

Children and the Worship Service

John Colyer

Professor of Christian Education
Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary
Lansdale, Pennsylvania

"But, Mom, I don't like sitting in big church."

"Come on, Dad, we don't even understand what he is trying to say."

"Son, when we go to church, we sit as a family. It doesn't matter if you understand necessarily. You will someday. Just try to listen and get something out of the service."

These short phrases sound all too familiar to those of us who have been in church most of our lives. As pastors and parents, we struggle with the apparent problem of whether our children should attend a separate worship service or remain in a regular and worship as a family.

Pastors across the nation are trying to resolve this dilemma. There are proponents on both sides. Some would say children need to worship with their family—that the biggest thing in our churches is that family worship. Some would say children do not get anything out of the message; therefore, they should have their own service. Some churches run glorified Sunday schools for junior church; children really never worship. What do we do? Obviously, it is a matter of choice between the pastor and his congregation as to whether they will have a children's worship service. There are no right and wrong answers;

however, there are principles that can enhance the quality of children's worship services. This writer contends that children should be allowed to worship at their level of understanding. This will not be accomplished, however, without some effort. For children to worship at their level of understanding, they must still be led in worship.

Worshiping According to One's Understanding

The question may be raised in a church, "Why have a children's church?" To answer that, let us first take some time to consider the adult worship service. We know from Scripture that the pastor and his staff or trained laymen are given the privilege of directing the worship service in every church.

For those who fall into that category, permit me to pose a few questions. As you look at your worship services, consider all the elements of worship in your services—the prelude, the choir anthem, the congregational hymns, the announcements, the preaching of God's Word, special numbers, etc. What age group are you targeting for ministry? In theme-centered services, how many times do you consider the children when you plan? I propose that all pastors need to understand what age group is being targeted. Those below that age bracket should be provided with a children's worship time according to their own age level. This probably means setting up some kind of children's worship services.

How many children sit in our services and really are bored because they do not understand the songs, the prayers, the preaching. Are they simply to *endure* the services? One reason our youth often appear apathetic in our adult worship services may be because they really *do* worship God at their own level. If our services are geared to the young, then we ought to leave them in our services. But if we are not gearing our services to that third-grade mindset, that sixth-grade mindset, or even that

junior-high mindset, we ought to allow those young people to worship at their own level.

Training Children to Worship

That brings us to the second aspect of children's worship service: the need to *train* our children to worship according to their level of understanding. The purpose for having a children's worship service at their own level is so that they might *worship*. Nevertheless, they will not worship unless they learn *how* to worship.

It is commonly assumed that by the time adulthood is attained, the individual is capable of worshiping. By high school, it is thought, the individual ought to know how to pray and how to worship God. Do such assumptions, however, correspond to reality? Are the skills of worshiping lost in our churches today? How many adults really know how to worship? Perhaps our children's worship services could become the training ground for teaching future adults how to worship.

For such training to be effective, a variety of skills must be nurtured. Children need to learn the skills of prayer and Bible reading. They need to be directed in singing and worshipping our God. They must be aware of the importance of listening to the message and letting God's Word work in their lives as they sit in that congregation. Children's worship hours ought to help train children to worship properly.

This can be accomplished in a number of ways: having children's choirs, having children read Scripture, having children sing for special music, having a pastor or someone trained in your church lead these worship services. It would be great to have a room set up with small pews, small offering plates, a podium, a bulletin for children, ushers, a children's choir that sings every Sunday, a pianist and organist of a junior-high age. The goal is to develop an actual service on their level duplicating the adult service.

When should young people move from the children's worship to the adult worship? Once they have proven that they are able to sit still in the children's church service, that they know how to worship, and that they are ready to worship at the adult level, then they should be promoted to the adult service.

This is just one conception of a children's worship service. There are a lot of elements that go into producing this type of program, but let us meet the challenges so that children will have the opportunity to worship God at their own level. Moreover, let us do all that we can to provide them with the training necessary to accomplish those ends.