

CHILDREN, CHURCH AND THE LORD'S DAY

John P Thackway

The following article first appeared in the Bible League Quarterly, No.373, April-June 1993, and is reproduced here by kind permission.

The question of what to do with children on the Lord's day is of special concern to Christian parents. Our bringing them up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4) must include training them to sanctify this day along with us. "Thou... thy son... thy daughter" is included in the 4th Commandment (Exodus 20:10). But how can we achieve this? And what practical steps can we take toward helping our children love the Lord's day?

Let us be careful to avoid wrong thinking here. Because our children will be unregenerate in their early years* we may be tempted to feel that we cannot expect them to treat Sunday as we do. That would be "imposing our standards upon them." But such fears run counter to the Ten Commandments themselves, which are for the unregenerate also, and are a stepping-stone to the gospel (Galatians 3:24). Moreover, as Christian parents, we are to "*command* our children to keep the way of the Lord" (Genesis 18:19), therefore we do not impose *our* standards upon them but *God's*. So we have divine warrant for setting this standard in the home, and happy the children who are brought up in the physical, mental and spiritual privileges of the Lord's day there.

Example

What, then, should we do with our youngsters on Sabbath days? It cannot be stressed too much the place our example has in this. Children learn by imitation long before they listen to our teaching. If we obviously love God's holy day in the weekly rhythm of home-life, the foundation is being laid for our children to follow us in this habit of godliness. Parents have two kinds of authority: their lips, which command, and their example which commends.

[* The author writes as a Reformed Baptist - Ed.]

General Points

Before coming to more practical matters, a few general points should be made.

First, small children are not adults. They are little people whose God-given instincts are all in the direction of play and physical expression. This is taken very seriously by them. Through these things much of their early learning comes. This obviously has to be borne in mind when ordering the Sabbath observance of the home. To cut right across these natural and innocent traits in our expectations may be putting a yoke upon them which the Lord will not own. I am not advocating the free use of toys and games, but I am cautioning against an unimaginative and stultifying approach which forgets the age and capacities of our little ones.

Second, children differ from each other quite markedly. There are many variables: age temperment, intelligence, physical energy and so on. Therefore, what may be helpful for one child may not be for another. God lays it upon the head of the household to administer the Sabbath realistically and wisely. We need to plead with God for the guidance He has promised (Psalm 32:8; James 1:5).

Third, children do need to be provided for on the Lord's day. When at home it can be sheer laziness and abdication of responsibility to just "give them something to do" to keep them quiet. This will probably neither satisfy them nor teach them the positive blessings of this day. Paradoxically, occupying children and training them to use the day aright can be hard work! But it is a spiritual investment which will bring an eternal reward.

Fourth, we must make it clear that "neutral" activities are not good enough on God's day. The perversity of little minds will often try to skirt round the obligation by saying, "But Daddy, playing such and such is not exactly unholy." To which the reply must be, "No son, but it is not exactly holy either." In other words, it is not the *absence of the ungodly element* that makes a Sabbath activity legitimate, it is *the presence of the godly element*. This must be always our aim on the Sabbath of the Lord "in all our dwellings" (Leviticus 23:3).

Family Worship

Family worship will set the tone of the Lord's day for parents and children. Breakfast devotions, with the extra time available, can be hallowed and directed toward the rest of the day. In many ways, the battle to succeed with our children on the Sabbath will be won or lost here. Parents who get up too late for this are

setting a bad example and will inflict spiritual loss upon the household (see Proverbs 20:13). If children are used to family worship at home – especially Sunday mornings – they will readily take to the discipline of sitting quietly in church and worshipping there. *Our childrens' behaviour in church will reflect their experience of the equivalent at home.* These days we are seeing increasingly the spectacle of children disrupting divine worship by their noisiness and inability to sit still, and the worse spectacle of parents helplessly trying to contain the situation. Perhaps worst of all is that so many of God's people seem to regard this as normal. This certainly would not have been the case a few generations ago. It has more to do with the failure of parents regarding family worship and the discipline of children than with normality (see Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13,14; 29:15,17).

Children in Church

Let us examine what the Bible has to say about the place of children in the public worship of God. Much modern thinking would tell us that we cannot expect younger ones to sit through our "adult" services. Various devices are therefore employed to make it more bearable for them. Short, entertaining "children's talks" are the most common. These generally take the form of entertaining anecdotes with little biblical content, and usually all they do is make the children (and adults) laugh and thus lower the tone of the whole service. In some churches a creche system operates for children up to secondary school age; in others the Sunday School runs at the same time as the morning service, thus removing the children altogether. Even in churches where these practices are not found, some parents allow their children to play with toys during the sermon or read books.

All these concessions betray an unbiblical view of the public worship of God. They are out of accord with what the Lord requires of parents and children in the solemn assemblies. When Israel were gathered before Moses to hear God's Word, we read: "Ye stand this day all of you before the LORD your God... *your little ones, your wives...*" (Deuteronomy 29:10–11; see also Joshua 8:35; 2 Chronicles 20:13). There is no hint anywhere in the Old Testament that children were removed from such gatherings – or that alternative provision was made for them.¹ God expected complete families to be in His presence on such occasions.

In the Gospels it is clear that children were among the

multitudes who followed our Lord around and listened to His teaching. One lad among His hearers provided a meal that was miraculously multiplied to feed 5,000 (John 6:9). Jesus suddenly drew a child from the people to give His disciples an object-lesson in humility (Matthew 18:2). At another time mothers brought their children to Him for His blessing – children who had immediately before been His hearers (Mark 10:1, 13–16). And children were quite clearly among His audience when He cleansed the temple (Matthew 21:12–16).

The Epistles, too, are illuminating on this point. Paul writing to the Ephesians and Colossians specifically addresses children (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20). These letters would be read to the assembled church in someone's house by the elders. In the Ephesians letter he has a word for "wives" (5:22), "husbands" (5:25), and then he says: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" (6:1). And similarly in Colossians. Paul expected children to be present for the "sermon" and to hear his words to *them*. Here is apostolic proof that the congregation must not be fragmented, but that whole families should worship the Lord and hear His Word together.

A creche, of course, is a help for babies and toddlers – not to say parents! But by school age, children should have been lovingly but firmly trained for the discipline of being present throughout divine worship. Our expectations of children in this matter tend to be far too low. They are more capable than we realise of being still and being quiet, of understanding some of what they hear, and of receiving spiritual grace. Did not God speak to Samuel? God will honour parental faithfulness in this area more than we are prepared to believe.

Hospitality

Having arrived home from church and the children boisterous, what can we do to occupy them, satisfying their needs and the requirements of the Lord's day? The ministry of hospitality (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9) is a great help here. The presence of godly friends gives youngsters others to talk with who will augment our example and influence. Let this remind those privileged to share the homes of Christian families: what the children see in us, and hear from us, is so important. May we be guests who enforce, and not undermine, what parents are seeking to inculcate. Many testimonies contain reference to the good effect godly visitors had upon younger members of the family. And one

father told me recently that he attributed, under God, the conversion of all his children to the regular practice of having the Lord's people for meals and in his home.

Spiritual Talk

Mealtimes are a good opportunity to encourage conversation along spiritual lines. If it was morning Sunday School, questions can be asked about the lesson. Children can also be gently coaxed to see what they can remember of the sermon. Such natural reference to the things of God sanctifies meals and enhances the effect of having been under the Word (see Deuteronomy 6:7). The meal over, and while still around the table, what a good opportunity to sing a hymn or two, and for father to lead in prayer, giving thanks for another meal enjoyed, for the blessings of the Lord's day, and a request that the family might always remember to keep it holy. Questions often come from little ones at such times (Deuteronomy 6:20) and answering them is all part of the privilege of "not speaking thine own words" when "calling the Sabbath a delight" (Isaiah 58:13).

Practical Suggestions

The afternoon of the Lord's day is probably the time when most work needs to be done in the family. If there is afternoon Sunday School this helps greatly. But let us suppose there is not and a longish stretch of the day lies before us until tea time. How to fill this up profitably is not easy.

1. For most children simply to have their parents' attention will be their greatest pleasure. For Mum and Dad to sit down with them and talk about their concerns – under the umbrella of Christian influence – can be so fruitful. The trouble with many parents (including Christian ones) is that they scarcely know how to spend *any* day or time with their children. What a golden opportunity the gift of the Lord's day provides!

2. Reading younger children "Sunday books" is another helpful occupation. In the English-speaking world we are favoured with a wide range of them, although not all are suitable. We should go for those based upon the biblical text and which illuminate doctrine. *The Child's Story Bible, Leading little Ones to God* (Banner of Truth), and *Miracles and Parables of Jesus* (Gospel Standard publications) are excellent examples.

3. Bible colouring books can be a useful variation. The *Trinitarian Bible Society* produce very fine outline texts for

colouring and learning. *The Lord's Day Observance Society* also publish similar materials. Those who have done the best coloured-in ones can have them displayed in the room and our children will feel they have made us attractive motto text cards.

4. Taking children through a catechism is another excellent occupation for a while on the Lord's day. There are some good ones available for use with children. I have found the *Catechism for Young People* ² very suitable. This consists of 140 questions and answers. This a time-honoured way to impart doctrinal instruction to young minds. As an incentive, 1p offered (paid on Monday) for every correct answer tends to quicken zeal and make this a popular Sunday afternoon activity!

5. *Pilgrim's Progress* has stood families in good stead for centuries. After the Bible, this, together with *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, used to be staple reading for children on Sunday afternoons. It would be good to have today's rising generation acquainted with these spiritual classics once more. There are several children's editions of the *Progress* available, but like the story Bible, choose one that adheres closely to the original text so that youngsters can graduate to the full version later. Bunyan's allegory is full of characters that readily appeal to children and is an excellent and even entertaining book to read to or with them.

6. If any of the family can play a suitable instrument, accompanied hymn singing can lift the spirit and sanctify some of the Lord's day afternoon. This traditional custom has so much to commend it, but care must be taken that it rises above the level of a "sing-song." Whenever we employ the voice in hymns and psalms we ascribe praise to the infinite and exalted God – even in a more informal situation. We must guard against irreverence in our house, just as much as in God's house (1 Timothy 3:15).

7. Going out for a walk is a fine way of meeting the physical and spiritual needs of children on Sunday. Admiring the beauties of creation and sharing the intimacies of family conversation can be a hallowed occupation. Isaac went out into the field to prayerfully meditate (Genesis 24:63). And on the Sabbath our Lord and His disciples walked and talked together (Matthew 12:1). If this is kept from degenerating into just a Sunday afternoon stroll, "a walk thus improved may be a walk to heaven, and is very consistent with walking with God" (John Willison).

Ministers of the Gospel

Let us particularly pray for Ministers who are family men in

all of this. Having the same responsibility toward their children, they do not have the same Sabbath rest as others. After the nervous energy expended in the pulpit, sometimes the last thing they feel like is reading to lively youngsters. Still being wound up, or feeling cast down – and anticipating the evening service – what grace is needed!

Let us also pray for Pastors' wives. Sometimes their husbands have to finish sermon preparation on Sunday afternoon, or are even out preaching at that time. This means the children are solely her responsibility, which can be extremely wearing. She, who has borne the brunt of the children's needs during the week, sometimes gets scant relief on the Lord's day – the day when she cannot just send them out to play with the neighbour's children. And if she has the added work of hospitality, the pressures can be great indeed. Lord's days in the manse involve a unique sacrifice – may our readers often remember the occupants before the throne of heavenly grace (Hebrews 4:15–16).

Conclusion

As I draw to a close, no one can write on a subject like this without reflecting on his own performance over the years. How many shortcomings and failures I feel I have to confess! Yet I can also say that, as grace has been given, our four children, whose ages are 13 down to 7, still anticipate the Lord's day with pleasure. And I believe our spending those days together as we do enriches our family life immeasurably, and contributes to the measure of spiritual blessing each of us knows.

May we all seek to recover family religion in these degenerate times, and loudly proclaim with God's servant of old, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

Notes

1. If Nehemiah 8:2 is cited ("men and women, *and all that could hear with understanding*"), it must be remembered that here was an exceptional and historic occasion. The Jews had been restored from Captivity and they had gathered to hear the law of God read and expounded to them once again. This was not part of the regular assemblies of God's people, where all were normally present. In understanding the Scriptures, we do not make a rule out of an exception.
2. Available from: Hayes Town Chapel Evangelical Church, St Marys Road, Hayes, Middlesex.