

Special Paper

Behold, Children are a Gift of the Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

I'll never forget the day my first son Ron was born. Nor will I ever forget the moment my wife, Anne-Marie, handed that bundle of life to me to hold. I was thrilled that mother and son were physically well. I was humbled by the miracle of birth. I was confused and ill-instructed on the proper handling of a newborn child. I ended up holding him like your average football player would hold the ball as he ran around the left end on his way to a touchdown. I had the back of his head in the palm of my hand with his face looking up at me. His little body was lying up my forearm and his legs were straddled around my elbow. In spite of my confusion, my heart was filled with thankfulness to the Lord for entrusting us with this wonderful gift of life.

After we arrived home with our son and life settled down to the routine of midnight feedings and being awakened several times each night to the strange noises coming from his crib, our minds moved from the physical need of our child to his spiritual needs. We found ourselves desiring to take him to church and do something "religious" that would express publicly our deep gratitude to the Lord for our son. We weren't sure if he was to be baptized, confirmed, or dedicated, but we did know the Bible said that parents were to do "something" to show public joy and thankfulness to the Lord.

It has been almost twenty-five years since the day Ron was born. During those years I can't tell you how many parents I've met who have felt the same way about their newborn child and especially about their desire (and yet confusion) concerning the proper way to present their child and themselves publicly to the Lord.

This paper is an attempt to help clear up some of the confusion in light of the reality that so many of you come from so many different religious backgrounds.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Men and women in every generation since the creation of Adam and Eve, who have had a personal relationship with the Lord, knew and appreciated the truth so well expressed in Psalm 127:3-5 and Proverbs 17:6:

**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...
Grandchildren are the crown of old men....**

These same men and women knew that not only did God gift parents with children, but they also knew that he was the one who held the woman's womb closed for a variety of reasons. When a couple found that the Lord had closed the womb of the wife, the scriptures reveal that the husband, as well as the wife, would go before him in prayer and ask for the gift of life.

Isaac prayed that his barren wife, Rebekah, might have her womb open and have the blessing of children. God answered his prayer and they rejoiced over the birth of twins (Genesis 25). The barren wife of Manoah rejoiced over the news from an angel that she would give birth to a son named Samson (Judges 13). The barren wife of Elkanah, named Hannah, prayed for years to have a son. The Lord heard her prayer and she gave birth to the future prophet and judge, Samuel, and broke out in a song of praise and joy to the Lord (1 Samuel 1-2). Then there is the story of the faithful priest, Zacharias, who prayed for his

barren wife, Elizabeth. In due season they were blessed with a son who came to be known as John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. Elizabeth's words of joy are recorded for us in Luke 1:

"This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.... Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her."

The writer of the Psalms added even more insight:

**"Who is like the Lord our God,
Who is enthroned on high,
Who humbles Himself to behold
the things that are in heaven and in the earth?...
He makes the barren woman abide in the house
as a joyful mother of children.
Praise the Lord.**

The word teaches us that God opens wombs and closes wombs. It also teaches us that prayer plays an important part in the lives of barren couples. Some godly men and women have suggested that perhaps one of the reasons so many Christian couples cannot have natural children today is because our Lord desires that they prepare their hearts and homes to reach out and adopt many from the abandoned generation regardless of their color, physical condition, or race, in order to show that child, as well as the hurting and confused world around them, the wonderful love of Christ.

WHAT DID THE MOSAIC LAW REQUIRE PARENTS TO DO WITH THEIR NEWBORN?

If you turn to the writings of Moses, as recorded in Exodus 13, we find:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Sanctify to Me every first-born, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel,... and it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying 'What is this?', then you shall say to him: 'With a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. And it came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go that the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn man and the firstborn beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord the males, the first offspring of every womb but every first born of my sons I redeem'" (1,2, 14, 15).

It is of some interest to note that some two thousand years after the Law of Purification was written, Luke informs us that forty days after our Lord's birth, Mary and Joseph were preparing to go up to Jerusalem:

".... when the days for their purification according to the Law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord "EVERY FIRSTBORN MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord...." (Luke 2:22-24).

WHERE DID THE CHURCH GET THE IDEA OF DEDICATING A CHILD TO THE LORD?

First, let's define the word "dedication." The word in the Hebrew text means "to be holy, to set apart, to consecrate." In the Greek text, it means to set apart, to make new." The context would finish the thought. In the scriptures, we find places as well as persons being set aside for God.

Let's go back again to the Old Testament story of Elkanah and Hannah, for it is in that story that we discover a personal account of a mother dedicating her son to the Lord. In 1 Samuel 1-2 we are told the story of Elkanah, a man who had two wives: one named Peninnah who had children, and one named

Hannah who was barren. Hannah realized that children were a gift from the Lord, so she went up to the house of the Lord year after year and asked the Lord to take away her reproach.

Then one day the Lord answered her prayers and she conceived and bore a son which she named Samuel, "...because I have asked him of the Lord ... for this boy I prayed, and the Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have DEDICATED HIM TO THE LORD, AS LONG AS HE LIVES HE IS DEDICATED TO THE LORD" (1 Samuel 1).

Hannah nursed Samuel and then she weaned him and took him up with her to the house of the Lord along with the items for special vows offering and presented him to the high priest to be trained to serve the Lord all his life.

After that event Hannah was blessed of the Lord again and gave birth to three more sons and two daughters who lived with Hannah and Elkanah until they married.

Another example in which a first-born son is set aside for the Lord is recorded for us in Judges 13. In this story the angel of the Lord appears to the barren wife of Manoah and tells her that she will give birth to a son. But in this case the mother and father have nothing to say about the future of their son for the angel of the Lord said:

Behold now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son ... and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines." (13:3-5).

There is the case of a first-born being set aside for the Lord's service as recorded in Luke 1. It's the story of a senior couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth:

They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. and they had no children because Elizabeth was barren...." (1:6-7)

Then in the course of Zacharias' priestly duties at the temple in Jerusalem, an angel appeared to him and said:

"...your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name JOHN and you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord and he will drink no wine or liquor: and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. And will turn back many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah...." (1:13-17)

So we can get insight as to where the Christian church got the idea of dedicating their children unto the Lord. And yet there is really no law that instructed the early church to dedicate their children to the Lord for his service in the sense that they leave him at the temple to serve God as a prophet or priest.

WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACH PARENTS TO DO WITH THEIR NEWBORN CHILDREN?

Some church denominations believe that infants should be baptized, while others hold that the parents of the newborn should dedicate them to the Lord. Still others believe that the church should dedicate the parents to the Lord asking him to provide them with the love and wisdom and patience necessary to raise a child in such a way that when he comes to the age of reasoning he will personally ask Jesus to become his Lord and Savior.

Let's take a brief look at these three views:

1. Infant baptism

From all we can find from secular and church history, it appears that infant baptism arose around 200 A.D. The practice is based largely upon man's tradition rather than a biblical text.

Those who believe in infant baptism usually come at the idea from one of two different theological schools. There is the "sacramentarian view" and the "covenant view."

The sacramentarian view holds that salvation is a drama that is played out in the process of time. The word sacrament comes from the Latin which means token, pledge, or downpayment. Therefore, infant baptism is viewed as the gracious action of God in which, when the water is placed on the child, the Spirit as the Lord and Giver of life is believed to regenerate the child and to make him a living member of Christ, the family of God.

This is sacramental because it is seen in faith and not empirically, and it is believed to begin a process of growth in grace which carries the new creature into his eternal destiny. The Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Churches, as well as most Lutheran churches, many in the Church of England, and the Protestant Episcopal church hold that baptism is the direct instrument of regeneration. Roman Catholics subscribe so strongly to this view that accordingly all persons, adults as well as infants, who die unbaptized are excluded from heaven.

The covenant view holds that God has made certain covenants with his people and all the covenant promises apply to the parents as well as the children. They view baptism as "washing with water" in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and signifying and sealing the benefits of the New Covenant.

The argument in support of infant baptism is based upon the essential unity and continuity of the covenant of grace administered to Abraham, unfolded in the Mosaic and Davidic covenants and attaining to its richest fruition in the New Covenant. The New Covenant is the administration of grace that brings to fulfillment the promises given to Abraham, "...in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed..." (Genesis 22:18). Abraham is the father of all believers and they are his seed and heirs according to the promise (Romans 4:16-18 and Galatians 3:7-9). The covenant made with Abraham includes the infant seed and was signified and sealed by the rite of circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14).

John Calvin and other church fathers found a relationship between the Old Testament sign of circumcision and the New Testament rite of water baptism. They understood that infants are incapable of repentance and faith. Yet circumcision is a sign of repentance and a seal of the righteousness of faith and by the command of God is given to infants. The seed of repentance and faith lies in the infants by the secret working of the Spirit and they are baptized into future repentance and faith. When they grow into the age of reason all these promises will be fulfilled as they place their personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The problem with the sacramentarian view is that there isn't any scriptural support for it, but rather it is based on the traditions of men.

The problem with the covenant view is that the Jews did not partake of their covenants on the grounds of circumcision; they were born into covenant relationship with God. Therefore, it is not demonstrated that children by baptism become the children of the covenant. To be consistent, those who would insist that infants should be baptized based upon the Abrahamic covenant should then only baptize the males, for females were never asked to be circumcised.

The basic problem with both of the above views on infant baptism is that they set aside the clear biblical requirement that God demands for a person to enjoy the full benefits of

"For by grace you have been saved through; and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God; not as a result of works that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

"....if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved...." (Romans 10:9).

The clear biblical requirement for salvation is that a fully conscious individual is willing to place their personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Based on that faith, that individual is saved forever from the wrath of God and placed immediately into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

It may be important at this point to get a clear view of baptism before we move on. The scriptures speak of a spiritual baptism and a water baptism.

Spiritual baptism is best described in Romans 6:3-54 when Paul wrote:

"Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (See also 1 Cor. 12:13)

When Paul used the word baptize he was thinking of the word to dip or to immerse, to place into. So according to this verse when a person places their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior they are spiritually placed into (baptized) the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, and thus are united to Christ and all other believers.

Once a person becomes a follower of Jesus Christ by placing his faith in Jesus as his Lord and Savior, he is then encouraged to move towards a time when he is willing to be publicly baptized in water.

The resurrected Lord not only told his disciples that "...before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4), but he also told them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matt. 28:19).

Some Christians believe that a new Christian should be fully immersed in a pool of water in order to symbolize it as an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. By this outward physical sign of water baptism the believer portrays in shadow form Christ's death, burial and resurrection and their purpose in atoning for sin in delivering sinners from its presence and power. The believer also professes the death of his old life of self-centeredness and the realization that with the new power of the resurrected Christ within him, he is able for the first time to follow Christ as he rises to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:5, Colossians 2:12).

Some Christians believe that a new Christian should be sprinkled with water to symbolize the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and of the cleansing of the life that occurs when one is baptized by the Spirit into the spiritual body of Christ (Acts 2, 1 Cor. 12:13).

2. Dedication of Children

Christian parents now living in the Age of the Spirit (the Age of the Spirit began at the Day of Pentecost and will last until the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory) are no longer under the Law of Moses, but are now part of the body of Christ. In that light as Christians we are encouraged to love our children and to raise them to love the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are also to understand their value in the sight of God. For Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 18:10, 14:

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven...it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish."

As Christian parents we should bring our children to the Lord in a spirit of humility and thankfulness and ask him to continually guard them until they have an opportunity to personally and intelligently understand the love that the Father has for them and the gift of eternal life that can be theirs when they place their personal faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

3. Dedication of the parents

There is rarely a couple that has been given the gift of a child that does not find their hearts filled with mixed emotions. On the one hand, there is the wonderful feeling of joy and thanksgiving to the Lord for his blessing. On the other hand, there is the fear of responsibility combined with an equal sense of inadequacy.

It is these mixed feelings of joy and inadequacy that should bring us as parents to the feet of our wonderful heavenly Father in prayer. We should then ask him to provide all the wisdom, strength, courage, patience and love necessary to raise our children in such a way that we bring honor and glory to his name and provide an opportunity for them to also hear the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

As parents we also should realize that we are part of a spiritual body, a family of brothers and sisters to whom we can turn and ask for prayer and words of encouragement.

So we should gather our family and friends together and have a dedication service not only for the children, but also for the parents. At that time we need to rejoice at the blessing of being parents and the joy of having children. In the midst of our celebration we pray that the Lord will enable the parents to dedicate themselves to the Lord and that he would enable them to raise their children in such a way that in the future they would become part of God's family through faith in Christ. In that way, they become part of God's wonderful plan of redemption in the next generation.

Many of you have seen dedication services occur in a church worship service. In reality, you are free to consider making the dedication of the parents of the newborn child a special time in your home or at a park. This can be a time of singing praise songs to our Lord, followed by a few words from the scriptures, and then a wonderful time of prayer for the new parents and child. These dedication services do not require approval or attendance by any official elder or pastor from the church, but you can feel free to invite them as part of your family so they may from time to time enter into your joy.

"...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Since Ron was born some twenty-five years ago the Lord allowed us to experience the joy of another son some twenty years ago named Rodd. As each child arrived into our lives, we saw the need to gather our spiritual family around us and have a prayer of dedication, not only for our children, but for ourselves as well. The Lord has answered our prayers, and because of his grace toward us, the prayers and support of our extended spiritual family--the love and encouragement of their godly mother and the thankfulness of their father--our sons have each in their own time and in their own way placed their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and are seeking to find ways to serve

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Second message
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