

Oikodomē. August 21, 2011.

Children in the Church

By Pastor Christopher Seah

On July 3, we had our first Family Forum. The topic was the behavior of children in the church. This topic arose due to feedback concerning the difficult behavior of some of our children. “Is there a code of conduct that we can expect of all our children?” was the question I suspected was on many of our minds.

But I reminded us that good behavior alone cannot be the issue when it comes to disciplining our kids. As Pastor Tedd Tripp has warned in his book *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Shepherd Press, 1995), it is entirely possible for us to groom children who are externally well-behaved, but who are, at the same time, deeply rebellious at heart. We must therefore be committed to the full discipleship of our children, addressing both external behavior and the murky realm of inner motivations to the extent that it is possible. In the end, we don't merely want nice children. We want children who will eventually grow to become God's holy priests. All that we expect of our little ones must therefore contribute to their salvation and their development toward the goal of lifelong, heart-felt service to God.

To make matters more challenging, Scripture is clear that we should not substitute man-made traditions for the Word of God (Mt 15:9). This should give us pause before we impose any wholesale code of conduct on our kids. It's not that such codes are wrong. It's that such codes tend to take on a life of their own and become cultural markers by which we judge the morality of others who are different than us. While God gives us liberty to make rules to order the life of our particular community, we must be careful to ask only what is biblical and reasonable of our children.

To that end, we have made a very modest accomplishment at our forum: Two concrete guidelines that can help parents guide their children. (1) *Children should be taught to imitate their parents during worship*. If singing is required, our children should be expected to sing as best they can. If standing is required, they should stand. If prayer is called for, they are to remain in a posture of prayer (bowed heads and silent lips) even if they are not yet able to pray on their own. If Scripture is being read, they should at least listen. Reverential postures do not make a Christian. But we must start here, at the level of reverential behavior. (2) *Children should not be a distraction to others*. This is simply an application of the command to consider the needs of others first. As simple as this guideline may be, it rules out the most obvious behavioral problems. If your child is causing a major distraction in worship, consideration for others would mean taking him or her out so that others may worship undistracted. Aside from those two very clear guidelines, we need to give *flexibility* to families to guide their children however their convictions dictate. The last thing we want is for families to discipline their kids to appease others. That would be a recipe for disaster.

Obviously, the discussion is not over. But I urge all of us to exercise patience. This is a church—not army barracks or a car factory. Children do not become disciples the way cars are made and fresh recruits are trained. While it is understandable that we may be annoyed by restless children in our worship services, we must remember that the exuberance of our kids is one of the joys of life. Our highly efficient and technologized society likes things to run smoothly. But we must guard against imposing that same expectation on our children.

If in doubt as to how we should respond to our children, we can always start with one rule: *Love*. I do not say this glibly. Because of their age, lack of experience, and natural egocentrism, our children are in a weaker position than we. In God's way, the stronger you are, the more patience and compassion is demanded of you. So love your little brothers and sisters. Love them completely for who they are, warts and all. Be committed to their full discipleship as Christians. Do not be content with rebuking them, snapping at their mistakes. But go the whole way and encourage, teach, exhort, reason with, and pray for them. Let us not forget that in our Father's eyes we are all little children (1 Jn 2:1). And how much in need of his patience are we!