

Dedication ?

We have been invited to the 'dedication' of the baby son of Christian parents whom we know very well. No doubt we shall go, but I have some severe misgivings.

Let's get the obvious problems out of the way first. The tradition of 'baptising' infants has been long established in several Christian groups, with varying levels of significance attached to it but all with the belief that this practice of sprinkling babies with water and (often) extracting promises from parents and 'godparents' has some beneficial effect on the spiritual life of the child.

The fact that the New Testament is very clear about the baptism by immersion of **believers**, and believers only, seems to have passed many people by in their attachment to what has often become a sentimental rite of passage for young Christian (and even non-Christian) parents. Forty years ago, when we did not have our children 'done' in any way, eyebrows were raised – and they are still raised today. It takes very firm convictions to resist even the most subtle peer pressure from well-meaning fellow Christians, let alone family!

So, we are assured that this is not going to be a 'baptism' in any shape or form, simply a time of the parents stating their intention to raise their son in the Christian faith and an opportunity for believing friends to join with them in prayer, support and ongoing commitment.

It may not happen in this case (we shall have to wait and see!), but two examples from Scripture are often quoted: Hannah with the baby Samuel and Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus. What possible objections could we have to a similar 'dedication'? If it was good enough for Samuel and our Lord, surely it is good enough for us today?

Let's look at those two examples. First, Hannah and her husband Elkanah in **1 Samuel 1**. After Samuel was born, there is no record of his 'circumcision on the eighth day' as prescribed in **Leviticus 12:3**, but I think we can be sure that his godly parents will have followed the Law in this respect and also in respect of the offerings for purification after 33 days, although Hannah states her clear intention **not** to bring the boy to the presence of the LORD until he is old enough to be left there in Shiloh on a permanent basis.

Quite a commitment, especially after her long and agonising wait for this son to be born, but Elkanah is loving and understanding. He also makes it clear that he wants to see the LORD confirm his word (**v.23**). What word? It can only be the word that Eli gave Hannah in **v.17**, in answer to her prayer and vow to give Samuel to the LORD 'all the days of his life' (**v.11**). The effect of the 'word' was to confirm the LORD's acceptance of the vow. No wonder Samuel's father wanted clear confirmation of it!

How much choice did the young Samuel have in all this? Little or none, it seems, and yet the LORD's word was confirmed. Not a word of disagreement or questioning of his mother's 'lending' him to the LORD. On the contrary, 'he worshipped the LORD there'. (**V.28**) Any fears that Elkanah might have had would be put to rest as he saw his young son readily fitting in to the place prepared by the LORD for him.

And, as our reading of Samuel's life reveals, he really did serve the LORD for the whole of his life. A man of God's choosing, but it needed the agony of childlessness, persistent prayer, a word from the LORD, the testing of that word, the obedience of the parents and the willing response of the young boy for it all to be worked out in practice. Samuel's influence on the history of the people of God was immense.

His 'dedication' (= 'lending') to the LORD was not accompanied by the usual 'purification' offering prescribed in **Leviticus 12**. That would have been a lamb and a young pigeon or

turtledove or, for those with few resources, two young pigeons or turtledoves. This dedication was much more significant: a 3-year-old bull (some translations say 3 bullocks!), an ephah of flour (about 40 litres in volume) and a skin of wine.

This was not your run-of-the-mill Jewish dedication of a son! Somehow, the significance of Samuel being lent to the LORD for his whole life was being played out in the level of sacrifice being offered at the same time. Elkanah and Hannah had truly been led to make this dedication. The LORD confirmed his word!

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Joseph and Mary did not have the resources to splash out on even the 'normal' level of offering when they brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem at nearly 5 weeks old (**Luke 2:21-40**). They had followed the requirements of circumcision and naming on the eighth day of his life and now brought him with his mother for the purification procedure, with 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons', one as a burnt offering and one as a sin offering, fulfilling the minimum requirements of the Jewish Law in **Leviticus 12**.

That was all there was to it. 'Their' son had been born, so they obeyed the requirements of the Law, nothing more and nothing less. Both Simeon and Anna saw him there in the temple and the Holy Spirit gave them words of prophecy and early recognition of the Messiah. These were very specific to the child Jesus, and to Mary herself, but applied to a time about 33 years ahead. Mary 'treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart' (**v.19 & 51**) and no doubt passed them on to Luke when he was doing the research for his account of Jesus' life (**Luke 1:1-4**).

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Perhaps another example of dedication is that of Samson in **Judges 13**. Born following a prophecy, and with a very specific role in delivering Israel from the Philistines, but the 'dedication' was actually an offering to the LORD at the time of the announcement of his coming birth. Nothing mentioned when the boy is born, other than that he grew and the LORD blessed him.

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So, as far as I can see, these are the examples of 'dedications' in the Bible that give a tenuous basis for modern-day 'dedication' of the children of Christian parents.

Please don't misunderstand me. There is absolutely every reason to pray for our children, to show them the reality of new life in Jesus, to encourage them to the point of faith in him and the commitment of their whole lives in his service.

We can share with our believing brothers and sisters in their desire to see their children born again and growing in Christ, by praying, by example and perhaps even as a caring 'aunt' or 'uncle' to get alongside these young people to help them when it may be difficult for them to talk to their parents. Many of us have first-hand experience of the value of such friendship to a young person from a caring Christian adult.

But none of this requires any form of ceremony to enable it. In fact, wrapping up real care in ceremony usually has the effect of formalising it out of reality and into a very dead formula, killing the potential of meaningful and precious relationships by giving them meaningless titles as 'godparents' (or some nonconformist equivalent). Extracting promises from people who often have little opportunity (or intention?) of fulfilling them.

Yes, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we passionately want all our offspring to share in that same faith, so perhaps we are over-keen to try any opportunity to hopefully make sure it

happens for them as it has done for us. Is that why we suspend our uncertainties about infant 'baptism' or 'dedication' and 'throw the kitchen sink at it' in the hope that something, somehow will have some effect?

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I have two main misgivings about the whole 'dedication' thing:–

1) That it gives the appearance of having some intrinsic effect on the life of the child. I well remember the shock I felt when I first heard the words spoken in an Anglican ceremony of 'infant baptism' just after the child had been sprinkled with water. "Seeing now that this child is regenerate . . ."

I was a teenager and had only been a believer for a few short years, but even I knew that this was sheer stupidity and deception. Both my gradually increasing Bible knowledge and my own experience underlined the fact that no ceremony could produce the new life which had started growing in me when I had responded to the good news of forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ.

OK, hopefully no-one who is 'dedicating' their child has this expectation, that some sort of 'spiritual magic' will take place which will ensure (or at least make a lot more likely) that he or she will grow up to follow Jesus.

But I suspect that, deep down, there is a superstitious element for many people, which gives them the feeling that having your children 'done' (in this or some other religious way) will give them a better standing with God. These people may not be the parents, the family, the friends or even the congregation, but surely we owe it to them not to give even the slightest hint of confusion here?

We may tell them "No ceremony brings new life; that only comes through faith in Jesus." And then they see us enacting this ceremony and ask the obvious question: "What is this for, then?" We may be able to explain it to our own satisfaction, but the perception remains with them that there is some sort of magic going on.

By contrast, the baptismal immersion of believers speaks loudly of the believer themselves wishing to 'act out' the reality of the death of their old life and their resurrection into new life in Christ. 'Burial' in water, followed by joyful emergence and usually backed up by personal testimony, speak graphically and movingly of the change that has already taken place. Not much room for misunderstanding here!

2) My second, and equally serious, misgiving has to do with the appropriateness of following the examples of Elkanah and Hannah or Joseph and Mary. They followed the prescription of the Jewish Law as given to Moses and we can see that especially clearly with Joseph and Mary in **Luke 2**. If we want to copy their example, why do we not also insist on the circumcision of male babies at seven days old? Why don't we try to bring a burnt offering and a sin offering to the Lord?

The answer is obvious: we are not under the Jewish Law as they were. In fact, even though **we** are not under the Law, the Lord Jesus himself was! Do we realise this? In the same way as he said to John the Baptist (**Matthew 3:15**) that "it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" and so submitted himself to John's baptism, so he also submitted to all the requirements of the Jewish Law – and fulfilled them completely – including the offerings to be made for a newborn child.

But we are set free from all those requirements. Paul says it is as if we had been slaves in the market place, never free but sold from one tyrannical master to another, but then we have

been 'bought out of the market place' (the real meaning of the word 'redeemed'), away from the tyranny of law, and have not just been set free but also been made sons and heirs of God.

And how has God done that? “. . . we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, **God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under law**, so that he might redeem those who were under law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.” (**Galatians 4:3-7**).

'Adoption' is a terrible translation of the Greek word *huiothesia* which was used for the coming of age of the son and heir, when his father made him a partner in the family business and joint head of the household. So we are not slaves any more, but sons. And not just sons, but heirs together with Jesus!

Jesus was under the Jewish Law. We are not, simply because he has bought us out.

It was wholly appropriate for the baby Jesus to be dedicated at the temple, because he needed to fulfil the whole Law in every detail. By that fulfilment, we have been released from the requirements of law – not just the Jewish Law but all religious and legalistic requirements – and can live in the freedom that results!

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So, what is the point of a modern-day infant 'dedication'? What does it achieve, except possibly giving a confused message to those who observe it? What can the various parents, family members, friends and congregation do at such an event that they cannot do more meaningfully in their ongoing relationship with the child and the parents? Is it just a sop to a tradition of 'infant baptism' and supposed 'spiritual magic' or sacramentalism?

Is there any benefit to anyone? None that I can see.

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Since I wrote thus far, we have been to the 'dedication'. The examples of Hannah and Mary were NOT quoted, but one disquieting idea emerged which seemed to indicate a belief that something had 'happened' as a result of this ceremony.

After the little ceremony, done in a warm and family-friendly way, the leader of the meeting indicated that the child had now been welcomed into 'the family of the church', and even paraded him around the congregation so that they could 'welcome' him more personally. This despite the fact that the little family is well-known to all, having regularly attended church meetings with their young son since his birth several months ago!

Evidently this leader believes that it is possible to join 'the family of the church' without being born again, in spite of the fact that he drew attention to the need for the child to make his own response to the Lord when he will be of an age to do so. This can only mean that he regards the church organisationally, not strictly from the viewpoint of new birth. To judge by the response of the congregation, they were in agreement, so the confusion of 'What is the church?' has been added to the mix, together with the deceptive idea that this child has now somehow 'joined the family of the church' without spiritual rebirth!

Additional confusion, totally unnecessary and undesirable! Did anyone ask "What can be the harm in the 'dedication' of infants?" Perhaps some of the answers are a little plainer to see!

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