

Children in the Meeting of the Ephesian Church

By: Scott Brown

Ephesians 6:1-4 is the flagship New Testament passage on child rearing and fatherhood. It is an extremely simple and steadying message in light of the dizzying array of advice the world gives to parents. We find four major ideas arising from the text. First, the setting: the meeting of the Church. Second, there are two simple commands for children: obey and honor (Eph. 6:1-2). Third, there are two understandable results for children: good life and long life (Eph. 6:3). Fourth, there are two dangerous pitfalls for fathers: provoking and neglecting (Eph. 6:4).

This article is focused on the first point — the setting of the meeting of the Church.

In the first two verses, Paul is clearly speaking to children. These are the children who are in the meeting of the Ephesian church and are hearing the letter read. Paul uses a Greek grammatical form called the vocative case, called the “vocative of direct address.” He is directly addressing the children in the meeting of the church. This makes it an obvious fact that children were present in the meetings of the early churches.

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

The apostle assumes that among those who will be listening when this letter is read to the various congregations the children will not be lacking. They are included in God’s Covenant..., and Jesus loves them.... 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. (William Hendricksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) pg. 258)

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 out and rolled off the window’s ledge (Acts 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 being tempted by the worldliness of the world. The children were not in age-graded Sunday schools, but were in the midst of the meeting, and were taught side by side with everyone else. The meetings of the early church were conducted with a full complement of relationships.

There is no indication from Scripture that children were ever removed from the meetings designed for preaching, Scripture reading, prayer, and worship. But, in our culture, it is automatic and comprehensive. Contrast the normal meetings of our churches with the normal practices of the meetings recorded in the Bible:

The Time of Moses: Deuteronomy 31:12-13;

The Time of Nehemiah: Nehemiah 8:1-3, Ezra 10:1;

The Time of Jesus: Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-15; and

The Time of Paul: Ephesians 6:1-4, Col 3:20.

Jeremy Walker sums it up:

The constant presumption of Scripture is that children were present in the worship of the people of God. In Nehemiah’s time, men and women and all those who could hear with understanding gathered to hear Ezra the scribe read the Law (Neh 8.1-3; Ezr 10.1). Moses certainly anticipated the literal “children” of Israel to be present when the Law was read (Dt 31.12-13). Paul’s letters, intended to be read to the churches, assume the intelligent presence of children (Eph 6.1-4; Col 3.20), and children were present when the Lord Jesus taught (Mt

18.1-5; 19.13-15). (Quoted in Banner of Truth magazine, November 7, 2002, “Attendance of Children in Public Worship”)

For further study, see the following passages where it is mentioned that children were present in meetings of God’s people.

In Joshua 8:35, Joshua built an altar to the Lord in Mount Ebal of whole stones over which no man had ever laid an iron tool. He read “all the words of the law.”

There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them. (Joshua 8:35)

Joel 2:15-16 describes a time of repentance of the people where all were to gather—even the bride and bridegroom on their wedding day.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. (Joel 2:15-16)

I would like to pose four questions to help us to reflect more deeply on this subject and, hopefully, help us understand how important it is that we experience the worship of God and the fellowship of the saints alongside our children.

I. Which way is more Biblical?

Should children be in the meeting of the church, alongside their parents? If you only had the Bible, what would you conclude about what to do about childcare? Is there any evidence of childcare services to support the worship and instruction of God’s people? Do the apostles ever allude to a nursery or Sunday school? Are there any commands relating to the subject? Are there any examples to follow in Scripture for this area?

II. What effect does worship singing have on a child?

This question gets to the point of the power of music on all human beings. We may say, “Our children don’t get anything out of the services,” but we can’t really believe it. We get goose bumps when we sing to children while they are in the womb. We believe that the sounds and even the attitudes surrounding them are affecting their development process. Some people play classical music to their children in the womb, while others contend that just hearing it makes their kids smarter outside the womb.

Let me suggest that it is truly wonderful to immerse children in the rich songs of the faith from the time they are babies in arms. So what is the optimal time for bringing your children into the meeting of the church? I counsel families to bring their babies on the first Sunday after their birth, and continue weekly throughout their lives.

Children get something out of everything they experience

First of all, it must be said that children get something out of everything they experience. So we should abandon the idea that “my child gets nothing out of ‘big’ church.” This is subterfuge and misinformation. Plus, nobody gets everything out of anything, particularly a sermon. We take them to the library and they do not get everything out of what is there. They listen to all of our conversation, but don’t think for a minute that everything goes over their heads.

There is great value for a very young child experiencing the deep and authentic worship of the church. Something is being transferred as they watch their fathers give of the family resources during the offering. As they grow up, their understanding will increase. Something is being transferred as they watch the adults “worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23).

They don't get everything, but they can get something from observing the fervency and genuineness of the church's expression of love for God, dependence upon Him, and joy in Him. This is the value of having children in church.

Children progressively understand what a parent and the wider church members love and appreciate. Year after year, their understanding builds. Year after year, the well is filling up. The cumulative effect of deep and significant thinking and activities is what we are looking for.

III. What effect does the teaching of the Word have on a child?

By joining in the main services, children will be experiencing the teaching of God's Word and beginning to understand the importance of preaching. This is a perfect opportunity for a father to share with his children how the preaching of the Word is affecting him and how he plans to bring his family in line with it.

Only God knows what a child gets from hearing father pray.

Only God knows what a child gets out of hearing God's people worship.

Only God knows what a child gets out of seeing men standing up and speaking of the things of God.

Only God knows what a child gets out of experiencing Christian community.

It is really much simpler than you might think. The attitude should be: the church is family time. Our family, and the family of God.

We enjoy eating out together as a family. We enjoy going to the beach together as a family. Then, why do we not enjoy worship and instruction and fellowship as a family with our spiritual family of brothers and sisters?

IV. Which way is more wonderful?

This question helps us to think clearly about what is truly superior. All options are not created equal. Recently, after our worship service, I passed by a mother who was carrying her baby girl. She took a deep breath through her nostrils as if to take in the aroma of her baby. She said:

I can always tell who held my daughter during worship because of the perfume. For instance, I can tell that your wife Deborah was holding my daughter during worship.

Where would you rather have your child? In the arms of one of our mothers or fathers or teenagers, or in a soundproof room, playing with saliva-encrusted toys? Is it better for a child to be held by his mother while she sings the words of precious hymns, or to be in the back room with a childcare worker and who knows how many children?

Would it be more wonderful if we rose up and involved our children in the meetings of the church? And if we used these meetings as opportunities to serve as their personal coaches to grow their love for the Body of Christ; to increase their appreciation (and appetite) for prayer; and to cultivate their affection for the preaching of the Bible? In doing so, we would be resisting the child-neglecting, child-rejecting, and child-depreciating practices that are at work in our churches. It is more wonderful!

Why have children in the meetings of the church?

The question would be a strange one for people in the year 1800 since they always had their children with them during worship. It was normal. The question would not have come up because people were used to keeping their children with them.

The question would also have been an unusual one for people in the early church. The early church met in homes with all present and Jesus made it clear to His disciples that children were always welcome.

The question would be a strange one for people in Israel. We have many Old Testament references that record children present during major events where God's Word was being communicated to groups of people. The Old Testament writers make mention of this without interpretation.

It is obvious that the normative practice for Israel and the early church was to integrate children into the normal practices of the gatherings of the people. Nowhere do we find a trace of teaching or example of our modern age-graded approach to the church.

Let's bring our children back into the meetings of the church. I sincerely believe that if the Lord Jesus Christ were here in the twenty-first century, He would be the first to invite them back.

About the Author

Scott T. Brown is the director of the National Center for Family Integrated Churches and elder at Hope Baptist Church in Wake Forest, North Carolina.