



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Introducing Children to Worship
(*Catechism*, pp. 30-37)

Suggested Article:

📖 Catechism in the
Worshiping Community
(*Catechism*, pp. 86-91)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for
your personal or group study?
Please send your suggestions
to

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Christian Reflection

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Introducing Children to Worship

We don't introduce children to worship to make them good but rather that they will know who they are. Worship that is attentive to the gospel's grand story will transform their lives, feed their imaginations not their egos, and help them (and us) learn to order our lives by the gift of God's time.

Prayer

Almighty God, fill our minds with eternal thoughts and fill this room with praise.

We sing to you, our creator, redeemer, and friend.

Let us look into the mystery and hear the truth.

We listen for your Word.

Let us remember the good news and believe the gospel.

We trust again in your grace. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 78:1-8

Reflection

Are children "naturally spontaneous, vulnerable, and filled with wonder, and thus...better disposed to worship than are adults"? Or is worship so difficult for them that they must be trained for it in a separate "children's church"? Debra Dean Murphy charts a middle course between these extremes. "Children bring good instincts and often profound insights to the practice of Christian worship," she writes, but "preparation for their participation—and ongoing catechesis as they mature in it—are essential."

The joy of congregational worship can draw children (and us) into mature discipleship. Though children (and we) are naturally attuned to the practices and disciplines of worship, what training, or catechesis, do we need to participate fully in them? Murphy explores three dimensions of *story*, *imagination*, and *time*.

► *Tell me a story.* Children love great stories that evoke a compelling world, draw us into it, and bring us together. In worship we enact such a story. "In acts of praise and thanksgiving—prayer, song, sermon, sacrament—we tell and tell again the grand cosmic narrative of God's redeeming activity in the world," Murphy writes. As children hear, sing, and enact the biblical story, they sense the deep worth of Scripture. On the other hand, if we only "use the Bible's stories to impart pious moralisms to children ('be good,' 'be helpful,' 'be nice to your brother') we minimize Scripture's real purpose and power, and we fail to teach our children that they, along with us, are called to enter its narrative world and to be shaped by God's desire for communion with all of creation."

► *Use your imagination.* Children have a wonderful ability to engage imaginatively the world around them. "When we communicate with confidence and conviction that Christian worship invites us to inhabit this world of God's extravagant grace and goodness, most children will be eager for the adventure and challenge of living in such a world." (By "imagination," Murphy means a community's "construing reality according to a particular vision," not engaging in "subjective flights of fancy.") In regular



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catechesis through worship, children will learn to see the world differently, and soon they will “discern the disconnect between what occurs in worship and the workings of the world around them. As they mature, they will need continued guidance as they reflect on the implications of this disconnect for the Church’s witness and for their own efforts at faithful living.”

- *What time is it?* Children are naturally curious about time. In worship they “join the communion of saints through time—past, present, and future”—and [learn] that the saints live in God’s time, time redeemed by the saving work of Jesus Christ and measured by the rhythm of feasts and fasts that orders the Church’s common worship.” As they learn to mark the passage of time by the church year, “children, like the rest of us, come to realize that resistance is often called for.” Christmas and Easter become celebrations of God’s gifts in God’s time, rather than occasions for excessive spending in the names of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

The lessons of worship are not just for children, of course. As we help them be “transformed by participation in corporate worship,” Murphy cautions, we “may ourselves need to be converted; we may need to have our own vision and understanding of worship sharpened, tested, transformed.”

Study Questions

1. Do you agree that congregational worship is naturally attractive to children? When does worship “lose” them?
2. How do your congregation’s worship services focus on *story*, *imagination*, and *time*? In which dimension do your worship services excel? In which one do they need to be improved?
3. Some congregations “dismiss” children from the worshipping body to attend “children’s church.” Why does Murphy object to this practice? What does she recommend instead?
4. In our “worship wars,” Murphy notes, *style* replaces *story* as the basis for planning worship services. Discuss her observation that “*Style* customizes worship and compartmentalizes worshipers. *Story* does something else.”

Departing Hymn: “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak” (verses 1, 4, and 6)

Lord, speak to me that I may speak
in living echoes of your tone;
as you have sought, so let me seek
your erring children lost and lone.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
the precious things that you impart;
and wing my words, that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.

O fill me with your fullness, Lord,
until my very heart overflow
in kindling thought and glowing word,
your love to tell, your praise to show.

Francis R. Havergal (1872), alt.

Tune: CANONBURY

Introducing Children to Worship

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the catechetical (or, teaching) value of three dimensions of congregational worship – story, imagination, and time – that draw children (and us) into mature discipleship.
2. To consider whether children have a natural aptitude for worship.
3. To discuss how we can develop children’s skills in the practice of worship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Catechism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Lord, Speak to Me that I May Speak” locate the familiar tune CANONBURY in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Forming children into disciples through the life of worship takes a lot of time, Debra Dean Murphy believes. Yet the very slowness of the process “reminds us that the end of worship – its goal or *telos* – is not entertainment or even personal edification, but a life transformed by the habit of praise and thanksgiving.”

She reports how in Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*, the title character recalls an exchange with a wise old Bible professor:

“You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out – perhaps a little at a time.”

“And how long is that going to take?”

“I don’t know. As long as you live, perhaps.”

“That could be a long time.”

“I will tell you a further mystery,” he said. “It may take longer.”

The professor’s insight should remind us, Murphy writes, that “in undertaking the task of introducing children to worship we recognize this gift of time: that we don’t have to do it all at once or say it all at once – indeed we cannot; and that if we ensure our children’s regular presence in the worshipping assembly, and couple that commitment with substantive catechesis, the Spirit will do its transforming work with the passage of time” (*Catechism*, 35).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by leading members to read the responsive prayer. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 78:1-8 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This and the next two study guides, “Laying Foundations for Faith” and “Spiritual Direction,” explore three approaches to catechesis today. This one examines how worship trains young children, “Laying Foundations

of Faith” discusses using a question-and-answer catechism with older children and adolescents, and “Spiritual Direction” explores one-on-one guidance in the faith for adults. All of these approaches, however, may be adapted for believers of all ages and at every level of maturity. As Debra Dean Murphy notes, we can all be transformed through worship that emphasizes story, imagination, and time. Likewise, the question-and-answer approach to catechism and practice of spiritual direction can be adapted to serve all believers.

Therefore, this study is an opportunity to explore the end, or *telos*, of communal worship more generally, rather than just focus on how the congregation introduces children to worship.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to share their experiences with children in worship. When do the children show interest? When do they become bored and restless? For instance, I have noticed young children pay special attention when other children or young people lead in worship, or when adults they know (relatives, school teachers, or neighbors) are involved. Some children have a favorite part of worship—the congregational singing, Communion, baptism, the children’s sermon, ringing of chimes, and so on. Sermons may seem like a long stretch to children, but they often “tune in” for stories, dramatic readings, or instruction addressed to them.

Encourage members to talk to children about worship. Do they notice connections among the Scripture readings, hymns, prayers, liturgical actions, and sermon? What parts of a service do not seem to “fit”? What questions do they have about what happens in worship?

2. You might assign three small groups to review the worship services along these dimensions. How is the *story* dimension expressed in Scripture readings, preaching, testimonies in which members’ stories connect to God’s drama, the stories of saints, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper? Are children taught how each element of worship fits into God’s drama?

In the *imagination* dimension, discuss how drama, storytelling, sermon applications, sacraments, and other elements of worship help children “see” their world—their families, friends, and possessions—in Christ-like ways. Are children engaged in interpreting their own experiences through the lens of the biblical story? Are they taught to see how God’s story is shaping their lives and relationships?

In the *time* dimension, Murphy includes celebrating of the seasons of the church year and seeing oneself in the communion of saints through the ages. How do children learn about Christians in other eras? Who teaches them the meaning of baptism (inclusion in the communion) and the Lord’s Supper (sharing a meal with the communion of saints)?

3. “When we ‘dismiss’ children from the worshiping body (say, for ‘children’s church’), no matter how well-intentioned our efforts at teaching them *about* worship, we convey to them and to all others present that dividing the worshiping body is an acceptable norm,” Murphy objects. “More importantly, we rob children of the gift of being formed by the regular habit, discipline, and joy of corporate worship—which is really how they learn it and learn to love it in the first place.” Instead, she recommends that children be included in acts of worship and patiently taught the meaning of each part of worship. “All of this, of course, takes work,” she admits. “It takes patience, preparation, flexibility, much good humor, and a great deal of creativity and resourcefulness.”
4. “Style-driven worship is planned, promoted, and produced...[by asking]: What is the basic worship *preference* of today’s discriminating congregant-consumer? Quiet, contemplative worship? ‘Rock and roll church’? Hymnody, liturgy, vestments, and choral singing? A mixing and matching of all of the above?” Murphy writes. “But a preoccupation with style and preference puts the wrong subject at the center of the discussion (and indeed of worship itself), for the proper question to ask when planning and executing worship is not ‘what do people like?’ but ‘what is God doing?’ She does not urge us to adopt a children’s style either.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.