

Children's Church

A STUDY OF
CHILDREN'S WORSHIP
PROGRAMS



By
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In recent years our brethren have begun to toy with a practice borrowed from the denominations, that is sometimes referred to as “Children’s Church.” This practice involves offering a special session, set aside for children during the time the congregation usually assembles for preaching. Children are dismissed from the assembly and escorted to a separate area in which classes are given to children ranging anywhere from puppet shows (offered by some churches), to more traditional Bible classes. As with all practices involving the church it is the duty of New Testament Christians to analyze the Scriptural soundness of any practice.



Ephesians chapter six verse four tells us who has the primary responsibility for the spiritual training of children. It declares—“**...fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord**” (NKJV). The example of Timothy shows that mothers are not excluded from this duty. When Paul wrote his second epistle to the young man, he spoke of the faith which first dwelt in Timothy’s mother Eunice (1:5) and later says of Timothy – “**...from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures...**” (3:15). Clearly those who bear the foremost responsibility in this matter are the parents.

This leads to the question—*Do other Christians bear any responsibility in the spiritual training of children?* We must answer, yes! From two standpoints: 1) Christians have a responsibility to one another to encourage one another to do right. Hebrews 10:24 teaches us – “**And let us consider one another in order to**

stir up love and good works.” This would include encouraging Christians who are parents to raise their children in accordance with God’s word. 2) Christians also have the duty to try and influence others towards obedience to the gospel. 1 Peter 3:15 teaches—**“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.*”** Children, though not yet accountable, are potential converts whom we have a duty to seek to influence. The local church and its leadership share these same responsibilities. They are spoken of as those who – **“watch out for”** souls (Hebrews 13:17).

With this said, it must be acknowledged that the responsibility of others is limited. No other Christian is ever charged with the duty of chastening (i.e. spanking, grounding, etc.) a child. The elders are never charged with making certain that the children of members behave them-

selves, except to the degree that it is their duty to teach, rebuke, and discipline unruly saints (See Titus 1:9, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). Parents, on the other hand are commanded to chasten children in order to train them (See Hebrews 12:5-11 and Proverbs 19:18).

In an effort to try and fulfill this limited responsibility we have towards the children of others, many congregations set aside times in which they offer Bible classes for all ages, taught by members of the congregation. In general a Christian is authorized to teach anywhere he has the opportunity. We see this from Acts 8:4 which tells us that those scattered by persecution—**“went everywhere preaching the gospel.”** Even so, we know from 1 Timothy 1:12 that women are prohibited from teaching over a man, but they are commanded to be **“teachers of good things”** (Titus 2:3). This shows us that they may teach children and other women. The church is authorized to support teaching. Ephesians 4:12

shows this in describing the objective towards which church leaders work. Notice—“**...the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.**” Whether such teaching is conducted in homes, street corners, barnyards, or rooms in a meeting house the principle remains the same.

With these principles set forth, let’s consider a few problems associated with the practice referred to as “Children’s Church.”

1. Terminology. The first problem we must consider is the name associated with this practice. “The church” as described in Scripture is the “body” of Christ (Ephesians 1:22,23). It is composed of those who are in fellowship with God, having been obedient to the gospel of Christ. Acts 2:47 says of the church in Jerusalem—“**...the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.**” Scripture speaks of the church: In a *universal sense* (i.e. all in

heaven and on earth who are saved—Hebrews 12:23), in a *local sense* (i.e. those who have obeyed the gospel and identified themselves with one another in a specific place for work and worship—1 Corinthians 1:2) and in reference to a *local church actually assembled* (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:34; Matthew 18:17). While it might be argued that children are a part of the church in a *universal sense*, as those who are innocent and not yet accountable for sin, it cannot be suggested that a group of children forms either a *local congregation* or an *assembly of a local congregation*. Thus to speak of this as “Children’s Church” is using the word church in a way it is not used in Scripture. *Wouldn’t it be best to use “Bible names for Bible things”?*

2. Missing An Opportunity to Worship. While there are many times we can (and should) offer ourselves to children in order to teach them spiri-

tual truth on their own level, there are some serious problems with doing this at the time the church has come together to study God's word. The adults who conduct these "Children's Church" sessions are missing the opportunity to worship God as they ought. When a congregation assembles to worship, the elders attempt to offer to the congregation the spiritual nutrition they need to live in Christ (see Acts 20: 28). They do this by their appointment and oversight of those who lead the worship, and their specific direction regarding the order and content of worship. When a system is set up (no matter how well intentioned) that routinely deprives the adults who lead these "Children's Churches" of the spiritual nutrition the elders offer them, it is bound to have an effect upon their own spiritual growth.

3. The Effect on Children Themselves. As a father of three children I recognize that one of

the most serious and yet powerful duties I had when my children were small was the task of nurturing faith within my children. My wife and I had the task of trying to raise children who would delight in hearing God's word taught, who would love to sing songs of praise to the Almighty, and who would feel that prayer to God is a normal, regular part of life. While most of this teaching must occur in the home, a time this is the most clearly demonstrated is when the church assembles for worship. Ours was the task of teaching our children that it was not boring to hear God's word taught! We had the task of teaching respect for God in times of worship. This is never easy but it is a serious responsibility.

What do we teach children when they are dismissed from the assembly and spoon-fed an entertaining "Sesame Street-like" presentation? Are we saying to them—"I know that worship

is boring, so we'll give you entertainment!"? Is it possible that the reason we feel that children must perceive of worship as boring is a reflection of our own feelings about worship?

Someone might suggest, "*But you can't expect children to sit still for an entire service!*" My youngest son, at the age of one sat motionless through a two hour theater presentation of the movie *Toy Story*. We (as other parents) insist that our children behave in the theater so as not to disturb others. If a child can be taught to behave and pay attention for something as unimportant as a cartoon why can't we do the same when it concerns spiritual matters? Somewhere along the way in our generation of Dr. Spock and permissiveness we have come to think that children can't do what used to be expected of them. Laura Ingalls Wilder who lived in the late 1800's in this country wrote a series of books about her life and the life of her husband when they were children. In her book entitled *Farmer*

Boy she gives an account of her husband, Almanzo at church one Sunday. She writes – “...there was nothing to do but sit still till the sermon was over. It was two hours long. Almanzo’s legs ached and his jaw wanted to yawn, but he dared not yawn or fidget. He must sit perfectly still and never take his eyes from the preacher’s solemn face and wagging beard. Almanzo couldn’t understand how Father knew that he wasn’t looking at the preacher, if Father was looking at the preacher himself. But Father always did know” (90).

Another argument is that if we insist that children behave and pay attention we may cause them to resent coming to worship. This is possible, but there are some things in life that are important enough that we must insist upon them. *Do we take our children out of school because it is difficult for them to sit through classes? And yet who among us does not look back and appreciate the benefits of our schooling?*

After a number of years of engaging in these practices there is now evidence from churches that have done these things that these

“Children’s Church” programs don’t always have the desired effects. I know of one church that has had such a program for years. They now have teenagers who are no longer young enough to go to “Children’s Church,” but who have never learned to behave and engage in worship for themselves. When is it easier to shape behavior?—When someone is a child?—Or as a teenager? Have we so permitted children to dictate their own behavior that we have deprived them of the very things they need to become sound adults? Thomas Szasz has said – “Permissiveness is the principle of treating children as if they were adults and the tactic of making sure they never reach that stage.”

Conclusion. Our effort is not to criticize the sincere desire of good men and women to try and help children. Rather it is simply to call upon us to consider what is really at stake in these matters. In the decisions my wife and I have made regarding how we raise our children



I am sure that we were viewed as a “too hard” on our children. We did not allow them to bring toys to services, and as small

children they were not allowed them to sit with others during services. We did this so that we could teach them how to worship. *What effect did this have on them?* At the present they are now grown and serving the Lord as faithful Christians. Given the serious nature of this responsibility can we do any less than try the best we can to teach them (even as children) how to worship God themselves? I fear that “Children’s Church” programs keep children from learning this very element of our lifelong service to God.

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