

An Analysis of

Infant Dedication
and **Believer Baptism**

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Infant Dedication vs. Baptism

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Caring for Children

Parents want the best for their children—be it school, sports, clothing, or education. They want to provide optimal opportunities and resources for them. It should be no different when it comes to spiritual care and instruction. However, many parents are uncertain regarding the issue of baptizing their child or presenting their child in a dedication ceremony.

This booklet's purpose is to explore the biblical practice of baptism and the meaning of consecrating¹ children to the Lord, as well as promote a sense of responsibility on the part of the parents in instructing and modeling a biblical, Christian lifestyle. Any religious ceremony performed for the child will have little influence on that child unless the parents live a consistent Christian life each day.

A Godly Heritage

In fact, Scripture emphasizes training and teaching children in the ways of the Lord, but says little about ceremonies involving children. The Jewish Shema, or Greatest Commandment, found in Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength," and is followed by this statement: "These commandments that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6,7). Tragically, many parents place great value on infant baptism or dedication, but they neglect training and exemplifying a Christian life for their children.

¹ The terms "consecrate" or "dedicate" will be used interchangeably throughout this booklet.

A biblical example of a child who came to faith due to his godly upbringing is found in the life of the Apostle Paul's young protégé, Timothy. Paul wrote to him, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded now lives in you (2 Timothy 1:5-6). He later commanded him, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you have learned it, and how from infancy, you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Parents need to teach and train their children early on in the truths of Christ contained in Scripture, and model an active faith, as did Timothy's grandmother and mother. As Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Let's now examine the roots of dedicating one's child to the Lord.

Jewish Consecration of Children

From the very beginning of God's relationship with His people, He established a way of designating children for Him and His purpose. Through Abram (Abraham), God commanded his people to set their children apart—that is, consecrate them—from the surrounding pagan nations through the act of circumcision. Genesis 17:9-14 states that every male was to have the foreskin of his genitals removed on the eighth day. This physical mark signified dedication of the child unto the Lord. Moses continued this covenant between God and Israel in Leviticus 12:3.

Throughout the Old Testament the firstborn male was considered a blessing from the Lord (see Psalm 127:3-5), and he was to be given to the Lord. The Lord

commanded Moses to have all the firstborn males of Israel consecrated to him as his possession (Exodus 13:2; 34:19). An example of this is Samuel, the Prophet and first Judge of Israel. His mother, Hannah, had prayed earnestly for a son, and she vowed, "I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life." Therefore, after she had weaned Samuel, she took him to the Temple and presented him to the Lord with a sacrifice and worship. From then on, Samuel lived and served in the temple with the priest Eli (1 Samuel 1:1-2:16).

The infant Jesus was also circumcised on the eighth day and given his name (Luke 2:21). Then, after Mary's thirty-three days of ritual purification (cf. Leviticus 12:3,4), she and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple "to present him to the Lord as the firstborn male" (Luke 2:23). She offered two doves or pigeons as an offering to atone for her flow of blood and sin according to the Law (Leviticus 12:6,8; Luke. 2:24).

Therefore, the acts of circumcision on the eighth day of the child's life and the consecration of the firstborn male on the fortieth day of his life were the means of devoting one's child to the Lord during biblical times.

Consecration by Circumcision

Circumcision's importance as a covenant marker became less throughout the New Testament as more and more non-circumcised Gentiles embraced faith in Christ. Some felt it was necessary to be circumcised and abide by the law of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:5). However, the first Church council held in Jerusalem clearly opposed mandatory circumcision: "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul [the Apostle]

and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them” (Acts 15:1-2). The agreement was that “it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are” (Acts 15:11), and not by circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. Therefore, they issued a letter to the Gentile believers that circumcision was not necessary to be saved.

So prevalent was this debate between Jewish and Gentile believers, that one entire book of the New Testament deals specifically with this issue – the book of Galatians. Circumcision became less vital in consecrating one’s child to the Lord, and as we shall later examine, more emphasis was placed on an internal change rather than an external sign. Therefore, early Christians would consecrate both their male and female children through a dedication service or by water baptism. Let’s look at what the Scriptures teach on baptism.

Jewish-Christian Baptism

Some have questioned whether baptism was a distinctly Christian practice devoid of any Jewish precedence, since no mention of it is found in the Old Testament. However, ritual baths and water cleansings were common in the Old Testament. For instance, Moses and all the Israelites were required to wash their clothes prior to the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:10). The priests were required to wash before ministering in the Tabernacle (Leviticus 8 and 16), and stipulations for the cleansing of those with skin diseases and body fluid emissions are detailed in Leviticus chapters 14 -15. King Solomon had elaborate baths built in the temple for the priesthood (1 Kings 7:23-50), and even around the time of Christ the religious community of the Essenes, located in Qumran near the Dead Sea, had baths. Furthermore, “proselytes [converts] entering Judaism were expected

to strip themselves of their former clothing submit to circumcision, and bathe themselves completely, after which they were reckoned members of the Jewish community.”²

Baptism in the Christian sense, however, came to the forefront when John the Baptist began to gather people around him at the Jordan River “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). He taught righteousness and humility in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah, the Christ. In fact, he felt unworthy to baptize Jesus, who insisted that John baptize him “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew. 3:15).

Likewise, Jesus early on in his ministry had his disciples baptize those who followed him, though he himself never baptized anyone (John 4:2). Prior to his ascension into heaven, Jesus commanded his disciples: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Ten days after Jesus Christ gave this commandment, the Apostle Peter had the privilege of overseeing the baptism of over 3,000 people on Pentecost (Acts 2:41). His message was clear: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38). Similarly, Philip carried out Christ’s command with believers in Samaria: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized...Simon himself believed

²Henry, Carl F. H., ed., Basic Christian Doctrines, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 256.

and was baptized” (Acts 8:12,13). He did the same with an Ethiopian believer: “As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?’ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:36,38).

When Saul (Paul) of Tarsus was converted on the road to Damascus, he was immediately baptized after his blindness had been removed (Acts 9:18). During his ministry he commanded baptism for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. For instance, in the city of Philippi, he and Silas shared the message of Christ to Lydia and her family and they were baptized (Acts 16:14,15). Later, they baptized the jailer and the members of his family who believed after “they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house” (Acts 16:32,33). In these instances, belief and repentance preceded baptism, as with “many of the Corinthians who heard him and believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

In these New Testament examples, people heard the message of forgiveness and salvation in Christ; they put their faith in him, and were baptized. The Roman Catholic theologian, Richard McBrien writes, “Thus the normal sequence: proclamation of the Gospel, conversion in faith, water bath, and post baptismal teaching, fellowship in the Spirit, breaking of the bread, and prayers.”³ Therefore, once a person has heard, believed, repented and been baptized, what significance does baptism have?

³ McBrien, Richard, “The Sacraments,” in Catholicism. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 809.

A Biblical Theology of Baptism

The New Testament speaks clearly of the meaning of baptism. When the Apostle Paul recounts his conversion and baptism experience to the crowd in Jerusalem, he says he was told, “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his [Jesus’] name” (Acts 22:16). The word here for “wash away” in Greek is *apolusai*. It is used only twice in the New Testament—once in Acts and also in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul tells the believers in Corinth that the “wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9). He follows this statement with a list of heinous offenses and then writes, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed (*apolousai*), you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). It is not the baptismal ritual of going under water that washes one clean; rather, it is Jesus Christ who washes believers clean by His Spirit.

The Apostle Peter takes imagery from the Old Testament and applies it to the significance of baptism. He writes, “In the days of Noah...only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body, but the response of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:20-21). Peter draws a parallel between the floodwaters that covered and destroyed the wickedness of the world and the waters that cover a believer in baptism, symbolically washing away the sin. Peter also proclaimed after a crippled man was healed at the Temple in Jerusalem: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19). Hence, it is repentance—the

turning away from sin—that causes sin to be wiped out, not the waters of baptism.

Paul uses two analogies to describe the significance of baptism in the life of the believer: (1) death and resurrection, and (2) circumcision. He tells the church in Rome, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ Jesus was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:3,4). The verb form “to baptize” in the New Testament is *baptizo*, which literally means to “dip, immerse, submerge.”⁴ Paul draws upon the image that when the

⁴ To “baptize” is to go completely under water. Matthew 3:16 says, “As soon as Jesus was baptized, *he went up out of the water.*” The phrase “he went up out of the water” could not be misconstrued to mean he simply left the river. Rather, he had been completely submerged. Likewise, when Philip baptized the Ethiopian “they came to some water...Then both Philip and the Eunuch went *down into the water* and Philip baptized him.” (Acts 8:36,38). The end of this baptism ceremony is described much like that of Jesus’: “When *they came up out of the water*” (Acts 8:39). Furthermore, John the Baptist could baptize at Aenon near Salim “because there was plenty of water” (John 3:23). Some have questioned how it was possible then, to completely submerge an individual or a group of people at a person’s house, as is mentioned in the New Testament. This would have been possible because houses in that part of the world and era were built with courtyards containing cisterns of water (cf. 2 Samuel 11:2; 17:18,19, and Wight, Fred H., “Houses of More Than One Room” in Manners and Customs of Bible Lands [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], pp. 37-38). “Baptism was celebrated normally by immersion or pouring. (Actually, these were the normal ways of administering baptism at least until the ninth century. Baptizing by dabbing water on the head had been practiced long before that, but usually only in extreme conditions of

believer goes under the water and then emerges, it is a picture of death and resurrection. When Jesus refers to his death in Luke 12:50, he says, “But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed.”

The second analogy of baptism to circumcision is found in Paul’s letter to the Christians at Colosse: “In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:11,12). Essentially, baptism identifies the believer who has faith in Christ just as circumcision did the Jews who were in covenant relationship with God. However, baptism apart from faith is useless, for it is through our faith in Him that we are raised with Him. As Paul explains in Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Therefore, baptism is a symbolic way to convey the cleansing of sin, our death and resurrection, and the circumcision of our hearts in Jesus Christ. With this understanding, should children be baptized if they are unable to comprehend the message of salvation, repent of their sins and confess Jesus Christ as their

poor health, deathbed baptisms, or scarcity of water. It was in the colder areas of western Europe, in the ninth century, that this alternate form of baptism became more common. In Italy baptism by immersion was continued until the thirteenth century, and the Eastern Churches...still baptize by immersion” (González, Justo L., “Constantine” in The Story of Christianity Vol. I [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1983], p. 128).

Lord and Savior? There are no examples in Scripture where infants are baptized. In fact, “It cannot be established conclusively when the early church began to baptize children.”⁵ What then, contributes to the practice of baptizing infants?

Infant / Child Baptism

Many churches have taught that all of humanity has inherited and is tainted by “Original Sin”—that is, the Sin of Adam and Eve. This idea was developed primarily from the writings of theologian St. Augustine of Hippo, who lived in the middle of the 5th Century. He “portrayed Original Sin (a term he coined) as a situation in which the whole human race finds itself, but from which only some individuals are rescued by an utterly gratuitous act of God’s mercy. Although God desires the salvation of all in Christ, only those who are justified by faith and baptism are actually saved.”⁶ Earlier theologians had influenced Augustine, particularly Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 250) who “was the first to argue that infants are baptized because of the ‘contagion of death’ inherited from Adam.” Consequently, many have erroneously taught that without baptism, the child remains contaminated and damned to eternal hell.

However, the Bible makes it clear that it is not baptism, but belief in Christ and repentance of sins that saves an individual.⁷ Mark 16:16 states, “Whoever believes

⁵ Myers, Allen C., ed., “Baptism,” in The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 124.

⁶ McBrien, p. 187.

⁷ A faulty interpretation of Jesus’ statement in John 3:5 has led some to assert baptism’s necessity for salvation: “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit.’” The assumption that “born of water” means baptism is clearly not

and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”⁸ Note that the latter part of the verse does not say, “whoever does not believe and is not baptized will be condemned.” Again, belief is the determining factor, not baptism. Also, Jesus promised the thief hanging on the cross next to him eternal life though he could not be baptized (Luke 23:43). Consequently, salvation clearly pivots on belief, not baptism.

Furthermore, the view that a child would be found guilty before God contradicts what is in Scripture. It was common Jewish practice for parents to bring their children to a rabbi to be blessed. The Gospel writers tell how during the ministry of Jesus the people brought their children to Him, the rabbi, and he blessed them. Even when his disciples tried to prevent the parents from bringing their children to Him, He rebuked them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). The word ‘such’ “may refer

intended within the context of John 3. Jesus indicates what he means by “born of water and the Spirit” in the next verse, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:6). “Born of water” is synonymous with being born of the flesh, that is, natural birth. Furthermore, Jesus is emphasizing the fact that all people must believe and be born of God’s Spirit in order to be saved, “whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life... whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already” (John 3:16,18).

⁸ The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.

either specifically to children or to those resembling children in their childlike qualities.”⁹

Therefore, in the eyes of God, children and those with faith like children are blessed. However, until what point are children not considered accountable for their actions before God? When is a child expected to come to the point of recognizing his/her need to believe in Jesus, repent of sin, and be baptized? Perhaps the Jewish custom of the Bar / Bat Mitzvah may help us understand.

The Age of Accountability

Rabbis have traditionally considered a child accountable before God near the age of puberty (12 for girls, 13 for boys). This celebration of “rite of passage” is known as the Bar Mitzvah (“son of the commandment”) and Bat Mitzvah (“daughter of the commandment”). Though this practice is not commanded in Scripture, its practice is found in Judaism, and can be seen in the life of Jesus Christ. Luke writes that when Jesus “was twelve years old, they went up for the Festival as custom required. But after the Festival was over, when his parents returned, Jesus remained in Jerusalem...he was sitting in the temple court among the rabbis, not only listening to them but questioning what they said” (Luke 2:42,46).

It is interesting that Luke chose to write about this particular festival. Jesus and all the males of his family would have gone annually to Jerusalem for the three official festivals that they were required to attend by law (Exodus 23:14-17). However, when Jesus was twelve, he stayed in Jerusalem to dialogue with the rabbis. It

⁹ Harris, Ralph W., ed. The New Testament Study Bible: Mark, (Springfield, MO: The Complete Biblical Library, 1986), vol. 3, p. 273.

was precisely at this age that he became a son of the commandment (Bar Mitzvah) and could legitimately discuss issues pertaining to the law with the religious leaders. Therefore, we see that children are able to decide for themselves whether or not they want to follow the Lord and become His disciple through obedience and baptism.

Conclusion

In light of the biblical evidence, baptism is reserved for those individuals who are aware of their sin and need of salvation, and want to make a public confession of their faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. Very young children, therefore, can be dedicated by the parents to the Lord for His service. This can be done similar to the presentation of the infant Jesus by Mary and Joseph. The dedication ceremony recognizes the child as a gift of God and the parents' responsibility to rightly raise him/her. And as with any ceremony, we must live out its meaning. The Apostle Paul says, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Galatians 5:15).