

Do Children Belong in Church? A Biblical Overview

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Three Key Starting Points

1. The sufficiency of Scripture

This issue, and all issues of Christian living, needs to be approached through the lens of “Sola Scriptura.” God’s Word has given us all that we need, by way of its commands, as well as its patterns, for all decisions related to faith and practice. So our concern on this question of “do children belong in church?” or “should families be called to worship together in church?” needs to be addressed with the patterns¹ and commands found in Scripture. “Sola Scriptura” points us to ask, “If we only had the Bible to refer to in making a decision about this issue, what would we conclude?”

2. The responsibility of parents to be the primary spiritual trainers of their children.

The responsibility for the discipleship of children is given to parents as the first application of the Great Commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5ff and directly to parents, specifically fathers, in Ephesians 6:4.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These commands that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home.” - Deut 6:5ff

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” – Eph. 6:4

3. The vision of multigenerational faithfulness spreading the gospel to all nations.

The third foundation for this issue has to do with the mission of the church to make disciples and to spread the gospel to all nations. Throughout the Scriptures, from the first command to multiply throughout the earth, a vision and plan is presented of generation after generation of God’s people bringing the message of God’s truth and love to all people. The link between the discipleship of children and the mission to bring the love of God to all nations is clearly seen in Genesis

¹ It is understood that there is a difference between “descriptive” and “prescriptive” teaching in Scripture. Just because there is an example of something being done a certain way in the Bible does not necessarily mean that is equal to a command for all believers for all time. A careful study of Scripture should look at both the descriptive patterns and prescriptive commands, for both have instructive merit, in order to discern the will of God.

18:18-19 where we discover that Abraham's specific responsibility in seeing God's kingdom mission fulfilled was the spiritual training of his own children and descendants.

“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

This priority on multigenerational faithfulness is also found through the express mention of children at the giving of the major covenants.

To Noah, God said in Genesis 9:9, “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you.”

To Abraham God said in Genesis 17:7, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come,”

The Mosaic covenant was specifically directed to the multigenerational faith community in Deuteronomy 29:9, “Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do. ¹⁰ All of you are standing today in the presence of the LORD your God--your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel, ¹¹ together with your children and your wives, and the aliens living in your camps who chop your wood and carry your water. ¹² You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, ¹³ to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Davidic Covenant continued the theme of focusing on multigenerational faith in 2 Chron. 21:⁷ Nevertheless, because of the covenant the LORD had made with David, the LORD was not willing to destroy the house of David. He had promised to maintain a lamp for him and his descendants forever.

The Patterns and Commands in Scripture Related to Family Integrated Worship

In light of the foundations above, what patterns and commands do we find in the Bible related to the place of children in the worship gatherings of God's people?

1. Parents were specifically commanded to include their children as participants in the Passover celebration.

The Passover celebration was celebrated both in homes, and in the larger faith community, and it was intentionally designed for the inclusion and spiritual training of children. This has direct implications for our practice of communion today. Exodus 12:21-27

EX 12:21 Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. ²³ When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

EX 12:24 "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. ²⁵ When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' ²⁷ then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.' " Then the people bowed down and worshiped. ²⁸ The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron.

2. God's people were instructed to include their children in the Feast of Weeks.

This extended worship event, for the people of Israel was a family integrated event. Deuteronomy 16:9-11.

DT 16:9 Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. ¹⁰ Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. ¹¹ And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name--you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you.

3. God's people were instructed to include their children in the Feast of Tabernacles.

The first text for this is found in Deuteronomy 16:13-14

DT 16:13 Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. ¹⁴ Be

joyful at your Feast--you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns

Later in Deuteronomy 31:9-13, we find more detailed instructions related to the Feast of Tabernacles. Not only were the children of Israel to be participants in the worship event, but the children of the aliens living in the land were specifically encouraged to attend to hear the words of the law.

DT 31:9 So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. ¹⁰ Then Moses commanded them: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Feast of Tabernacles, ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. ¹² Assemble the people--men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns--so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. ¹³ Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

4. Family integrated worship continued to be practiced during the time of Joshua.

Despite what appears to be a very long worship event, children were present for the entire reading of the Torah. Joshua 8:34ff

JOS 8:34 Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law--the blessings and the curses--just as it is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.

5. During the time of Ezra, men, women, and children gathered around him for a time of confession.

EZR 10:1 While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites--men, women and children--gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.

6. The prophet Joel called the people to a fast and to gather together for worship. Adults were specifically told to bring their children with them. Joel 2:15ff

JOEL 2:15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. ¹⁶ Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather

the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.

7. As a 12 year-old boy, Jesus was an active participant in the spiritual life of his worshipping community. He had specifically been brought by his parents to Jerusalem to participate in the celebration of Passover.

Luke 2:42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷

8. Children were present when Jesus taught. In some situations they were present even when Jesus was privately teaching His disciples. Matthew 18:1-5

MT 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

MT 18:2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. ³ And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

MT 18:5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. ⁶ But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

See also Mark 9:35 and following.

9. Children were present during the church services in the book of Acts.

Despite the extremely long sermon indicated in Acts 20:7, children were present at the worship gathering.

Acts 20:7 On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. ⁹ Seated in a window was a young man (Greek word indicates age between 7-14) named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.

¹⁰ Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" ¹¹ Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. ¹² The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

10. Children were present in the worship gatherings in Ephesus and Colossae.

In Paul's letters to these churches, he specifically speaks to children. These letters were intended to be read to congregations in these cities. It seems reasonable to assume that Paul counted on the fact that children would be present for the hearing of the letters, since he addressed portions of the letters to them. It is also reasonable to conclude that Paul had no problem with children being exposed to the entire content of the letter.

Eph. 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother"--which is the first commandment with a promise-- ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Colossians 3:20 Children obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Summary of Biblical instructions and patterns on children participating with adults in the worship events of their faith community:

From Moses through the New Testament church, the Scriptures specifically invite children to worship with the faith community, and there is a pattern of noting the presence of children at worship events. On the other hand, there do not appear to be any examples where the faith community gathered for corporate worship without the children.

Some of the positive impacts of children worshipping together with the family of God may include:

1. Increasing the spiritual unity of the family, which results in the spread of the gospel to all nations through multigenerational faithfulness.
2. Worshipping with the faith community becomes built into a child's spiritual DNA. They increasingly identify themselves with the body of Christ, and the family of God as expressed in their local church.
3. The Scriptural patterns indicate that children greatly benefit from being in the presence of God in corporate worship, sitting under the authority of God's word through preaching, even if they are not able to intellectually understand all of it.

What if children are absent from the worship events of the faith community? Some possible effects include:

1. If family worship is not taking place in the home, and children are not integrated into the worship services, it is likely that a child would only see their parents engaging in singing, sitting under God's word, and participating in corporate prayer at Christmas and Easter.
2. Children identify more with age specific programs than they do with the church family as a whole. When their programs are gone, or they don't like them any more, they may be on to the next thing.
3. The older generations have less influence on developing the next generations of believers, and thus God's plan to spread the gospel to all nations through multigenerational faithfulness is hindered.

This paper has a simple objective, to develop the biblical patterns and commands related to family integrated worship. If one becomes convinced that this is indeed the biblical pattern and command found in Scripture, then the following questions may help move the discussion from the theological to the practical.

1. According to the Scriptures, what is a "worshipful atmosphere?"
2. What would happen if we called parents to prioritize family worship so that their children would be equipped and trained to fully participate in corporate worship?
3. What impact would it have on visitors to come into our church and see children enthusiastically engaged in worship?
4. What would a church that was connected across the generations look like?