



# KEEPING CHILDREN IN CHURCH

SCOTT BROWN

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# KEEPING CHILDREN IN CHURCH

## 1. The Family Together in Church

*“When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it” (Deu 31:11-13).*

**T**HE pattern of Scripture shows families gathering together for worship and discipleship. This is the reason you should keep your children with you when you worship in the local church. The Bible shows many scenes where families were together for worship, prayer, and discipleship. It is nearly impossible to find age-segregated gatherings for worship and fellowship in the Bible. This is the reason you should consider opportunities to keep your children with you when you worship in the local church.

However, we live in a culture that almost always separates families into age-graded subgroups. Did this come about because we were thinking biblically about it? Not really.

### ***A big vision of God***

Children need to be inspired with a big vision of the greatness of God. How do you give it to them? You give it to them by showing them the majesty of God, the truth of God, the seriousness of sin, the power of the gospel, and the relief of redemption. This is the heart and soul of local church meetings. Or at least it should be.

All this to say, one of the indispensable ways parents do this is by bringing them to participate in the rich and varied experiences of the meetings of the church.

### ***Why do we segregate the generations?***

Here is the short history. The modern pattern of separating families (and systematic age segregation) in the church was copied from the public education system. The church fell in love with this practice in the 1850's with the rise of public education under the guidance of ungodly educational philosophers such as Horace Mann and John Dewey. The movement grew, and it picked up steam all over the world. Then, in the 1950's, in America, we saw the rise of a new and innovative obsession—youth culture, and its offspring—youth ministries. It gave birth to youth rallies, youth groups, youth pastors, and a version of segmentation of the church that no one had ever seen before.

Everything in the church became age-segregated. These popular practices spread all over the world.

But if all we followed was the Bible, would we do it this way in the church? What does the Bible say?

### *Examples of families worshiping together*

Here are a few examples from the Bible of families worshiping together, celebrating, or engaging in discipleship. Notice the many beneficial things the families were engaged in during these gatherings—worship, adoration, confession, repentance, prayer, and reading.

#### *Passover*

In Exodus 12:1-28, we learn that whole families celebrated deliverance from bondage in Egypt at the Passover feast. This was a seven-day family celebration. Moses says, “Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families” (Exo 12:21). It was designed for the children to learn about bondage and redemption in Egypt. “And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service?” (Exo 12:26).

#### *Tabernacle*

In Leviticus, the whole family was commanded to bring sacrifices to the tabernacle for atonement for sin. The sacrificial system was a family affair. Sacrifices had been brought to the Lord by families since Cain and Abel. In the first chapter of Leviticus, we encounter very specific instructions for both people and priests. Let us not forget that it was families who brought their sacrifices. These sacrifices were acknowledgments of sin in the families. There were five sacrifices specified.

First, the burnt offering for atonement (1:1-17). Second, grain offering for personal consecration (2:1-16). Third, peace offering for reconciliation with God (3:1-17). Fourth, sin offering for propitiation for unintentional sins (4:1-5:13). Fifth, trespass offering for repentance (5:14-6:7). The whole family was involved at some level.

### *Sabbath Feasts*

In Deuteronomy 12, Moses explains how parents must bring their families to “the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes,” to rejoice in God (v. 5). The families (tribes) are commanded to bring their offerings to these places the Lord chooses, and they are to eat together and rejoice together to worship God as families. “And ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God, ye, and your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite that is within your gates” (Deu 12:12). This activity is specifically not to happen in the home but in the place the Lord chooses (Deu 12:17-18). This forms the consistent pattern of the worship of God in the Bible.

### *Outdoor Discipleship Experiences*

In Deuteronomy 27:11-26, we see all the families of Israel gathered on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerezim to recount the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience. They shouted the curses and blessings to one another antiphonally from the tops of these two mountains. Many of the blessings and the curses have to do with family life.

In Deuteronomy 12:6-7, we find families commanded to worship God, to rejoice together at the feasts, and to bring their tithe money, turn it into cash, and “rejoice...ye and your households.”

### *Reading the Law*

In the days of Moses, God commanded families, including the little ones to come together every seven years to hear the reading of the Law of God (Deu 31:12-13). This was practiced for hundreds of years in Israel.

In Joshua 8:35, we learn that Joshua read all the words of the Law to whole families on Mount Ebal.

In Nehemiah 8:1-2, everyone gathered to hear the reading of the Law of God. Who was present? Everyone, including the little ones, except those who could not understand—most likely because half the children only knew the language of Ashdod, not the language of the Hebrew Bible (Neh 13:24).

### *Rejoicing After Revival*

In Nehemiah 12:43, we read the story of reformation and rejoicing, and women and children included in the public gatherings.

### *Worship and Prayer on Threat of Attack*

In 2 Chronicles 20:13, children and wives were prayerfully present in time of danger of invasion. The children were included in singing and prayer in the face of battle. This must have left an unforgettable impression on their young minds.

### *In the Temple*

In 2 Chronicles 31:18, the families were before God in the temple to sanctify themselves.



## *In Seasons of Repentance*

Joel 2:15-16 describes a time of repentance where whole families came, even brides and bridegrooms on their wedding day.

## *New Testament Examples*

In the New Testament, we see the same pattern of families involved together in the life of the gathered church. There is no explicitly biblical evidence that the church was ever separated by age.

## *Jesus and the Little Children*

In Matthew 18:2-3, Jesus called a little child to hear Him, and used him to illustrate the doctrine of salvation: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." On another occasion, recorded in Matthew 19:13-15, the disciples rebuked children who drew near to Him. Then, Jesus rebuked the disciples for restraining the children.

## *The Temple of Jerusalem*

In Matthew 21:15-16, we learn that children were in the temple and they were crying out. But the Pharisees did not approve of this. The children cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" But the Pharisees "were sore displeased, And said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?" It seemed normal to Jesus that the children were in the temple.

## *Jesus Teaching the Multitudes*

In Matthew 14:21, when Jesus fed 5,000 men, there were women and children present also: “And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children.” In the following chapter, the same conditions existed when He fed 4,000 men (Mat 15:38). Most interpreters suggest that Jesus was preaching to 15,000-25,000 people of different ages and genders during each of these events.

## *Prayer Times*

In Acts 21:5, we find the children joining their parents in prayer on the beach: “We departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed.”

## *Local Church Meetings*

In Ephesians 6:1-4, the setting is the gathered church. The Apostle Paul directly addresses the children in the assembly: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord.” These are the children who are sitting in the meeting of the Ephesian church who are hearing the letter read. Paul uses a Greek grammatical form called the “vocative of direct address.” He is directly addressing the children in the meeting of the church. It is clear that children were present in the meetings of the early churches. Paul assumes the children are present for the reading of his letter to the Ephesians.

In his commentary on Ephesians, William Hendricksen explains it this way:

Were Paul to be present with us today he would be shocked at the spectacle of children attending the

Sunday School and then going home just before the regular worship service. He has a word addressed directly and specifically to the children.<sup>1</sup>

The meetings included young boys like Eutychus (probably between 7 and 14 years old) who left the meeting after midnight by falling out a window. He was overcome with sleepiness during a long Pauline preaching session, nodded off, and rolled off the window's ledge (Act 20:7-12).

We need to understand that the meetings in the early church included babies who were cutting teeth, eight-year-old boys who were wired for movement, and budding teenagers. The children were not in age-graded Sunday schools instead of the meetings of the church. They were taught side by side with adults in the meetings of the church.

On the flip side, are there explicit biblical examples or commands or principles that lead us to segregate the church by age? No! Not in the Bible. You will have to go somewhere else to find it. You cannot make an explicit case for age segregation by using the Bible. You have to go to some other source.

### *Teaching on their level*

Now the big question is, "Don't children need to be taught on their level?" Here is my answer: in some contexts, yes, it seems to make sense. However, to deduce that this is reason enough to implement and maintain fragmentation of the gathered church for

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendricksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 258.

worship suggests a practice totally foreign to the witness of the Scriptures. We do not have record of it in the Bible. Does the Bible ever tell us that children need to be taught on their level in the church? If we are going to fragment the worship of God in the church by learning levels, I believe we need to have a clear biblical warrant for it. To my knowledge, there is no biblical warrant. I believe that whatever is done in the church of Jesus Christ must have biblical warrant.

Could it be that God has so arranged His church so that children would increase in their knowledge as they naturally grow up hearing the preaching and teaching of His Word? They grow in spiritual maturity as their cognitive abilities rise.

God has given, in His Word, all the principles and practices we need to teach our children in His church. It seems that children grow through a progressive acquisition of wisdom and knowledge over time, through the normal gatherings of a local church. The children understand a little when they are little and a lot when they are big. That's God's plan. I'm content to let that happen organically over time as they receive the Word of God, with the help of their parents, week by week.

There is no indication from Scripture that children were removed from the meetings designed for preaching, Scripture reading, prayer, and worship. That's the Christian way. Go and do the same. Keep your children with you for worship and discipleship.

## *Discussion*

- In your own words, describe the biblical testimony for keeping your children with you in church.

- If you are reluctant to keep your children with you in church, what is holding you back?

## 2. Keeping Children in Worship Services

*“Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord” (Col 3:20)*

*“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph 6:1-3; see also Exo 20:12; Pro 25:28).*

Let’s talk about helping your children observe the glory of Jesus Christ in all of His attributes, deeds, and instructions. God gives you many opportunities to show your children His majesty and set them up for success at the same time. Local church life is one of them. Keeping children of all ages with you in church services can be tough sledding. It creates interesting situations—sometimes exasperating situations. It can be embarrassing and distracting. Having your little children with you can feel like *you* just missed *half* the sermon. You start thinking that *your children* missed the *whole* sermon. The Lord’s Supper tray can be precarious in little hands. It is easy to get frustrated.

Keeping your children with you often exposes defiant hearts, right in front of God and everybody. Sometimes sin in the hearts of the parents is exposed. These experiences reveal things that need to be

addressed before the Lord. The exposure is good. Hopefully, repentance and sanctification ensue.

In the first few years of a child's life, parents often find themselves in a constant battle to stay on top of things. It seems it will never end. So, why not just hide them in the nursery for a while? You get the idea.

Here are some practical suggestions to help you keep your children with you in the church service.

### ***Prepare them***

A church worship service may stretch out to 90 minutes—like most movies. However, church services are not like movies. Church services for the glory of God, properly experienced, require preparation. So, you need to talk to your children about it. Help them see how the time will be allocated. Deliberate preparation is very helpful to children who sit in church services.

### ***Role play***

It is very helpful to role play the service situations. This is when you make sure the rules are clearly communicated. Here are some of the objectives we tried to uphold (though imperfectly) in the Brown household:

- Sit still
- Look at the speaker
- Listen to the speaker
- Sing wholeheartedly
- Show respect for other worshippers
- Don't turn around

- Don't make faces at other people

Some of my children (now that they have their own children) have their little ones fold their hands together during worship. At the beginning, when they are little, they might hold the child's hands together to keep them from flying apart. It works very well, and it helps them to keep focused, keep from bugging siblings next to them, and from playing with things.

### ***Family worship trial runs***

You should have a time daily when your family gathers around Scripture. Do it from the time they are babies. The best way to prepare your children for church meetings is to maintain daily worship in your home. This is the training time where all of the disciplines of the meeting of the church are engaged in, within the privacy of your own home. Divide your time together with singing, Scripture reading, memorization, and prayer. In other words, duplicate some of the familiar elements of a church service. You might even consider listening to a recorded sermon. This way the child is hearing someone else's voice, just like they do in the worship service.

The church service should not be your primary training ground. Rather, family worship in the privacy of your own home should be where your primary training takes place.

### ***It's a set-up***

What's this all about? You are setting them up to succeed! I cannot emphasize this enough. Well-

ordered family worship is indispensable for preparing them for Sunday. If they cannot learn to sit still and listen in the privacy of your own home without distractions, you are setting them up for failure and setting yourself up for frustration on Sunday morning. Orderly home life is the key to orderly church life.

### ***Establish biblical standards of behavior***

The fifth commandment requires children to obey parents (the first time). This is the baseline for all child training. It forms the structure of honor that is necessary for a child's success in life (Eph 6:1-4). You need to wisely deal with dishonor and rebellion whenever it presents itself. Christian parents are required by Scripture to use discipline when necessary, for, "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Pro 29:15).

### ***Is it fair?***

The question in most people's minds is this: Is it fair to expect little ones to be obedient in these areas? My answer is, "Yes, it is." It does not happen with the snap of a finger. You will have to work at it, just like anything else that matters. They can do it, but they need a good and patient shepherd, who knows where he is going and is not willing to leave any behind.

Unfortunately, in our culture, we have accepted a standard of behavior that allows outright rebellion in toddlers. Don't join that club! The common feeling is that rebellion is normal and acceptable during two periods of life: early childhood and the teen years. So they tell you, "Just close your eyes, and it will go away



eventually.” Mark Twain represented this philosophy very well:

When a child turns 12, you should put him in a barrel, nail a lid down, and feed him through a knot hole. When he turns 16, you should seal up the knot hole.

Not so fast. We need to think outside our own cultural standards about rebellion. Is there any indication from the Bible that rebellion just needs to be tolerated until it goes away? Is rebellion acceptable? Should it be socially acceptable in your home?

### ***Perfection not necessary***

I’m certainly not suggesting that your children need to be perfect. That won’t happen. I had plenty of “moments” with my children in church. The question is, what kind of culture are we cultivating? A culture of rebellion?

People in our culture think, “You cannot expect a two-year-old to obey.” Unfortunately, this principle is usually a prophecy. 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” (Psa 27:4).

## ***Self-control***

Most little children, at some point, will cry so loudly that they need to be taken out of the worship service. Don't be afraid to leave the service to get your children back on track. You should not take them out for every little peep. But if it becomes too distracting for the other worshipers, or if they are flat out rebelling, please do the whole church a favor and take them out.

You need to make it crystal clear that they are not allowed to let their emotions get out of control. This is something you must teach them by telling them, "You are not allowed to act this way. No crying. You may never scream in church (or at home)." It should not be normal to hear the same squalling children every week in church. They must be obedient. Children need to keep self-control, and you ought to embrace the principle that it is possible for them to keep it.

Taking your child out of the service will likely be a normal part of child training when they are very young. Don't be embarrassed. Although, if it is happening all the time, you need to take a hard look at how you are handling things at home. Your church experience will normally mirror your home experience.

## ***Not a play time***

If you remove your child from the service for discipline, don't make it a play time. Don't make it more fun than the service. It is self-defeating because children know how to work the system. They are not dumb. They might even be naughty so that they are

removed to have a play time. This is how children wrap you around their little fingers.

If you take your child out of the service for a few minutes, don't make it a different kind of time than what you have in the main service. One way to do this is to go to another room and have them sit in your lap... and not play. When the child settles down, take them back to the service. Don't be afraid to do this multiple times.

### ***Don't bribe***

While I fully acknowledge that God does reward us for obedience, I am cautious about rewarding a child with food, toys, or other incentives for good behavior. I believe this is going in the wrong direction and will eventually take you where you don't want to go. Good behavior should be the baseline. If you start paying them to be polite, you will get a selfish, materialistic brat. And, you might end up paying your children to go to church.

### ***Fathers Play a Key Role***

One of the mistakes that fathers can make is delegating all of this work to their wives or older children. My experience is that a common denominator of unrestrainable children in the worship service is often a father who is not taking personal responsibility. Of course, husbands and wives need to work together on this.

We all understand the struggles that arise from keeping your children in church. In the midst of the

difficulties, be very patient with one another. You are making disciples of Jesus Christ. You are showing them true treasure. You are telling them of the praises of the Lord, teaching them the ways of gladness, opening the gates of righteousness, and paving the way for everlasting joy. And don't forget that the Holy Spirit is always working beyond your abilities. God and God alone can save your children, giving them hearts to love Him.

This can be messy work. We will need to persevere through successes, failures, and re-takes. And what is at stake? Nothing less than the eternal souls of our children (Col 3:20; Eph 6:1-4).

### *Discussion*

- Which ideas do you need to incorporate for keeping your children with you in church?
- As husband and wife, are you in agreement over the things you need to incorporate?

## 3. Distracted Children

*“My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise. Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early. I will praise thee, O Lord, among the people” (Psa 57:7-9).*

Now that you prepared your children for the importance of the moment, and now that they are coming into the church ready to hear, what do you do *during* the service? The answer is this: help them keep their

hearts *fixed* on God. Help them be *awake* and stay *awake*, to all the things that worship brings. Remember, you are tour guides for everlasting joy in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### ***Deal with distractions***

First of all, let me acknowledge that everyone gets distracted at church. I get distracted. You get distracted. So, don't be too hard on your children when they get distracted. At the same time, you should be attentive to notice when your children are getting distracted and help them get back on track.

David Clarkson says that the “wanderings, roving of the mind, will, affections, senses, caused by the cares of the world and the lusts of the flesh” are the chief reasons for distractions.<sup>2</sup> He says it is hard to hit the moving object of a distracted soul. One way you can do this with little ones is to encourage them to listen for particular words and mark down how many times they heard it.

### ***The worship service is not a play time—no toys***

Playing in church does not teach your children to understand the gravity of worship and the wisdom of being still. I am not in favor of giving children things to play with in church. No rattles or cars, etc. I also discourage reading books other than the Bible. I maintain that allowing children to read other books desensitizes and distracts them from the gravity of the

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<sup>2</sup> David Clarkson, *The Works of David Clarkson, B. D.*, ed. T. Smith vol. 1 (Edinburgh, Scotland: James Nichol, 1864), 437.

gathering of God's people for worship. If you bring crayons in, then draw outlines of pictures that will help your children participate in the service, not get disconnected. Playing in church gives them the impression that the singing, preaching, and praying are not important. You don't want to create a tune-out pattern in your children.

### ***No walking around during the church service***

Some people think it's OK to allow their children to walk around during church services. Don't do it. It is simply distracting and dishonorable behavior. You would never allow this at a theater, basketball game, or the office of your boss at work. You owe it to the people around you, the pastor, and to the gravity of the moment.

### ***Relax with their different cognitive capabilities***

You will need to be extra attentive to the capacities of each child. Some children can only understand one word or one concept from the sermon. Not a problem! Help your child to understand at least one element of the sermon. Pick one thing from that sermon and discuss it. A child who understands one word or one concept has experienced at least one victory.

Relax. Knowledge is cumulative. Learning is always a slow pile-up of truth. They don't need to hear everything or understand everything. Their understanding of everything was never my goal as a father. My goal was that they would understand at least one thing. Notice the wisdom of Richard Baxter's father:

At first my father set me to read the historical parts of the scripture, which suiting with my nature, greatly delighted me; and though all that time I neither understood or relished much the doctrinal part, and mystery of redemption, yet it did me good by acquainting me with the matters of fact, and drawing me on to love the Bible, and to search by degrees into the rest.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Baby steps***

Parents somehow feel that children need to understand everything that is said. Not so. Baby steps are normal. They don't need to understand everything. Nobody gets everything out of anything. Nobody remembers everything they hear in a sermon. Your children just need to learn a little more than what they knew before—even if it is one new word they did not know before, one new story, or one new illustration in the Word of God. This is what we love about baby steps. The first step sends the whole family to their feet in a standing ovation. Baby steps in sermon acquisition ought to be the same.

## ***Words***

When I had young children, I would have them listen for specific words in the sermon and bump my arm when they heard them. When they learned to write, I would write a word on my notes and circle it and have them copy it on their own paper for later discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Baxter (1615-1691), *The Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter* (London, England: London Religious Tract Society), 4.

At other times, I would have them illustrate the scenes of the sermon text by drawing pictures of it as the preacher preached his sermon. The Bible is full of illustrations and imagery from nature and real-life experiences. Many sections in your Bible can be illustrated on paper. This is one way to encourage small children to be engaged.

I wanted my children to love the preaching by tracking with the preacher. I wanted them to see that no matter who is preaching, they can strike gold—if they listen carefully. I did not want my children to get the cancer of, “I didn’t get anything out of that.” Don’t let them think that way. Yes, you can get something out of everything! Teach them to have a heart to squeeze every ounce of good out of every sermon.

### *Awaken respect for the preacher*

Teach your children to engage with the preacher—eyeball to eyeball. One way you can assist them is by developing a culture of respect for the preacher or anyone else who is speaking or leading. Train them to keep their eyes on the preacher. Take notice when they let their eyes wander. Create a culture in your family where it’s wrong, impolite, and unacceptable to talk to each other or look around while the preacher is preaching.

Remember, God designed these moments specifically for their joy. We must never forget that distractions in meetings designed for joy only dilute gladness. So, do what you can to minimize the distractions and teach your children to mine maximum joy from the means of grace. You are setting them up. You are



helping them to say in the genuineness of their hearts, “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise.” How did that happen? It happened because somebody came alongside to help shape their conscience by saying, “Awake” (Psa 57:7).

### *Discussion*

- Do you agree that it is appropriate to help your children to pay attention during the service? Do you think it is too disruptive to the meeting to have distracted children?
- What are the ways you can appropriately help your children pay attention at church? What kinds of things have you tried in the past? How do you think they worked?

