

Healthy church 1: The priority of the local church

Introduction

C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* is a fictional conversation between an experienced devil and a junior devil. It's all about how the younger tempter may cause a Christian (his "patient") to turn his back on Christ. Here the senior devil talks about "church." Does this sound familiar?...

"One of our greatest allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately that is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like "the body of Christ" and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to our Father below, is a fool. Provided that any one of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous."

The topic of "church" does not thrill many hearts! To some people it is tedious, foolish and smacks of hypocrisy and even immorality. Even plenty of Christians find "church" vexing and sit loose to it.

Our Sunday School programme this term is considering the Bible's marks of a Healthy Church. It's critical that individually and corporately we grow in our understanding of God's blueprint of the church, so that Immanuel becomes an increasingly healthy body of Christ. Here's our schedule:

1. The priority of the local church
2. Unity and diversity in Christ's body
3. Denomination and partnership
4. Encouraging and serving
5. Biblical manhood and womanhood
6. Bibleteaching and prayer
7. The Gospel
8. Reformed theology
9. Church government
10. Church membership
11. Discipleship and discipline
12. Corporate worship
13. Evangelism

Today we begin by considering the priority of the local church. And we'll ask the still more fundamental questions, "What is the church? And why does church matter?"

To begin with I'll PRAY. Then we'll have three readings: from God's Word in **Deuteronomy 4:1-14**, and then from the **39 Articles** and from the **Heidelberg Catechism**.

Deuteronomy 4:1-14,

"And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ² You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. ³ Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. ⁴ But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today. ⁵ See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? ⁹ "Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children-- ¹⁰ how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.' ¹¹ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. ¹³ And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. ¹⁴ And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess."

Article 19 (from the 39 Articles of Religion):

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of believers in which the pure Word of God is preached and in which the sacraments are rightly administered according to Christ's command in all those matters that are necessary for proper administration.

Heidelberg Catechism: Question 54

Q. What do you believe concerning the *holy catholic church*?

A. I believe that the Son of God,
 out of the whole human race,
 from the beginning of the world to its end,
 gathers, defends, and preserves for himself,
 by his Spirit and Word,
 in the unity of the true faith,
 a church chosen to everlasting life.
 And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it.

1. What is "church"? It is the GATHERING of God's people

The "church" is the gathering together of God's people. It is not – and it is NEVER – a church building. Do get out of the habit of describing a church building as a "church". Call it what it is: a building... or a useful rain shelter!

The Bible's words for "church" help make that point. [Greek *Ekklesia* translating Hebrew *Qahal*]. In Scripture, "church" means "assembly," "gathering" or "congregation."

In one place the word is used to describe something akin to a riot! (That's Acts 19:32 – the "assembly was in confusion"). So in the NT the word could be used of a range of different assemblies or gatherings – not all

of them religious in character. However, when the New Testament uses the word *ekklesia* it almost always has in the background the Old Testament usage of that word.

For example, we read God's command in Deuteronomy 4:10 to "assemble the people before me to hear my words." We could translate this as "church my people – gather or assemble them together."

Or in the NT in 1 Corinthians 1:2 we read: "To the church of God in Corinth...". Paul's letter is addressed to the gathering or congregation of God's people in Corinth.

Notice that GOD gathers his people together. It is not a gathering of people who have a common interest and who have chosen to associate (like a club or a political party). Just like at the great "churching" of God's people at Mount Sinai, God gathers His people to Himself.

And that's why the Heidelberg Catechism says of the Son of God that He "gathers" to Himself a people, who He will defend and preserve.

Here is one very simple point of application: the Church is most "churchly" (if we can invent an adverb!) when her members gather together. Of course, there are many things God calls members of the church to do – either on their own (perhaps at home or work) or as little groups of Christian people. But, at the very heart of "church" is "gathering together; assembling as the people of God. It's the very core of being church.

So, Christian people need to gather. Those whom God is gathering need to gather. It's why it's such a tragedy when a Christian stops meeting together with their church or just can't bear to gather any more. (Cf. Hebrews 10:25). Christian people need to echo and believe the statement with which the Heidelberg Catechism describes our relationship to church: "I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it."

2. Where does the church gather? In HEAVEN and on EARTH

That sounds a strange question! "WHERE does the church gather?" Isn't it obvious? Perhaps not...

(a) God's church gathers in heaven

Please look at Hebrews 12:18-24. These are complex verses, but they teach us something precious about the church.

Hebrews 12:18-24, "For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

In these verses the Bible is talking about an amazing gathering – more awesome than a vast pop concert and more fearful than armies gathering together to fight a vast battle. Here we learn that God's church gathers in heaven.

And in fact we are there right now! This is a gathering to which Christians "have" already come (verse 22). We are there now, in the "heavenly Jerusalem" and in the "assembly" or "church" of Jesus Christ the firstborn from the dead. We gather there with "innumerable angels" (wow!), and we gather with all of those whose names are "enrolled" in the membership list of heaven.

And we gather together with the “spirits of the righteous made perfect” (verse 23). That’s shorthand for Christians who have already died and gone to be with Christ. Here is what is sometimes called the “invisible” or “universal” church: it includes every Christian who ever will live, from across the world and down the ages – the apostle Paul is there, Martin Luther is there, my grandmother is there.

This church is a very big deal! But also...

(b) God’s church gathers on earth: the local congregation

For example Paul writes: “To the church of God in Corinth.” Take the Corinthian Christians: where did they “gather”? They gathered in two places. They were part of the heavenly gathering (and still are – now perfected in Christ’s presence). But they were also part of the gathering in the town of Corinth, a particular group of Christians who covenanted together in a little town in Greece.

So too with us. We are members of that great universal church that Christ is gathering into one from the beginning of the world until its ending. *And* we are members of the local body of Christ here at Immanuel Church Brentwood.

That’s why Article 19 of the 39 Articles begins by saying of the church that, “The visible church of Christ is a *congregation* of believers.”

The way you express your membership of the Universal Church is by being an active member of a local church. That’s worth underlining in our hearts and minds: the way you express your membership of the Universal Church is by being an active member of a local church.

Some Christian folk like the thought of the universal church, but struggle with relationships in the local church, where God sees fit to gather us together as a family of not-yet-perfected-sinners. But you’re not meant to have one without the other!

And as we gather together down here, we’re privileged to join in with that heavenly gathering and her worship – joining with unseen angels and departed saints in the serious joy of God’s assembly.

Will we give ourselves to God’s gathered people?

3. Who gathers in God’s church? ALL sorts of people

(a) Diversity: gender, age, ethnicity

Skim through these verses which describe the make-up of the Old Testament church of God (and see the Appendix below):

Deuteronomy 31:12-13, “Assemble the people-- men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns-- so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. ¹³ Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess”.

Joshua 8:35, “There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.”

Joel 2:15-16, “Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. ¹⁶ Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.”

Our point is a simple one: God gathers to himself a diverse people. The one thing uniting them is the salvation they share in the Lord. Apart from that, there is a great diversity in *gender* (men and women), in *age* (old and young, even those nursing at the breast), and in *ethnicity* (“aliens” – people from other nations – a bit like us – who used to worship other gods, yet brought near in the covenant).

They all need to gather together, at the Lord’s Command. It’s so significant, says Joel 2:16, that newly weds should themselves out of bed and answer the Lord’s summons to church.

Next week we’re going to spend an entire session on unity and diversity in the body. I believe the Lord has much to teach us about that. Here are a couple of applications for now:

First, a local church where everyone is pretty much the same is a denial of the power of the Gospel. There might be practical reasons why a parachurch organisation does ministry with one group of people (e.g. UCCF’s ministry to students). But a church cannot and must not do that. Students sometimes find it hard moving from a monochrome Christian environment to a diverse local church. But that is God’s plan and will for our sanctification and our service.

Second, this is why we structure Sunday mornings the way we do. Yes, age-appropriate learning is important for all ages and stages. But “church” – the gathering of God’s people – ought to be as diverse as possible. And just like in the gatherings of the Old Testament (where nursing infants were called to worship) and of the New Testament (where Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was read out to a gathering including young children) we do not want to deprive our youngest of the blessing of “gathering” together. (See “Why encourage children to stay in church?” – appendix 2 below).

4. Why does God gather His church? To DISPLAY HIS WISDOM

More on this in our next session. But for now just briefly consider Ephesians 3:10.

Ephesians 3:10, “...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

The “rulers and authorities” are hostile spiritual forces opposed to the rule of Christ and to His people. They have been defeated by the powerful work of Christ at the Cross. And it is God’s pleasure and design to “make known” the wisdom of Christ’s victory to Satan and His forces.

But how does he do so? The answer is “through the church”! By gathering together and unifying in Christ a saved people, God displays the powerful wisdom of the Cross.

More next week: but for now, simply notice: the gathering together of God’s people – in the local church, which mirrors the universal church – is of eternal significance.

Appendix 1: learning from the “church” in the Old Testament

Why does this matter? Because when the New Testament writers speak about “church” (Greek: *ekklesia*) their use of that word was not primarily shaped by secular Graeco-Roman usage (as has sometimes been said).

Rather, dozens of Old Testament references to the “church” (Hebrew: *qahal*, translated in the Greek Old Testament as *ekklesia*) help shape its meaning in the New.

Here are some observations about the make-up and function of the Old Testament gathering:

Who is part of the OT gathering?

- all Israel, eg. 1 Ki 8:85
- many people, eg. 2 Chron 30:13
- no-one maimed, illegitimate, Ammonite or Moabite, Deut 23:1-3
- everyone, including elders, children, nursing infants, newly weds, Joel 2:15-16
- all Israel, including sojourners and “little ones”, Deut 31:12, Josh 8:33-35
- men and women, and all who could understand, Neh 8:2

What does the OT gathering do?

- read all the words of the law, Josh 8:33-35
- hear God’s words, learn to fear him, and teach their children, Deut 4:10, 31:12, 31:28
- read bk of Moses in people’s hearing, Neh 13:1
- receive the king’s blessing, eg. 1 Ki 8:14, 2 Chron 6:3
- bless the Lord and worship him, eg. 1 Chron 29:10,20
- worship and sing, eg. 2 Chron 29:28
- hold feasts, eg. 1 Ki 8:65
- bring sacrifices, eg. 2 Chron 29:31-32
- make covenants to obey the Lord (2 Chron 23:3,16)
- exhortation to obedience, 1 Chron 28:8
- confess sins and weep, Ez 10:1
- make resolutions together, Ezra 10:12, 1 Chron 13:4, 2 Chron 30:23, Neh 5:13
- pray, eg. 2 Chron 20:5-6, 1 Ki 8:33
- give thanks and praise, eg. Ps 35:18
- judge evildoers, Neh 5:7

Appendix 2: Why encourage children to stay in church?

Our Sunday pattern at Immanuel Church Brentwood

Most Sundays at Immanuel start with **Sunday School classes** which run from 9.30-10.15am. Currently we have classes for pre-schoolers, infants, juniors, teens and adults.

Why? Because age-appropriate learning is important for all ages. Just take grown-ups: there are things we need to learn together that can't easily be covered during church or midweek fellowship groups – e.g. theology and doctrine, ministry training, practical discipleship, etc.

Church follows at 10.45am. We encourage **whole families to “do church” together as soon as it’s right for them and their children**. We provide a crèche for younger children (often 0-5s). But older ones are encouraged to remain in the congregational gathering. We don't mind a bit of noise and a few wriggles, and we provide learning sheets to help them engage with the sermon.

Why? Firstly, this pattern allows those who teach our Sunday School classes to be in church. Secondly, we believe that it helps the long-term spiritual growth of young people. Thirdly, it reflects the nature of “church” in the Bible.

What is “church” and who is in it? The word “church” simply means “assembly” or “gathering” or “congregation.”

But when God gathers His people together who is in that gathering? Take the Old Testament “church” or “gathering” – this is the model which stands behind the New Testament church:

- Deuteronomy 31:12-13, “Assemble the people -- men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns-- so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”
- Joshua 8:35, “There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.”
- Joel 2:15-16, “Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.”

So, we believe that Immanuel is most “churchly” when all her members are gathered together. Our culture quickly divides people – not least by age or race. The church has always meant to be an amazing and unified gathering.

Below are three short articles from **The Gospel Coalition** helping us better understand and help children in church. Have a read!

- **Children in worship – let’s bring it back**
- **Children in worship – mom tested tips**
- **8 tips for talking to kids about the sermon**

Children in Worship – Let’s Bring it Back

By Jason Helopoulos

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/children-in-worship-lets-bring-it-back/>

I remember sitting as a small child in church sucking on wintergreen mints and drawing battle scenes on the offering envelopes (my mother would always give me a tap of correction when the explosions were a little too loud with my scribbling pencil). And though I might have been preoccupied with my wintergreen mints and airplanes dropping bombs on tanks, I was picking things up. Was it easy for my single mother to corral a feisty little boy and his sister in the pew? No, it is a testimony to her patience and grace! But it was good for my soul.

As the church, let’s be open to the idea of inviting our children into worship again. Let’s be patient, deliberate, and wise, but let’s encourage families to have their children in worship as soon as they are able. Not all families or children will be ready to do this as each family functions under different circumstances. So having said this, let’s not go overboard. I think every church should have a well-equipped nursery at least for children under the age of five years old and even beyond if they deem it appropriate. In addition, we must be sensitive to visiting families and those that just aren’t convinced that children belong in corporate worship. So we must be patient and understanding, but it is something we should be aimed at before our children are driving cars! Even if our children cannot understand all that is happening, struggle to sit still, and even are bored at times during the service they are still benefiting from being in the midst of this divine meeting between God and His people (Mark 10:13-16). And at the very least they will come to appreciate the power of wintergreen mints.

Today, I want to offer a few reasons on why we should encourage the children of the church to attend our corporate worship services. Tomorrow, I will pass along some helpful hints for parenting in the pew.

Why should children attend the worship service?

1. **Our children are members of the covenant community (the church):** Corporate Worship on Sunday morning is the primary activity the covenant community engages in together (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 10:24-25). Therefore, our children as members of this community should be included in this crucial aspect of covenantal life.
2. **Our children will be present in the midst of the means of grace:** Our children benefit by being where the Word is preached (Romans 10:14), the sacraments are administered (Matthew 28:19-20), and corporate prayer is practiced (Acts 2:42-47). These are the chief means by which God pours out grace upon His people. Why knowingly rob our children of this blessing?!
3. **Our children will be present in the midst of the entire congregation:** Our children benefit greatly by being in the presence of Christians of various ages. They are able to see that the faith of their parents is not a faith that they own alone, but is a faith that is important to all of these people who are gathered around them on Sunday morning. This only reinforces what Mom and Dad are modeling and teaching when they see this incredible gathering of people reading the Word together, praying together, confessing together, and singing together (Deuteronomy 31:9-13). They need to see the body in action.
4. **Our children will be present with their parents:** Worshipping together as a family helps to counter the current trend in our society of fragmenting our families. If our children join us in worship from four years of age until they are eighteen they will worship with their parents in 780 Sunday morning worship services! Think about the cumulative effect of a family worshipping together, in the midst of the means of grace, meeting with God for 780 Sundays in a row.
5. **Our children will witness their parents worshipping:** It is the Biblical role of parents to disciple their children in the faith (Deut. 6; Psalm 78; Eph. 6). What a benefit there is when children witnesses their mother or father singing with conviction, praying in reverence, listening intently to the sermon, or receiving the Lord’s Supper in joy. In these moments a child witnesses the importance of faith and worship. There are few greater encouragements to a child’s faith then

seeing their parents worship God with reverence and joy. (Exodus 12:1-28; Deut. 4:9-11; Deut. 6; Psalm 78; Ezra 10:1; Nehemiah 12:43; Joel 2:12-17; Acts 16:33).

6. **Our children will learn the rhythms of church life:** Teenagers in our culture often balk at attending corporate worship. But how many of our teenagers have we setup for this reaction, because we did not consistently include them in worship until they were a teenager? If attending church for years has always meant coloring Bible pictures, singing songs to a cd, playing games, and doing crafts—then we should not be surprised that our young people find worship to be odd, uncomfortable, and even boring. I love good children’s songs—they ring through my house. I love good children’s Christian crafts—they decorate my study. But if this alone is the rhythm of church life we have set up for our children week in and week out, we have done them a great disservice. They must see, know, and learn that the singing of the great hymns of the faith, the preaching of the Word, reading of confessions, corporate prayers, etc. is anything but boring. It is the gathered life of the community of faith. It is our weekly rhythm—appointed by God, designed by Him, established for the ages—this is what we want them to know, because we want them to know and worship Him.

Children in Worship – Mom Tested Tips by Jason Helopoulos

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/children-in-worship-mom-tested-tips/>

This is a follow-up on yesterday’s post...

1. **Focus on this moment throughout the week:** Talk about Sunday morning worship all week long. Help your children to see that each week begins with this privilege (Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:24-25).
2. **Model excitement about the Lord’s Day:** Children learn a great deal by watching their parents. If Mom and Dad reluctantly go to church, then the children will reluctantly go to church. If Mom and Dad are critical of the preacher, sermon, etc. then the children will most likely be critical. Wake up early on Sunday morning and prepare for worship. Let the children see your joy and excitement.
3. **Implement family worship at home:** A family that worships together at home will find it much easier to worship together in corporate worship. A child will find it natural to hear the Word of God, to read the Word of God, to sing the hymns, etc. This will also help our children to learn to sit still, to understand the importance of worship, to focus during prayer, etc.
4. **Read the passage during the week:** Most sermon series are an exposition of one book of the Bible. This means that you know what you are going to hear read and preached in the week’s service—the next passage. Read it throughout the week and converse about it around the dinner table or during family worship. The children will then be familiar with the text that the pastor is preaching on. With this knowledge, give them some things to listen for in the sermon.
5. **Start early:** Many believe that it is harder to introduce a five year old to corporate worship than a twelve year old, but this is not true. A five year old is in the formative years of training. They are not yet “set in their ways.” A few months of struggling with a four or five year old teaching them how to sit in corporate worship yields benefits for the rest of their lives.
6. **Use Moments in the Service:** Use transitional moments in the service to whisper in your child’s ear how much you loved a certain verse in a hymn, how you need to remember to pray for the sick person mentioned, or how you were convicted by that application. It keeps them engaged and allows them to see you participating intently in the service.
7. **Use the Obvious Helps:** We often forget to use the helps that are already available to us. For example: have an older child find the Bible passage or guide your finger over the text as it is read for a younger child. Use the bulletin and show your children where the service is at. Have them read the confession as you point along with each word.
8. **Sit near the Front:** Children are easily distracted, so sit near the front where there are less distractions.
9. **Create an atmosphere in your row:** Encourage your children to pay attention, to stand when everyone stands, to sing when they are to sing, to bow their heads in prayer when the congregation is to pray, etc.
10. **Enlist the Support of Other Members:** Ask another member to lend a helping hand by sitting with your family. Surround yourself with other families that you have enlisted to provide you encouragement and not to fuss if your child is a little restless.

11. **Stop Worrying:** Many parents are concerned about what other parents or members of the congregation think of their parenting skills or how annoyed someone else is with their child's fidgeting during the service. DON'T! Commit as a congregation to welcome children into your services. This means that not only do our children have to adjust, but so do the adults. *In reality, it is adults who have to adjust the most!* Let's just learn to have a little more tolerance on this front. If a baby is a little fussy, papers are rustling, or a few things are dropping on the floor it is o.k. As congregations, we need to willingly and joyfully join in this great privilege of welcoming our covenant children into corporate worship. And that takes some minor adjusting on our part.
12. **Affirm Your Children:** When you leave the service and are on the way home, affirm your children. Ask them questions about the service and relay how the Lord blessed you. Encourage your children if they were well-behaved and let them know how wonderful it was to worship alongside of them.
13. **Be Consistent:** It will take time for your children to learn how to sit still, sing the hymns, etc. Be consistent in your expectations and desires for them during the service.
14. **Do Not be Overzealous:** *Be patient with your children and shower them with grace.* It takes children time to adjust and different children adjust or accept on different time tables. Your child may come into the service and sit attentively and quietly within a few weeks or you may have to help your child with this for months or even years (as has been our case!). Be patient! Love them and do not compare them to other children. God has blessed you with this little bundle of joy!

8 Tips for Talking to Kids about the Sermon

By Joe Holland

<http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2011/02/25/8-tips-for-talking-to-your-kids-about-the-sermon/>

They sit there next to you and their feet don't even hit the floor. You're thinking, "What, if anything of this guy's sermon is sinking into my kid's head?" And with that little thought you've already decided not to engage your child about the sermon. But it doesn't have to be that way. Let me introduce you to the most important rule when talking to your kids about the sermon: **They retain more than you think they do.** The second most important rule is like it: **They understand more than you think they do.**

In the interest of these two truths I'm writing this brief guide on how to talk to your kids about a sermon. I'm writing it both as a **preacher** and as a **parent** of four boys under the age of 8. I've failed, succeeded, and failed some more at talking to my kids about Jesus. Hopefully the tips you find below will help you as they've helped me. At the heart of the gospel is Jesus introducing us to his loving Father. In worship we get to make a similar introduction—we get to introduce our kids to Jesus. Don't miss that opportunity.

1. **Remember the outline.** It doesn't matter if you keep written notes or not. Remember the gist of what is being taught. If your pastor preaches for 40 minutes, then try to make a mental note of what you've covered at the 20 minute point. Don't be discouraged if you can't get every point. Get as many of the big ones as you can.
2. **Know the one, main point.** Every passage and every sermon—no matter what your pastor says—has a main point. Grab it when you see it go by and don't let go. And as a word of caution, every preacher has a bad day. Sometimes the structure of the sermon looks like a piece of abstract art. If so, do the best you can. But don't let the guy close in prayer without having a main point in your head.
3. **How is Jesus the hero?** Now that you have an outline and main point, make sure you have Jesus too. How was Jesus the hero of the sermon? Kids are incorrigibly self-centered—and so are a few adults. Make sure you have a ton to say about Jesus, no matter what the passage or where the preacher went with it. Without an emphasis on Jesus your little saints will grow up thinking that the Bible is all about them.
4. **Engage your kids with open ended questions.** You know the outline and you can keep to the main point. You know you're going to talk a ton about Jesus. Now engage your kids with any kind of question you can think of... except ones that can be answered, "yes" or "no". Here are some examples:

- o *In the story questions:* “What would have thought if you were an Israelite soldier and saw big ol’ Goliath walking up to little David?”
- o *Emotions questions:* “If you were blind, how would you feel if Jesus put his hands on your eyes and fixed them so they could see?”
- o *Leading questions:* “The rich young ruler was wrong because he thought he could earn God’s favor. Why is it silly to think we can earn God’s favor by doing enough good things?”
- o *Action questions:* “What would you have done if Jesus had made a hurricane turn into a cool breeze right in front of you?”
- o *Application questions:* “If Jesus has forgiven you, do you think you can forgive Tommy when he wings a Tonka truck at your head?”
- o *Use your imagination questions:* You know your kids best. Make up some questions.

5. **Make sure the gospel is clear.** *Jesus died for sinners.* It’s very simple and can get very complex. But no matter the passage, don’t you dare teach your kids moralism. Tell them that Jesus has done everything necessary for them to know that God is overjoyed with them. When you tell them to do something, feel something, or think something, show them how those things are motivated by God’s love and not by fear, guilt, or pride.

6. **Be the first to pray and confess.** Talking to your kids about the sermon is as much letting them watch you learn from the sermon as it is teaching them about the sermon. If the preacher is helping your congregation diagnose sin, show your kids how it affected you. You could say, “You know, sometimes, daddy struggles with being angry. And it’s then that I realize I really need Jesus.” And when it comes time to pray, let them pray after you. Model for them what it looks like for a Christian to talk to God.

7. **Chase rabbit trails.** Your kids will lead you down them. Go with them. You’ll find out a ton about how they think. And you may just enjoy the unexpected stroll off the beaten path.

8. **Remember the first two rules.** After all this, it may be you feel like it was a complete waste of time. It’s at that point you must remember the first two rules:

- o *They retain more than you think they do.*
- o *They understand more than you think they do.*

And I promise you this, they will remember these times with you. They will forget a ton. But they won’t forget Sunday afternoons with daddy and mommy talking about Jesus.