

Training Children For Corporate Worship

“Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.” – Proverbs 22:6

“I have a young child who won’t sit still in worship. What can I do?” This situation is not at all uncommon, especially in a church such as ours with a bunch of young families. This is a question that I have asked and wrestled with on numerous occasions. How can we train our children for worship? Unfortunately, there is not a single sentence that will answer that question. In fact, to answer this question with any sufficiency is to unpack a treasure chest of thoughts and practices.¹

First, we must remember the aim in training our children for worship. We should expect (in the long run) more out of our children than just being quiet. Worship is an action, something you participate in rather than observe. Worship is not something that we go to like a movie, but something that we do, something in which we participate. This means that as we train our children, our aim is not just for them to be quiet, but to learn to actively participate in worship. Our family rules? Be quiet; be still, participate.

What does it mean, then, to train our children? One thing you will see if you look up the word “train” in the dictionary is that training generally involves both instruction and practice. We need to be teaching our children what worship is, what is expected of us in corporate worship and why we do it. We need to teach them about the various elements of worship and their importance. But, explaining is only half of training. We need to be providing opportunities for our children to practice what they have been taught. They need to practice sitting still, being quiet for an extended period of time, standing and singing songs, and praying. Only when both instruction and practice are taking place are we actually training our children.

Is once a week enough? Is that sufficient practice? I don’t think so. There isn’t much that we do in this life (exercise, learn an instrument) that we can do once a week and call it sufficient preparation. This is especially true with children. Regular and frequent repetition is vital to a child’s understanding. How often do you ask your son who’s being potty trained if he has to go to the bathroom? The frequent questioning both assures the parent and reminds the child of his need to learn to use the potty. Training for worship is no different. To truly train a child for worship, we need to be practicing at home. One of the greatest tools in preparing our children for quiet yet participatory worship is daily family worship. Taking your child to corporate worship once a week is not training them for worship.

In fact, I would argue that training does not (even *can* not) take place on Sunday at all. Rather, real training can only take place Monday through Saturday. On the Lord’s Day, however, it’s no longer practice, but the real thing. Consider eight-time gold medalist Michael Phelps preparing for his events in the Summer Olympics in Beijing. Everything that he did prior to the Olympics was called training. The events he swam in Beijing were part of the very event for which he had trained. Those were not training swims, but the application of that training – the real thing. Corporate Lord’s Day worship is not practice, but that for which our children have been trained. We can’t say that taking our children into worship once a week is training them for worship. But, rather it is entering them into the Olympic 400 IM without first teaching them how to swim. If we truly want to train our children for corporate worship, they must be practicing on a regular and frequent basis at home.

“Well, this theory is great, but give me more concrete practices. What are some concrete things that I can do to set my ship on the right course?” We all understand and acknowledge the fact that if our children behave properly in worship then it’s only because of God’s grace. This is very true. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and in our hearts that any of us has any interest in corporate worship.

¹ For a glimpse into this chest I am greatly indebted to three men with many more years of fatherhood experience than I have, men who willingly gave of their time to help me with this article, men without whom this article would have been mostly theory and white paper.

But there are some things that we can do to encourage our children (realizing that God has appointed secondary means). The first is that the father, the covenant head of the family, must be convicted and convinced of the need for family worship. Consider the fact that the very first church, in a very real sense, was a family. Still today, the family is, as B.M. Palmer and J.W. Alexander write in The Family, “the Church in miniature.” They go on to speak of corporate worship appearing “as a collection of smaller churches aggregated in one large assembly of worshipers.” Those smaller churches are the various families seated together in the pews. We fathers are held accountable for our family’s spiritual growth. Until the covenant head catches that vision, it will not last. Also, in your family worship time, use some of the elements of corporate worship so that your children gain some insight into how to participate in these elements. Pray together as a family. Sing hymns together, teaching your child how to read a hymnbook.

There are some things that you can do specifically to prepare for Lord’s Day worship each week. You can now have the bulletin every single week before you get to church on Sunday. It can be downloaded from the website (www.christpresoxford.org) on Saturday so that you can practice the hymns, the corporate readings, and be prepared for the sacraments. I can’t tell you how helpful it was to tell John in advance that bread and juice would be passed down our pew and that he would not be getting any. It was important to let him know that this was not like snack time in Sunday school.

As your child begins to get restless in worship, you need some means of quietly rebuking her. I had one father tell me that his family was relatively proficient in sign language. He is able to control his children from the other end of the pew without ever letting on to anyone that he is talking. While you may not take the time to learn sign language, you can certainly create a few hand signals of your own. It is important, though, that you don’t expect more than is age appropriate. Obviously it’s hard for our 2-year-olds to stand and read a hymnbook because they don’t even know how to read. But, we should expect our 7-year-olds to be able to follow along. While our 4-year-olds may not be able to take notes, they can certainly draw pictures that are related to something in the sermon. With age and ability comes more responsibility.

My hope is that this article is helpful as you prepare your children to grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord – which certainly involves learning how to worship Him. Remember that we worship as God commands, not how we see fit. If we can instill in our children this understanding, then we have gotten well along the road to worshiping God aright. May Christ Presbyterian Church become known as a collection of smaller churches gathered in one large assembly of worshipers. May God be glorified in the training of our children to learn how to worship Him as He commands.