



Disciplining Children in Church - Impossible or Covenantal?

A form of Christian education is done each week when we help our children in the worship service.

PCANews - I was once told a story about the "most memorable worship service" ever attended. The pastor (who I know very well) gave excellent sermons, but this particular event did not involve the particular sermon, but spoke volumes on loving discipline.

During the sermon the pastor noticed that his young daughter (about 6 years old at the time), was not listening to her mother and was being extremely restless. The pastor stopped and openly reminded his daughter to obey her mother. Obviously, this caused quite a stir in the congregation as suddenly all eyes were on the pastor's family.

Things settled down for a few minutes and then the pastor's daughter started acting up again. This time the pastor calmly (not showing any anger) put his notes down and left the pulpit. He took his daughter by the hand and led her out of the sanctuary. There was complete silence as all eyes followed him out. (No, she didn't cry out loud "pray for me!") About 5 minutes passed (seemed like 50; I believe a hymn was sung-- maybe some silent prayers offered up for the pastor and the daughter) and then the pastor reentered the sanctuary. His girl was sniffing a little, but obviously repentant. The pastor returned to the pulpit and the service was completed.

It was the most memorable "silent sermon" ever preached. Everyone present learned a great lesson about consistent and loving discipline. (By the way the young lady, now a young adult happily recalls the story--she never behaved that way again and remembers many of her friends of the same age quickly learning to sit still from that memorable day on.)

When was the last time you were "irritated" by the noisy child in the pew in front or behind you? Did you wish that "someone" would tell the

parents to take the child out and do "something" with him or her? What are our covenantal responsibilities when bringing our children into corporate worship?

Many congregations have looked for solutions to this "problem" by constructing "cry rooms" where hapless parents can at least hear and see the service as they try to deal with their child. Other congregations have developed "children's church" to take the young ones out of the sanctuary and have a program just for them (when do we cut this umbilical cord?).

A look through the Bible shows that children are never separated from their parents in times of corporate worship or celebration. Is there a reason for this? I think so. Even if the children don't "understand" everything going on they participate in an important event in God's eyes (and also in the eyes of his angels who delight in seeing us worship)—the worship of the living and triune God.

We may often fail to see anything getting through to our little ones during worship services and often cave in to their longings to be entertained. But they do experience something timeless? Our children observe the whole event of worship: our humility, prayerfulness, attentiveness to the preached Word, and the corporateness of worship. This becomes an integral part of their lives.

One of the most important character qualities we can teach our very young children is attentiveness. This can be accomplished even before they can read or write. A great place to do it is in the context of a worship service. Of course, if we are not attentive to the spoken Word of God don't expect our covenant children to be. It is amazing to see that many children can actually sit still, listen and learn in worship. But it is also sad to notice how so many children and teens are anything but disciplined in worship services. They talk with each other and are generally disinterested and restless (this is why I believe families should always sit together).

A form of "Christian education and training" is accomplished each week when we help our children in the worship service (instead of having someone else take care of the problem). Children must learn to "obey their parents in all things." Since the church is our larger family each member has a responsibility to help the struggling parents train their children. We can "plan ahead" for the worship service:

- Ensure the child has gone to the restroom

- Have something for the child to write on (a children's bulletin is a great idea) and the child can write his/her impressions of the sermon, look up the sermon text, and follow the order of worship
- Encourage parents to have their children sit with them (once in while they can sit with other families, but having them sit together without adult supervision is asking for trouble)
- Give a class for "encouraging your children to honor God in worship and home;" young parents need encouragement not critics. Some of the things that can be covered in the class are: 1) having older, seasoned parents explain how they discipline their children, 2) when to take children out of the service, 3) how to know when children are ready to brought back into the service, 4) ensuring children understand what is going on in the service, and 5) how the father should lead in the whole process (sadly, its too often left up to the mother).
- The guidance for our nursery is from the session and reads: "The goal for the nursery is to fully integrate the child into the corporate worship of the church." Is this a strange goal for the nursery? Think about it and let me know what you think.

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Brad Winsted, Director