

Dedication or Baptism

by Brian E. Coombs

It is the common practice of many churches today to dedicate the children of believing parents rather than to baptize them. Historically, Presbyterian churches have baptized their small children in recognition of their place within the Christian household. On the contrary, Baptists have always denied the sacrament of baptism to small children on the ground that they are not yet able to profess Christ as Lord, a condition they deem necessary for baptism. Many of the contemporary churches that dedicate their small children do so as a sort of "middle ground" or accommodation to both sides of the controversy and those families within their midst.

But does the Bible allow this accommodation? The purpose of this tract is to answer that question by the Scripture.

We believe the common practice of "dedication" to be an innovation, rather than what Scripture actually teaches. We do not question the sincerity of those parents that "dedicate" their children to the Lord with the hope that God will give their children salvation and use them for good in His kingdom. In itself, this is a very noble desire. But we do not believe that the contemporary practice of "dedication" is prescribed by the Bible or offered as a legitimate option to parents.

As a preliminary, it is necessary to point out that God deals with His people in terms of "covenant." A divine covenant is different than a human covenant in that it is a relationship that God Himself initiates, establishes, directs, and maintains. In a covenant, God lays out certain responsibilities, which if met, will result in blessing. If the responsibilities are not met, there will be negative consequences. The covenant does not relate only to the one with whom it is made. It affects also the household (i.e., children) of the one in covenant with God.

Throughout the Bible God made covenants with many people, such as Adam, Noah, the nation of Israel, and David, to name a few. But in light of the issue at hand, consider God's covenant with Abraham, which the Bible reveals was, in essence, the gospel (Galatians 3:8). God initiated His relationship with Abraham (Genesis 17:4) and announced many promises He would bring to & through Abraham (vv. 5-8). But the covenant was not only for Abraham. It was with his household as well (vv. 7-10 with 18:19).

As a sign of all that God would do through Abraham, Abraham was to circumcise his descendants (vv. 10-13). Not to receive the sign of the covenant meant that the covenant was broken, thus bringing a negative consequence on the one breaking it, in this case, death (v. 14). So, when Abraham was given Isaac, he circumcised him as an eight day infant (Genesis 21:4). And as Isaac grew older, having the sign of the covenant on him, and having been instructed by his parents, the promises of the covenant were in turn passed on to his descendants after him (Genesis 26:23-24; 28: 10-15).

This entire custom of circumcision (really, sacrament of circumcision) was a basic way of acknowledging God's covenant throughout the entire history of Israel, since it was placed into the Law of the Old Testament (cf. Leviticus 12:1-3). Every male child received the sign of the covenant as a very small child.

So, we see that God relates to His people and their children in terms of covenant, and that the sign of that covenant under the Old Testament was circumcision administered to their children.

Upon coming to the New Testament, the sign of circumcision is replaced by another sign, baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). The significance is the same, but the sign is different. Like circumcision, the sign of baptism was administered to the children of the believing parent (Acts 16:13-15, 31-34).

How does this relate to the issue of "dedication?" It reveals that God's manner of treating children born into a Christian home is to place on them the sign of the covenant, as his covenant is with the believing parent(s) and their children. Since the sign of the covenant is baptism, parents are to present their children - regardless of age - for baptism, not "dedication."

At this point, many advocates of "dedication" point to Jesus' "dedication" at the temple (Luke 2:22-24). However, this passage does not speak to the idea of "dedication" according to the contemporary understanding of offering your child to the Lord with the hope that he will one day be a Christian and serve the Lord Jesus. Properly this occasion of "presenting Jesus to the Lord" (v. 22) was in fulfillment of the Law. It was recognition that the first-born of Israel deserved to die even as the first-born of Egypt did soon before this law's enactment (Exodus 12:2,11-12). In short, by "presenting Jesus to the Lord" in connection with His circumcision (Luke 2:21-23), Joseph and Mary were confirming God's gracious covenant with them and Jesus' place in it.

In a similar way, appeal for contemporary "dedication" should not be made to Hannah's "dedication" of Samuel to the LORD (1 Samuel 2:22, 27-28). There the "dedication" is properly the Nazarite vow wherein a male would not drink the fruit of the vine or cut his hair while in the service of the Lord (Numbers 6:1-8). Hannah pledged that if she was given a child she would so consecrate him (1 Samuel 1:11). Having received Samuel, she "dedicated" (literally, "lent") Samuel to the Lord. If our "dedicating" brethren would desire to use this passage consistently, they should be consistent and apply it to only male children while at the same time no longer serve grapes to their children or cut their hair! Clearly, the passage knows nothing of the modern idea of "dedicating" the child to the Lord that he might one day be among the redeemed.

Thus, in both these passages often used in support of "dedication," the modern concept has been read back into these passages. This is unfortunate and erroneous. Moreover, the modern concept is simply not found in Scripture. So, there is really no room to stand for a "dedication" ceremony.

But you may ask, "Why infant baptism rather than dedication, really? What is it about baptism that...?"

Ultimately, the reason is that God commands baptism. There is no clear command in Scripture to "dedicate" children in the modern sense. By so commanding baptism over "dedication," God excludes "dedication." Yet, with this command to baptize, there are practical reasons.

First, in baptism a visible, real sign of what God promises to do through the gospel is placed on the child via water. This is personal and very "close to home." It is a "seal" authenticating that which the sign signifies. It signifies the genuineness of union/communion with God in Christ (Romans 6:3), cleansing from sin (Titus 3:5), membership among the people of God (I Corinthians 12:13), and justification by faith (Romans 4:11). God means what He says, and shows that by the placing of water on the child. It reveals the truthfulness of God's promise to save, and that such salvation is designed for the person baptized. That's why they're in the home they are!

Dedication offers no such promise. It simply hopes that God will do the parents' desire for their child, whereas baptism states that God has purposefully placed the child in their home so that He may bring the fullness of His promise (gospel) to them via the parents' fulfillment of their duty on the child's behalf. The perspective is reversed with "dedication." In baptism, parents acknowledge the child's place with the sphere of the covenant people (Church) and are thus, on behalf of the child, recognizing their duty to teach, lead, and nurture him in the Faith. In "dedication," though a child is born into a Christian home, he is not acknowledged as a member of the covenant people, so, he is "dedicated" with the hope that he will become one. Simply, baptism gives tangible proof to God's trustworthiness concerning the gospel, whereas "dedication" offers none.

Secondly, in "dedication" the child is "given to the Lord," whereas in baptism the child is acknowledged as already having been entrusted to the parents. Biblically, the one offering the child is not the parents, but God. God has given the parents the child and said that He will do what the dedicating parent wants as they train the child by His Word. So then, "dedication" reveals unbelief and irresponsibility in the parents' heart regarding what God promises for their child. If they really are eager to see their child brought to saving faith, they will demonstrate this by baptizing and training their child, not by "dedicating" and training their child. They will accept their responsibilities to train their children, and expect that through God's means, He will bring the child to embrace the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, baptism provides something "dedication" cannot-tangible sign for children to observe as they mature in understanding. It's something to "get their curiosity" as they grow up. They will be taught that something great happened to them when, for the most part, they were too little to know about it. That from the very beginning of their days, God cared and insured that they would be visibly set apart from many other people by being "marked off" for a special reason. They didn't see it happen, but they know about it because the parents tell them about it. And they will inquire about it! Children are designed to be curious and discover.

Fourthly, and following from the previous, as the sign of baptism is placed on other children in the congregation, this provides a reference point for children. They now see what the parents have been telling them about this "mark" that is so special and significant. They see other children receiving it. They become more curious and interested. They are instructed in the meaning of it as they see other baptisms. They see water, hear about water, hear the name of God, see parents in relation to their child, hear prayer, etc. "What does all this mean?" they should come to ask in time. So, they have an additional help in witnessing what God has done, is doing, and promises to do in the future-both for them and others. It could be pictured something like this:

Once there was a King. He was a gracious and loving King. In fact, He was so gracious and loving that He promised a certain boy that he would have a prominent place in His kingdom. To show this, the King gave this boy an envelope when he was newly born. The envelope was sealed with the King's signet, so that as the boy grew up, he would know that it was genuine and not a counterfeit.

But the envelope was placed into the care of his parents. This way it would be kept safe until the boy grew older. But in the meantime, the King expressly told the parents to tell the boy about it, because the King had great plans for this boy, and this way he would respond as would please the King.

So as the boy grew older, and as his parents told him about the King's envelope, the boy became very curious about what was inside. He generally knew that it was about something great, and that the King's offer was for him (even the boy's name was on the envelope together with the King's signet seal).

Since his parents had spoken of the envelope often, he asked His parents if he could open the letter and find out more about the King's promise for himself. So, in due time, they helped him open the letter. And when he opened the letter, he found so many, many privileges he would have with the King's Son - he would have friendship with Him, talk with Him, receive help from Him, serve with Him, travel with Him, be protected by Him, even rule with Him.

In short, everything he did would be with the King's Son. So, believing the King's promise, the boy went to the King to meet His Son with deep gratitude.

And so it should be for every baptized child of believing parents. Under the instruction of his parents and the work of God's Spirit, he will be led to uncover the significance of His baptism (the gospel) and trust in Christ for salvation. He is literally "impressed" with the authenticity of God's promise of salvation by the water of baptism and the Spirit led instruction of his parents since his youth (Psalm 71:5-6, 17-18; 2 Timothy 3:14-15 with 1:5).

And so, it is our practice in the Reformed Presbyterian Church to treat God's sacrament of baptism with respect. It is not ours with which to tamper. It is His to use for His purpose. Thus, we baptize our children and do not "dedicate" them.