parenting in the pew

guiding your children into the joy of worship

robbie castleman
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REVISED AND UPDATED

robbie castleman
DEDICATION

For my children’s children
Tyler, Ebenezer, and Tate,
Anastasia, and Zoe

Psalm 103:17
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This is a practical, delightful book, full of innovative ideas coupled with sound theology and spiced with irrepressible humor.

I only wish I’d had it when our children were small. Still, reading it as a great-grandmother has done me good.

By the way, Robbie’s mother-in-law came to China years ago. Three missionary families hired her to teach their children. Lucy Fletcher had a profound impact on me just as I was beginning my spiritual pilgrimage. And that influence has been with me all through my life.

Enjoy this book, as I have, and you will be a better parent and a more committed Christian (without realizing it). You will be won over by Robbie’s style, spontaneous humor and wise counsel.

Ruth Bell Graham

Montreat, North Carolina, 1993
get mail. Lots of mail. Lots of mail from wonderful parents and pastors.

A parent and a worship deacon at a small church in Australia wrote, “Thank you so much for writing your book Parenting in the Pew! It has had a profound impact on how I view children and worship. It brought together many things I have felt, but not really been able to articulate over the years, both as a child myself and recently as I have become a parent. As a result of this (among other things), the children’s ministry at our church has been significantly restructured over the last year.”

And this note from a good ol’ Google search: “I am not sure if you are the Robbie Castleman who wrote the book Parenting in the Pew, but if you are I would like to thank you for your help. . . . I received this book when I visited R. C. Sproul’s church 5 or 6 years ago, but just remembered I had it and decided to read it. I started reading last night and could not put it down. My 2.5-year-old sat with me in our worship service today, and it was such a joy to see him watching and learning to worship with us. Our Sunday morning was still a bit chaotic, but I am hopeful that my future diligence in preparation for Sunday will bear fruit.”
And here is one note from a pastor who helped guide his congregation through a big change. After I did a worship seminar for the congregation, they eliminated a worship service that ran concurrently with the Sunday school hour so that families could all be together in the sanctuary, as well as participate in age-specific Christian education classes. “Robbie, I recently did a little attendance analysis, and since Parenting in the Pew we’ve seen an 88% increase in children’s worship attendance. Not only that, but Adult Education attendance has doubled. God is good!”

Oh, dear Google friends, down-under friends, congregational pastors and children’s ministry workers, what a joy to hear from you, write back to you, pray for you and occasionally visit your congregations face-to-face. Parenting in the Pew was always “just” a little boy’s lunch, just five loaves and two fish, and I continue to be grateful that, by God’s grace, it has actually “fed” so many people through the years.

In this third edition of Parenting in the Pew, I have enhanced the discussion guide for parent groups and congregations. People have already found the guide very helpful and easy to use. The appendices from the expanded edition have been incorporated into the body of the book as appropriate. I’ve updated a few illustrations for today’s parents, but basically the content and its challenge have not changed. I’ve found it delightful to include more illustrations, stories and ideas from parents, children’s ministry directors, congregations, pastors and children in the book too.

People ask me all the time, “So, how did those two boys of yours turn out?” It is the deepest grace of God in my life that both our sons still love Jesus, love his church and are not afraid to bear witness in the “real world” to the gospel. Our elder son is an artist (with an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) and delights to “think theologically” with other artists
about life, meaning, beauty, order, truth. Our younger son is a pastor (with an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary) who delights to “think theologically” with anyone who crosses his path about life, meaning, beauty, order, truth.

Robert (who now goes by his middle name, Dayton) and Scott have become what I always prayed: men of God who don’t play it safe but follow Jesus radically and passionately—imperfectly like all of us, but faithfully. With our answer-to-prayer daughters-in-love, Karen and Rebecca, our grand next generation is being parented in the pew. Tyler, Ebenezer, Anastasia, Tate and Zoe, this edition is for you, your friends and their parents. This is my hope for the new edition of this book—that the church of Jesus Christ will continue to grow intergenerational communities of people learning to worship the God whose steadfast love never ends.
Daddy, I’d Like You to Meet My Children

I wish I’d paid more attention to the significant moments of my life. I don’t remember what my husband was wearing when I met him. I do remember where and when it happened, but I don’t remember anything he said. What were his first words to me?

Of course I didn’t know that humid evening in New Orleans would change the course of my life. I was in that city to see the French Quarter, not to fall in love. I was distracted by the excitement, the noise, the glitter and the yummy aromas of the Crescent City. I should have paid attention to that interesting young man, but I didn’t.

I don’t remember the first time my dad saw his first grandchild, my son Robert. Mom flew out two weeks after Robert was born, but it was five months later that Daddy saw and held his grandson. I don’t remember how it happened, because we were in the middle of a family wedding. The hubbub of dresses, flowers, shopping sprees, food, rehearsals and the reception grabbed all my attention. There were really important parts of that visit home that were lost to me.
All of us find it easy to miss the truly important moments of life. Distraction, busyness and the clamor of worry about future things rob us of what God may be up to in the present moment of our lives. We usually see the significant minutes, the turning points of our lives, from a distance. Then we pause in wonder and mutter, “Ahh, little did I realize how important that was at the time.”

The lives of children are affected by moments that hardly get our attention. Given an adult’s confidence and familiarity with the world, it is easy to overlook the often poignant perspective of children. I also learned the value of just quietly watching my children from a distance to see how they deal with people, things, situations and themselves.

As three and four year olds, our boys went twice a week for half a morning to a preschool across the street from our church. The window of our church kitchen provided a view of the preschool playground. Several times a month, I would stand at the window and watch Robert and Scott and pray for insight into who they were “out there” without me and who they would be in the years to come. I’d watch for signs of their emerging gifts and personalities, how they played, defended themselves, recovered from falls and handled themselves when alone.

I was fascinated with how our elder son always had a project of his own. Robert was perfectly content to stack things against a fence by himself or, it seemed to me, play in an imaginary space that only he could envision and take delight in. Other children or his brother could join him or not, but if they did, he was in charge. Scott, on the other hand, had to have people, lots of people. He never seemed to plan anything alone, and I don’t think I ever saw him play by himself. In fact, if he saw a child alone, he often went over to them and offered to include them in the game he was helping organize or the adventure that was brewing.
I’m so glad I didn’t miss seeing how their later interests were simply an extension of who they always were. I am so glad I lingered at that kitchen window, even though I always had “so much to do” on those “free” mornings. Looking back, I realize the value of seeing what God was doing across the street in my two very different sons and their preschool personalities. It’s made it easier to trust God with their uncertain futures, because they are indeed the unique handiwork of God from the get-go.

**Paying Attention Pays Off**

Paying attention is not always easy for even the most well-intentioned parents. Sometimes I just wanted to unplug the chatterbox. I remember one time making this statement to my toddlers. The chatterbox one calmly proceeded to inform me that he couldn’t be unplugged because he had batteries.

It is especially hard to pay attention to children when there is something else to pay attention to. Being immersed in a favorite TV show, an important phone call or a good book in a quiet corner seems to be a signal for children who suddenly find they need attention. The minute you settle on the couch to relax with a magazine, a teenager who hasn’t spoken since last week will suddenly want to tell you all about gym class. And isn’t it a wonder how the baby always needs to nurse just as Mom sits down to dinner?

Worship can be one of the times when we parents would like to pay attention to something other than our children. Kids can be distracting, aggravating and embarrassing in church. Parenthood can make sitting in a pew a lot of work. Paying attention to our children can make us less attentive to the service.

The temptations to just stay home, or at least to keep the kids out of the sanctuary, are real. It’s hard to pay attention to
God and children at the same time.

Training children to pay attention to God, however, is one rare way to have your cake and eat it too. Parenting in the pew can help children and parents pay attention to what is really important.

Learning to pay attention to my children has helped me pay attention to my heavenly Father in worship. And I do remember times when my children were first held in the Father’s arms. I can still see Scott’s tears offered in repentance as he confessed his “grubby heart” to Jesus. I can still hear “Jesus Christ, the Crucified” boomed loudly and off-key from my toddler sons when they learned this refrain from an old hymn.

I was with them when they first understood a gospel illustration. I answered their questions about a five-syllable word used in a sermon. I was next to Robert and Scott the first time they held the sacred symbols of Christ’s body and blood in their hands. I paid attention. These moments of grace and worship are remembered. And treasured.

Training your children to worship is one way to pay attention to the truly important and life-changing moments of life. Parenting in the pew keeps you focused on the significance of the moment, so it is not lost in the distractions of the day.

Training children to worship can allow parents as well as children to pay attention to what God is doing. Parenting in the pew helps you pay attention to the most important thing you can ever train your child to do: worship. Worship is the one very important thing we actually get to do forever.

For many parents, sixty minutes in a pew with a squirmy toddler or a sulky teen can seem like forever. Worship can be the furthest thing from our minds when children are distracting.

Actually, training children to worship is hard for some of us because we ourselves did not have the experience of worshiping
as children. Maybe your memories of church in childhood are similar to mine.

**Petticoats and Passing Notes**
I went to church as a youngster, usually in shiny shoes and an itchy petticoat. I was fairly good and reasonably quiet—at least my body was. Mentally and emotionally I romped outside, counted bricks and made up wild stories about the people in front of me. Eventually, though, I grew tired of counting bricks and doodling in the bulletin and graduated to the “teen balcony” to pass notes and gossip about the people down below.

I was a Sunday-morning dropout in my late teens, contributing to a documented trend noted in church-attendance studies. One reason for quitting was that I had never been trained to worship. I had only been told to be quiet in church.

During my childhood, my dear parents did not know the difference. Mama and Daddy did the best they could with what they knew. Mama grew up “going to church,” but not to worship, while Daddy had not gone to church for any reason as a youngster.

During the early years of my childhood, my parents grieved deeply over the loss of their first child, a brother I have never known, to “crib death” (sudden infant death syndrome). Then, when I was four, we were involved in a car accident. Some people who were kind and helpful at the scene of the accident became our friends, and it was they who encouraged my parents to begin attending church and Sunday school. My mother looks back now and muses, “We knew we needed something in our lives.” So we went.

As I sat by them, the difference between “going to church” and “going to worship” was something they were just beginning to discover. All I was taught was to “be quiet and be good.”

“Be still, and know that I am God” is more biblical (Psalm
46:10). This verse begins to define the difference between “going to church” and “going to worship.” Going to worship requires a life transformation and happens out of a new heart, not an old habit. Going to church can be nothing more than smart time management with good intentions. It may not have much at all to do with worship.

**Just Going to Church**

We can just go to church because it is good for us, benefits us, puts our week right, keeps our kids off drugs—and because we like the music. We can settle for going to church because it is “good for us.” Giving God attention in worship may seldom influence our thinking or touch our hearts.

On more than a few occasions (usually in a ballpark or a gymnasium) I have overheard the same conversation. It goes something like this:

- **AMY:** You know, now that the kids are bigger, we really do need to get back to church. I think it would do us some good.

- **CHRISTINA:** Yeah, I don’t know what we’d do without our church. It keeps the kids busy. They always have something to do.

- **AMY:** Well, Buddy isn’t much for a long service. Where do you go?

- **CHRISTINA:** Oh, you’d like our church. It’s got some life to it. The music is terrific. Wayne and I like the sermons. They don’t go on and on.

- **AMY:** Maybe we’ll visit some Sunday. Which church is it?

- **CHRISTINA:** It’s Riverside Fellowship. The one with the big stained-glass window and all glass on one side. On the corner of Hyde and Central.
AMY: Oh, I know the one. The daughter of one of the women in our office got married there. It was real nice.

CHRISTINA: I like it. Now that the kids are old enough to sit with their friends, I can just sit back and relax some.

AMY: Well, that’s why we’ve waited to get back to church. It was just too much hassle when the kids were little, but I think it will do them some good now that they are older.

Why do we go to church? My parents took me because none of us were killed in a car wreck when I was four years old. They had made a promise to God.

Some people go because they promised parents or grandparents. Some people, politicians included, go because it’s good for image or business. Some people like the “sameness” of church because the world is complicated and even threatening. Lots of people like going to church to get some help and support from others or just to feel better about themselves and life in general. But I think some folks are like Amy and Christina and the old why-to-eat-oatmeal commercial, “It’s the right thing to do.”

And it is. Worship, however, is the rightest of reasons. But worship doesn’t come naturally for us humans. God had to train the nation of Israel to worship. He went to great lengths to teach his people how he deserved to be honored and loved and known.

God outlined general guidelines (“Be still . . .”) and specific rules (“With a ram prepare a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a third . . .” Numbers 15:6) for his worship. Thus God began with Israel to train a people how to worship him “in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

God desires our worship. He commands it. His Word trains us in how to love him, how to worship him. The children of
Israel, we and our children must be trained to worship. I’ve learned along the way and in my study of Scripture that biblical worship is partly intended to help God’s people remember, rehearse and reenact God’s great story of salvation. To enter into that story week after week with one’s children is a great reminder of our place in that story. It’s good for us to realize that we not the “star” of God’s story, but that God is the ultimate means and ends for faith and life—for ourselves and our children. As a mother, I can only stand at a window for thirty minutes during play time, but the Father, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, numbers all our days and watches with a higher wisdom and deeper love than any parent ever could.

**Wanted: Training for Worship**

Parents teach their children how to make beds, hit baseballs, figure fractions and shop wisely. There are shelves of books, columns of advice and lots of good reasons for developing those skills.

But though we have plenty of advice for finances and child rearing, very little has been written about training children to worship. In *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, James Dobson affirms that “spiritual training” is important, and he says that the first seven years of a child’s life are “prime time” for this training. He provides a twenty-eight-point checklist of questions for parents.

The two checklist questions concerning church/worship are as follows:

- *Is he learning to behave properly in church—God’s house?*
- *Is he learning to keep the Lord’s Day holy?*

These are two good questions. Parents need help as they try to teach their children about church. But the help they give
must train children to worship, not just lessen the stress of an hour in the pew.

*Parenting in the Pew* is written to help parents train children in the only “proper behavior” for church: worship! This book is an expression of my joy in learning with my children how to remember the Lord’s Day and keep it holy.

Parenting in the pew can be a hot battle or a holy triumph of grace. It can consist of whispered commands: “Be quiet,” “Shhhhh,” “Sit still,” or it can contain the most intimate moments of life with God’s family together in his presence. Sunday morning with children in the pew can be the longest hour of the week, or it can provide the very best preparation for eternal joy.

Teaching your children to worship—parenting in the pew—is entering the house of your heavenly Father and saying, “Daddy, I’d like you to meet my children.” Worship is seeing your Father’s smile.