

to sit still and be quiet, but as Psalm 100 tells us, to “enter his gates with thanksgiving” and “make a joyful noise to the Lord.” If we forget that we are in church to do something, then we cannot adequately coach children in how to do it with us. Instead, we’ll adopt coping strategies designed to minimize the disturbance that children cause.

How do we do it? We begin on Saturday night. No coach wants a tired or distracted athlete at game time. In the same way, children need rest in order to worship. Christian parents can take a page from the Jewish Sabbath, which begins at sunset on Friday night. If we take Saturday night as the beginning of our Lord’s Day, we can let evening turn our attention toward the morrow’s worship. Children can be called to settle down for the night and invited to anticipate worship by preparing Bibles, tithes and offerings, and clothes. Read the lectionary texts together, go to bed early or on time, and pray that tomorrow our worship will be pure.

The central form of coaching in worship is to prepare, prompt, and praise. Children may naturally pick up on some things. But they need us to help them know what to do and when to do it. The best approach is to sit with a bulletin before worship and show a child all the places where she can participate.

What are they? Younger children can participate in the greeting, say “Amen” to all the prayers, hum along with the hymns or worship song, say “Thanks be to God” after the Scripture lessons, and give an offering. Slightly older children can memorize the Lord’s Prayer, Doxology, and the Apostles’ Creed—for them, the more things we say or sing regularly, the better. Children who read can follow along with Bible readings and do virtually everything adults do, except perhaps stay focused for the entire sermon (something not all adults can do).

Preparation beforehand doesn’t replace prompting during the service. Children easily lose focus, and react more slowly than adults, so they need our prompting a few seconds before

each act of worship or reminding them when it’s time to pray.

A key form of prompting is to share a hymnal or Bible with a child. Let your finger follow the words during the song. And sing songs of praise when you are at home or driving in the car on the way to church.

Every coach knows that players need both honest feedback and regular praise. So do children who are growing in their skill as worshipers. The key issue is to be sure that we praise them for pleasing God, not for pleasing us. Instead of saying, “You were so quiet in worship” try, “Thank you for helping me worship.” Praising children for worshipping well is not just a responsibility for parental coaches, but for us all.

REPETITION MAKES FOR EXTRAORDINARY WORSHIP

If variety is the spice of life, repetition is the meat and potatoes, especially in worship. We come to church every Sunday knowing that there are some things we can count on—like the offering. But there are more central things that we trust will never change: the risen Christ will meet us; the Scriptures will be read; we’ll pray and praise and sing.

Worship scholars call something that repeats week after week an “ordinary.” An act of worship that is unique to a given Sunday is a “proper.” On the ordinary side are the Lord’s Prayer, our response to the Scripture lessons (“Thanks be to God”), and most Sundays the doxology and the Christ greeting (“The Lord be with you. And also with you.”). Most everything else we do on a Sunday at our church—Scripture texts, responsive readings, and hymns—are from the proper category, which means that full participation will require good reading skills.

This makes it more difficult for several different groups to participate—children who don’t read, or don’t read well, the visually impaired, and adults who struggle with reading, whether because of illiteracy, dementia, or aging.

When I imagine worship that is more

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inviting to children, I begin with *repetition, repetition, repetition*. Children need the predictability and dependability of a structure of worship that is stable and of particular acts of worship that are the same every week. They need more ordinaries—such as naming God’s work through the words of the Apostles’ Creed, or singing God’s name in the Gloria Patri—than propers.

This is because real freedom in worship comes from “knowing by heart,” which frees us from bulletin and hymnal to concentrate entirely on praise and prayer.

Increasing the ordinary will help us do two necessary things with our children. First, there is the need to notice and name the actions of worship. We teach children to worship by giving them the names—the vocabulary—for what we are all doing. I call this *name it, claim it*, because I firmly believe that having words for what we do gives us a sense of proficiency and belonging.

When I went to work at a moving company, I wasn’t really a mover until I had learned the language. When I did, I was a good mover because the vocabulary told me not only what to do but why I should do it. Part of becoming a disciple of Christ is learning to bless God and others, to thank God, to intercede for the world, to receive grace, and to give of ourselves. We do these things in and outside of worship, but doing them in worship is the training ground for the rest of life, and learning to name what we are doing is key to becoming proficient at it. So before, during, and after worship, we teach children the names for what we do.

Finally, increasing ordinaries makes it easier to *notice the new*. A pattern of regularity allows us all the joy of noticing when something changes—when the banners change color, when the palm branches wave, or when our favorite hymn is sung.

The funny thing is that attending to repetition, naming the ordinary and noticing the proper will make worship extraordinary—for children and for the rest of us too. □