

# Baby Dedication

by Mark Mitchell

I remember well the day each of my three children was born. Though each was different, the emotions were the same. There was relief that my wife, Lynn, had survived labor. There was joy and gratitude for a healthy child. There was a sense of awe over the miracle of birth. There was even a bit of fear over the tremendous responsibility that lay ahead of us as parents.

After we arrived home with each child and settled into the frenzied routine of nightly feedings and dirty diapers, we encountered another emotion. It was the desire to do something public to acknowledge our gratitude to God for this priceless gift. We knew and appreciated the truth so well expressed in Psalm 127:

*“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.... Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them...”*

In the Old Testament, this desire to publicly express these deep and important feelings is acknowledged. It was out of gratitude and commitment that Hannah dedicated her son Samuel to the Lord’s service (1 Samuel 1:28). In the writings of Moses, God commanded the Israelites, “Sanctify to me every first born...” (Exodus 13:1). It was with this command in mind that Mary and Joseph went up to the Temple in Jerusalem and offered the baby Jesus to God (Luke 2:22-24).

There are many examples in the Old Testament where this desire to publicly dedicate a child to the Lord is given expression. But there is a problem with this—as Christians we are no longer under the Law of Moses. Therefore, the specific directions of setting aside the firstborn male do not apply to us. Furthermore, the New Testament does not give us explicit directions on what kind of public act is to take place after a child is born. For this reason, there has been much debate among Christians over the nature and form of dedicating children to the Lord.

The most dominant view in the church over the years has been that infants should be baptized. Unfortunately, this practice is based more on tradition than the Bible. Some who practice infant baptism, such as Roman Catholics, are what we might call “Sacramentalists.” They view baptism as an

act through which God automatically and graciously works to regenerate the child, making him a living member of the Body of Christ, and securing for him a place in heaven.

Others who practice infant baptism, such as those in the Reformed Church and some Presbyterian churches, do so out of what is commonly called “Covenant Theology.” The idea here is that the promises of the New Covenant which God has made with his people are for believing parents and their children. But since babies are unable to express repentance and faith, a visible sign is given to secure a baby’s salvation until he is old enough to make a decision for himself. Under the Old Covenant, the sign was that of circumcision. Under the New Covenant, the sign for babies is said to be baptism. Covenant theologians believe that though infant baptism doesn’t insure eternal life as adults, it does protect the child until they are old enough to make a decision, and it does insure the secret work of the Spirit in their life towards repentance and faith in adulthood.

The main problem with both of these views is that infant baptism is never practiced in the New Testament. The New Testament pattern is always the same—a person is regenerated by the Holy Spirit through repentance and faith, and then they are baptized as a visible sign of what has already taken place in their hearts. Furthermore, any view which sees a visible rite as guaranteeing eternal life, either during childhood or in the future, suggests salvation by works. The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is grace alone through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9).

So, the question remains: what do we do to publicly acknowledge our gratitude and commitment to the Lord in receiving and raising our children? While the New Testament doesn’t give explicit directions, it does describe an event in the life of Jesus which provides a helpful and instructive pattern to follow in dedicating our children to the Lord. It is found in Matthew 19:13-15:

*“Then some children were brought to him so that he might lay his hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, ‘Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ And after laying his hands on them, He departed from there.”*

There are a number of things to notice about this that are instructive for baby dedication.

**First, we bring our babies to Jesus as an expression of our own faith in Him.** No doubt, the reason these people brought their children to Jesus was because they had experienced something of the power and love of Jesus and they wanted their children to experience the same. They also believed in the power of prayer and expected this to be a life changing event in their child's life. In the same way, parents who dedicate their babies to the Lord are doing so as an expression of their own living faith, rather than out of some religious obligation. They bring their babies to Jesus because they have tasted something of His kindness in their own lives, and they want their children to do the same. And just as Jesus did, we lay our hands on these babies and pray for them, believing that this will have an impact on them down the road. This is not an empty ritual, but an act of great significance and power when done in a spirit of faith. For this reason, to preserve the integrity and meaning of this event, we ask that both parents involved in the dedication have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

**Second, we bring our babies to Jesus in the context of a church body who affirms their worth, providing an environment where they can come to know Jesus.** Unfortunately, the disciples provide a negative example for us in this regard. They felt that Jesus had better things to do than to baby-sit, and so they tried to stop these parents from bringing their children to Him. It's interesting that there are many in the world who, like the disciples, view children as more of a burden than a blessing. But Jesus affirmed the worth of these children and reserved some harsh words for his proud disciples. His firm command, "Do not hinder them from coming to me," applies to all those who will surround the parents at this important event. They are to be people who affirm the worth of each child in God's eyes and who join in sincere prayer for the child. No Christian is doomed to parent in isolation. It is the church's job to do all it can to help parents and their children walk in a close relationship with Christ. It is the parent's job to accept that help.

**Third, we bring our babies to Jesus accepting the awesome responsibility He has given us as parents.** Jesus did not keep these children, but he handed them back to their parents as a demonstration that the care of these children belonged to them. In the same way, in a baby dedication parents offer their child to the Lord, but the stewardship of their little life remains in their hands. This is an awesome task for which no parent feels qualified! It is a lifelong career that will, at times, fill a parent with unspeakable joy, and at other times drive them to their knees in helpless prayer. For this reason, we also consider this a "parent dedication." It is a time when we pray for parents as well as their child, and it is a time for parents to confess their own commitment to raise their child in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4). That which Moses said to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:4-7 applies to every Christian parent:

*"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your heart and with all your might. And these words which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up."*

Lynn and I are so thankful for the three wonderful children that the Lord has given us. With each child we started the process with a baby dedication. That event continues to remind us of our commitment, and it continues to encourage us with the knowledge that the prayers offered then, and since then, will be answered. When our oldest was baptized as an expression of her personal decision to trust Christ as her Savior, it gave us great joy. It also reminded us of that important day almost 23 years ago when, in her white lace dress, she gurgled in front of the church, and we prayed for her, and we prayed for ourselves, and we committed ourselves to do our best to love her, care for her, and lead her to Christ. It was a great way to start.

---

NOTE: The decision to dedicate your child to the Lord is a commitment we take seriously at Central Peninsula Church. Therefore, we require that those parents who are having any child dedicated for the first time at CPC must attend at least the first three sessions of our class, *Effective Parenting in a Defective World*. Call the church office for more details.