

CHILDREN IN CHURCH

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven, (Matthew 19:14). Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, (Ephesians 6:4).

Steven Hunter, a self-proclaimed “Christian (restorationist), family man, minister, and academic,” attempts to encourage parents to keep their children “in church” (the worship service). In his article “*To You Who Bring Small Children to Church,*”¹ Hunter identifies some decent sociological reasons parents should keep their children “in church.” However, he misses the opportunity to teach parents WHY and HOW to keep their children “in church.” He also concludes: “If you don’t hear crying, the church is dying.” More on that misguided axiom shortly.

Exasperated Parents

Yes, children “act up” during the Divine Service. The fussing and commotion easily distract other worshippers within a three-pew radius, at least. Then add the outbursts, the squawks, the dropped toys clattering on the floor, and the wailing and gnashing of impatient little baby teeth. Yes, it can get distracting for worshippers and pastors. And it certainly becomes exasperating for parents.

Mum (and sometimes Dad) is tempted to remove little Johnny or Susie from the service altogether – walk the walk of shame down the centre aisle and camp out in the back of the church. To be sure, if Johnny is fussing at the top of his lungs and distracting fellow worshippers, by all means exit the sanctuary until he quiets down. That’s a wonderful service of love for fellow worshippers.

But bring Johnny back into the sanctuary! After all, you don’t want him to miss out on all the good “Jesus stuff” happening in the Divine Service, right? And you don’t want him to get the idea that all he has to do is cry and fuss, and then he’ll get “out of church.”

Hunter seeks to encourage young parents through sociological considerations. Mum (and sometimes Dad), he exhorts, when you take your young one out of church, remember “the little elderly woman” and “the older man.” They are encouraged by your and your child’s presence in the worship service. According to Hunter, the elderly woman is encouraged by the presence of young parents and children “in church,” because, “To see young parents and their small children brighten her day, and she may have just received bad news this week about her health, but seeing the vitality of young ones removes – if but for a moment – her fears.”

Hunter also encourages young parents to consider the grouchy “older man” who notices the young family not missing any gathering: “You give him hope that maybe the church isn’t doomed after all, because there are still young parents who love God enough to bring their restless children to worship.”

Also, according to Hunter, couples unable to have children may be comforted and encouraged to keep trying to have children, or they may talk with young parents about the joys of children.

¹ <http://veritasvenator.com/2013/09/25/to-you-who-bring-small-children-to-church/>

Such sociological considerations are certainly fine First Article matters, and they do keep us attuned to our life together in the Body of Christ. But do they really help parents bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord? Hunter's message is merely: "Parents, keep your children in church, because other people will like it (or need it) and, by the way, the church will survive too." That's quite a burden to put on young, already-exasperated parents!

Let the Little Children Come to JESUS!

Instead of burdening exasperated parents with the likes and dislikes of other people, or with the survival of the church, why not just call them to live in their vocation? Our Lord gives parents the vocation of bringing their children to Him. Jesus wants the children to come to Him, and He wants their parents to bring them. So parents, bring your children to church (the Divine Service) in order that they may meet Jesus.

This challenge is not only for parents; it's also for other worshippers and for pastors. Here are some practical helps.

Helps for Parents

Bring your children to church (after all, they can't get there by themselves). Bring them from their youngest days all the way through their teen years. If you bring them to church as regularly as you teach them to brush their teeth or say "Please" and "Thank you," it will become a God-pleasing habit for the rest of their lives (just as, hopefully, teeth-brushing and good manners will).

Teach your children that "going to church" is where they get to be with Jesus. Children think in literal, concrete terms. "Going to church" is only about a building. Being "with Jesus" is more specific, more concrete, and more relational.

Sit up front. Children learn by observation. Let them see what's happening at and around the altar. They'll observe and appreciate how sacred things are done. When children sit in the back pews, they can only see the backs of people's heads or, when the congregation is standing, people's backsides (not the prettiest sight, to be sure!).

Teach your children the repeating portions of the liturgy. Encourage them to learn and repeat the Kyrie, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and other repeating responses. Teach these things at home, and encourage them to join in during the Divine Service.

Model reverent participation for your children. Children learn by observing their parents. If parents display reverent behaviour during the Divine Service, their children will, over time, absorb that behaviour, then mimic it, and then make it their own.

Be patient! Parents, it may seem as though you "get nothing" out of the Divine Service. But hold on to God's promises more than your undivided attention. God is rich in His grace! He still gives you His Word, in words and song, and His Body and Blood. What you do hear and receive is still edifying.

Helps for Worshippers

Be patient! Yes, children – even unhappy, screaming children – are a delight to our Lord. He has died for them and baptised them, and He wants them to come to Him in the Divine Service. And understand, with compassion, that sometimes children need to be removed temporarily in order to settle down. (Besides that, our Lord gives a big, burly angel to protect each of these little ones. See Matthew 18:10.)

Encourage young parents. Instead of giving a look of impatience, offer a consoling, compassionate demeanour. Tell young parents that, yes, you want their children in the Divine Service, because, after all, it's the place where they get to hear and receive Jesus Himself.

Offer to help young parents. Sit with them in their pew. Assist them in holding the hymnal for their children. Let the children sit on your lap. And encourage the children to participate in the Divine Service.

WHO Keeps the Church from Dying?

Hunter claims, "If you don't hear crying, the church is dying." Many a pastor, I'm sure, has heard a similar claim: "The youth are the future of the church." (Now, there's a fine way to view people in the Church between the ages of 19 and 90+!) However, the survival of the Church, or individual congregations, does not depend on children (or adults, for that matter). The Church's survival, and the survival of individual congregations, depends solely on Jesus.

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus responds to Peter's confession of Him as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). He says, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Our Lord builds His Church, not on the presence of children in worship, but on the confession of Him as "the Christ," the Saviour from sin and death. Also, our Lord promises that not even the gates of hell can, or will, prevail against His Church.

Congregations may grow or shrink. (Whatever happened to the congregations in Philippi, Ephesus, or the seven congregations in Revelation?) Numbers of children (and adults) "in church" may wax or wane. But one thing is certain: JESUS builds and preserves His Church. Not even the absence, or presence, of boisterous children can prevail against it.

So, parents, yes, bring your children to church and keep them "in church" – except for the occasional boisterous outburst. But bring them back in, so that they don't miss Jesus. But, parents, by all means, bring them to Jesus and teach them how to receive His gifts.