

## **ALL AGE CHURCH – NOT SO MUCH A SERVICE – MORE A WAY OF LIFE.**

**- learning from the experience of God's people in the Old Testament.**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The inclusion of children alongside adults in the life and decisions of God's people in the Old Testament is a challenge to the way that churches operate today.

These Old Testament experiences form the backdrop to Jesus' statements about children:- Jesus called a little child and set the child in the middle of them. And he said, "Unless you change and become like little children you shall by no means enter into the Kingdom of heaven.

Whoever therefore shall humble himself like this child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such little child in my name, receives me.

But whoever offends one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18 v2-5)

Today's children are being denied much of the place that was normal to their Old Testament predecessors.

**Here are 10 ways in which adults and children were together as God's people:**

### **1. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO BELONG TOGETHER**

Before they went into the Promised Land, God gave Moses the words of a covenant being made between God and His people. (Deuteronomy 29v9-18).

Here are the people who were addressed:

**You stand this day, all of you** before the Lord your God: your leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, **your children**, your wives (or women), and the foreigners living within your camp, those who chop your wood and carry your water, that **you should enter into covenant** with the Lord your God, and into his oath, which the Lord your God makes with you today: that he may establish today **a people** for himself.

So the children were not only included in the scope of the covenant, they were included as one of the categories of the people who were making the covenant – they are even mentioned before the women.

This was establishing **a people – one people** - not as traditional church where it has been "Church and Sunday school" – the church being comprised of the adults and the children being classified in the separate "Sunday school" until they were of an age where they would be accepted into "church membership"

## 2. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO LEARN TO LIVE IN GOD'S WAYS

Moses commanded that every seven years, the law he had written down was to be read to the people when they gathered together for a feast.

“Assemble the people – men and women and **children** and the foreigners living in your towns, so that they can **hear**, and that they may **learn**, and **fear the Lord** your God, and **observe** to do all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 21v12)

So this hearing and learning was to be done directly by the children alongside the adults, as they heard the instructions being read to them.

## 3. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE GOD'S BLESSINGS

**Celebrate** the Feast of Weeks...and you shall **rejoice** before the Lord your God, you and **your son** and **your daughter**, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite in your town, and the foreigner, and **the fatherless** and the widow who are among you. (Deuteronomy 16v11)

**Celebrate** the Feast of Tabernacles ... and you shall rejoice in your feast, you and **your son** and **your daughter**, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, and the foreigner, and **the fatherless** and the widow who live in your towns. Deuteronomy 16v14

Their large scale celebrations were all-age and all-inclusive.

## 4. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO LET EVERYONE HEAR GOD'S MESSAGE

Joshua, when he had built an altar for worship to God, “read all the words of the law – the blessings and the curses – just as it is written in the Book of the Law.

There was **not a word** of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read to the **whole assembly** of Israel, including the women and **the children** and the foreigners who lived among them.” (Joshua 8v35)

Children were expected to know how God wanted them and their families and the community of God's people to live.

## 5. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO PUT WRONG THINGS RIGHT

When it was discovered that some of the people of Israel including their leaders had become involved in wrong relationships, relationships which God had forbidden, Ezra, the priest, led the people in confession of their sin as a people.

“Then **everyone** who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered round me” While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of the Lord, there gathered round him a very large crowd of Israelites – men women and **children**. They too wept bitterly. (Ezra 10v1)

So the children were among those who were sensitive to God’s Word, and who were so touched that they participated in corporate repentance for the sin of adults.

## **6. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO UNDERSTAND GOD’S WORD**

When the people gathered to hear the Law of Moses being read, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and **all that could hear with understanding**

And he read it aloud from daybreak until noon.. in the presence of the men, women and **those who could understand**, and the ears of **all the people** were attentive to the book of the law (Nehemiah 8v2,3)

**All the people** had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. (Nehemiah 8v9)

Then **all the people** went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

This event described in Nehemiah 8v1-12 has some interesting examples for times of being together:

- a platform was built so that Ezra could be seen and heard (v4)– **it is important for people to have eye contact.**
- Ezra opened the book – (all the people could see him because he was standing above them) as he opened it, the people all stood up – **opportunity for response and participation.**
- Ezra praised the Lord – and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!”
- then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.
- Levites **explained the meaning** of what was being read **in a way that could be understood.**

This led to a response of weeping.

The people were given instruction as to **what response God required** in relation to what they had heard, and **what God wanted to minister to them**: “The joy of the Lord”

## **7. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO AGREE WHAT TO DO**

When the people of Israel realised that the previous generation had gone far from God’s ways, they came together and agreed together to commit themselves to following God faithfully. (Nehemiah 10v1-29)

The comprehensive list is given of those who entered into the agreement: Those who sealed it were Nehemiah, the governor, a list of priests, a list of Levites, a list of leaders, and the others who are listed as joining in the agreement are: the rest of the people, priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants, all who separated themselves from the neighbouring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, their women/wives, **their sons and their daughters, all who were able to understand.**

“**All these** now join their brothers the nobles and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God.”

## **8. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO REJOICE AND PRAISE GOD.**

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, along with Levites, priests, singers, musicians, leaders, it says,

“And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and **the children** also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem could be heard far away.” (Nehemiah 12v43)

Very noisy worship!

## **9. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO HEAR FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT**

When Judah was threatened by the approach of an enemy army, King Jehoshaphat resolved to enquire of the lord, and he proclaimed a fast for **all** Judah.

The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord.

Jehoshaphat led them in prayer – ending his prayer with, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.” (2 Chronicles 20v12)

It says that, “**All** Judah stood before the Lord, **their children (this word sometimes translated “little ones”)**, their wives, and their children (**this word sometimes translated “sons” – but not just referring to males**).

Then the **Spirit of the Lord** came upon Jahaziel... as he stood in the assembly.

He said, “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and **all** who live in Judah and Jerusalem. This is what the Lord says to **you.....**” (2Chronicles 20v12-15)

Jehoshaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and **all** Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, worshipping the Lord. (v18)

So here, all ages are at the “prayer meeting”, and in the place where the Holy Spirit is bringing revelation to God’s people through a prophetic word. The choosing to use two different words to describe the children present emphasises that **all ages** were present, receiving the encouragement of the Holy Spirit words and hearing what God was going to do.

## **10. THEY WERE TOGETHER TO LOOK FOR REVIVAL**

To a people who were facing the consequences of having gone away from God’s ways, God said,

“Even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” (Joel 2v12) and God’s promise was to bring back the blessings he had for his people: “I am sending.. enough to satisfy you fully.” (v18)  
“I will restore to you the years...” (v25)  
“You will praise the name of the Lord your God, who has worked wonders for you.”(v26)  
[The promise of God then goes on to the greater “Revival” of Pentecost –  
“Afterwards. I will pour out my Spirit on **all** people. Yours **sons** and your **daughters** will prophesy.....” (v28)]

God’s blessing was to be found in declaring a holy fast, calling a sacred assembly. “Gather the people, consecrate the assembly, bring together the elders, **gather the children**, and **those that suck at the breast**. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests who minister before the Lord, weep between the temple porch and the altar” (v15-17)

The situation was so important, that even wedding celebrations had to be interrupted for newly-marrieds to be involved.  
Our normal thought might be that if a really important matter is being dealt with, we should do it as adults and leave the children out of the responsibility – but not here. The call here could not be clearer – there was something so important in having the children there as part of the assembly, that even the babies have a special mention. Note: it does not say gather the mothers and their babies, but gather the babies nursing at their mother’s breast.  
It was important to God that they should be there.  
This togetherness of the people of all ages in seeking revival is further mentioned in Malachi 4: “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings. And you shall go out and leap like calves released from the stall” (v2)  
“...he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and smite the earth with a curse.” (v6)

## CONCLUSION

In seeking to encourage all-age meetings, I once gave someone the above-mentioned Old Testament references to things that were done by all ages together. His response included:

“The difficulty for me is no apparent direct NT (New Testament) reference, but implicit in households.”

What he seems to be saying is that he is not persuaded of the need for all-age meetings of church congregations because there is no direct clear description of such meetings in the New Testament church, other than his assumption that when churches met in people’s houses, there would/could have been children present.

I have difficulty with his difficulty, as there are many things which are taken as normal church activities about which there is “no apparent direct NT reference”. For instance, there is “no apparent direct NT reference” to the use of musical instruments in New Testament church worship, or to holiday conferences. This does

not seem to produce a similar “difficulty”. Of course both of these do have Old Testament precedents.

Also it is difficult to see why churches should prefer to practise a “no apparent direct NT reference” **division** of the ages to a “no apparent direct NT reference” **togetherness** of the ages?

It is said with some justification that the bigger a meeting is, the more difficult it is to accommodate a wide variety of ages. This does not form a reason for not doing it, but rather a challenge to find ways of doing it effectively. It is interesting and perhaps surprising to note that in all the ten Old Testament references where it is specifically mentioned that the children participated alongside the adults, the meetings were large scale meetings with very significant agendas.

It seems to me that the challenge for the church today in relationship to children is the same as the challenge to the New Testament church – it is to learn from God’s revealed and inspired Word, to look for the Holy Spirit’s application of that word to present circumstances, and above all to obey Jesus who made his expectations of children clear in the following ways:

## **Jesus' Expectation of Children**

The Kingdom of Jesus is designed with children in mind. Jesus shows how He expects their full involvement.

### **1. Children will Experience the Kingdom of Heaven**

Jesus said to adults, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

### **2. Children will Come to Him**

Jesus called the children to Him, and said, "Let the children come to me." (Luke 18:15-16)

### **3. Children will Feel His Touch on their Lives**

He took them up in His arms. He placed his hands on each of them. (Mark 10:13-16)

### **4. Children will be Serving in His Kingdom**

He used a child's contribution. (John 6:9)

He showed that "being about Father's business" is the natural place for a child to be. (Luke 2:49)

### **5. Children will Possess the Kingdom of Heaven**

He said of children, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." It belongs to them. (Matthew 19:14-15)

### **6. Children will Worship, Praise, Proclaim Jesus and His Kingdom, and be involved in Spiritual Warfare**

He welcomed the children's expression and honoured their involvement. (Matthew 21:15-16)

## **7. Children will be "Carriers" of Jesus**

When children are welcomed, Jesus is present. (Mark 9:36-37)

One useful document in seeking to find practical church application of Biblical principles relating to children is that which was produced in 1990 by the United Reformed Church:

### **Towards a Charter for Children in the Church**

1. Children are equal partners in the life of the church.
2. The full diet of worship is for children as well as adults.
3. Learning is for the whole church, adults and children.
4. Fellowship is for all – each belonging meaningfully to the rest.
5. Service is for children to give as well as adults.
6. The call to evangelism comes to all God's people of whatever age.
7. The Holy Spirit speaks powerfully through children as well as adults.
8. The discovery and development of gifts in children and adults is a key function of the church.
9. As a church community we must learn to do only those things in separate age groups which we cannot in all conscience do together.
10. The concept of "priesthood of all believers" includes children.

Of course, to apply the Old Testament examples, to follow Jesus' teaching, and to implement the above charter means upending much of what many churches do. That does not mean that it should not be done.

What we are **not** doing may be counteracting the benefits and limiting the effectiveness of the good things we **are** doing.

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