



How the Covenant Shapes Children's Participation in Worship

Heather Dirkse

Studies have revealed a lot about how children understand the world around them. Children learn much more through experience than just through instruction that is only tailored to their age. They learn by imitation rather than by simply being told what to do. They learn as embodied beings—because that is how God created them. And as God's image bearers, we are embodied people who worship Him with our whole being.

Consider how children learn to eat. When a child is very young, we don't wait until they fully understand nutrition or table manners before including them at the table. Instead, they sit with their family, watching their parents and siblings eat. As they observe, they pick up and taste pieces of food with their hands and gradually learn what it means to share a meal together. It's often messy and imperfect, but by participating at the table, children learn how to share a meal.

Similarly, our covenant children learn to worship through participating in the life of the church. From infancy, they observe their covenant family around them. Friendly faces smile at them, and they feel welcomed. They hear the voices singing, and the melodies become familiar. They see heads bowed in prayer and observe God's people gathered before Him. They may not understand everything that happens, but they start to see that this is what God's people do—they gather to read God's Word, pray, sing, and take part in the sacraments.

Our covenant children belong to the covenant community

When a family gathers around the table, children aren't invited because they understand the meal. They are there because they belong to the family.

Similarly, children of believing parent(s) belong to the covenant community (*WCF* 28; *BCO* 6-1). When God calls His people to gather and worship Him, the call includes children.

We observe this pattern throughout Scripture. As God's people prepared to enter the promised land, Moses directed them to publicly read God's law to everyone—men, women, children, and the sojourner among them—"that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and be careful to do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 31:12). The children did not understand everything that was read, but God called them to hear His Word.

Children born to believing parents receive the blessings of belonging to the covenant community. When they gather with the church, they are not outsiders looking in. They are members of the family whom God has called together.

Our covenant children are being formed by worship

When children sit at the family table, they get nourishment from the food they eat. They might eat smaller portions and may not yet be able to eat everything the adults do, but they are still being nourished.

Similarly, God nourishes His people through the means of grace—His Word, prayer, and the sacraments. These means are for the entire covenant community, not just adults.

Children may not understand everything happening in worship, but when they are present, the Holy Spirit uses these ordinary means to shape their hearts. As they hear God's Word read, listen to the prayers of the congregation, and join in singing, they are being formed by the worship of God's people.

They may not yet take part in the Lord's Supper, but as they watch the congregation participate, they begin to understand its meaning and beauty. Over time, they learn that this is a meal shared by God's people, and one day they will receive it by faith.

Our covenant children grow in faith alongside God's people

As children continue to eat meals with their families, they develop their ability to participate. What once required assistance eventually becomes natural. They learn how to hold a fork, how to serve themselves, and how to join the conversation at the table.

In the same way, covenant children grow in faith as they participate in the life of the church. In *Keeping Kids Christian: Recovering a Biblical Vision for Lifelong Discipleship*, Cameron Shaffer writes:

People of the covenant are not just discrete individuals, converted and united to Jesus by faith and then joined together for worship and discipleship. Covenant communities are families God has established for the sake of passing down and enculturating the faith in its members (Shaffer, 32).

As covenant children grow, the rhythms of worship become familiar. Week by week, their understanding deepens as they participate alongside God's people. It is a beautiful thing when they do not remember a time when they were not part of the worshiping community or when they had not heard about Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you most in this article? Why?
2. How does the family table illustration help you think differently about children participating in corporate worship?
3. How does our understanding of the covenant shape the way we think about children participating in worship?
4. How have you seen the children in your church learn to worship by participating in the life of the church?
5. What areas would you like to see your church grow in including children in the participation of the entire church body? Are there 1-2 goals you would like to implement over the next year?

