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# Five Parental Promises for the Faithful Discipleship of Children

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In 1982, and again in 1985, Sally and I stood before our brothers and sisters in Christ, a new baby in our arms, and made five promises in a special service of dedication. Then in 2005, in what seemed like a blink of an eye, and again in 2008 and 2011, I was standing before my eldest daughter, her husband, and their brothers and sisters in Christ, with each of our grandchildren in their arms, making the same five promises in similar services of dedication.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of standing before hundreds of parents as the words of the same five promises have taken root in my own heart, the hearts of those parents, and the hearts of the people in the two congregations that I have served. These promises have been a consistent reminder to Sally and me of the high and holy calling upon our lives as parents, while serving as a foundation for our ministry to parents and children in those churches. Countless times, I have reminded parents of these promises for their encouragement in various seasons of their lives. The promises have also served as a regular reminder to both congregations of our corporate responsibility as God's people to support and participate in the efforts of the church to invest in the faith and the discipleship of the next generation.

This little book is an attempt to unpack the significance, meaning, and implication of each of the five promises. As helpful as I hope it will be to parents who are preparing to make these promises, the benefit is not limited to using them in a church's child dedication service. I am hoping this resource will also serve those parents who are not part of a church tradition that practices

**Whether we stand before our brothers and sisters in Christ and make these promises or not, we will all one day stand before our King of kings and Lord of lords. On that great day, may God find us to be faithful servants and stewards of the precious gifts that He has entrusted to us.**

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child dedication or a church that does not use these specific promises as part of its dedication services.

Though the five promises have been at the center of a precious tradition in the churches that I served, they represent the biblical calling and responsibility that rests on all Christian parents who have been entrusted with children to raise for the glory of their Creator. Whether we stand before our brothers and sisters in Christ and make these promises or not, we will all one day stand before our King of kings and Lord of lords. On that great day, may God find us to be faithful servants and stewards of the precious gifts that He has entrusted to us.

### **Child Dedication—A Working Definition**

The dedication of children is an act of faith in the presence of God and His people in which we solemnly and earnestly offer our children up to God for His wise and sovereign purposes in their lives, and offer ourselves up to God for the holy responsibility of being biblical parents and raising our children in the fear, knowledge, and joy of the Lord.

I will unpack this definition more and refer to it as we look closely at the five promises. However, before going any further, I want to acknowledge at the outset that this definition and the wording for each of the promises were crafted by John Piper in his first year of pastoral ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church. Except for a couple of modest adjustments, the promises are the same as they were when John presided over his first dedication service more than 40 years ago.

To set the stage for the examination of the promises, I want first to address four common questions concerning the dedication of children.

#### **1. What are the historical roots of child dedications?**

Child dedication dates back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Its origin is unclear, but it was likely established as an alternative practice for churches that rejected paedobaptism (infant baptism). It is most commonly practiced in churches that also practice believer's baptism.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Worship Training, "Historical Origins and Development of Child Dedication," copyright © 2020 Worship Training, worshiptraining.com. [www.worshiptraining.com](https://www.worshiptraining.com/media/historical-origins-and-development-of-child-dedication) at: <https://www.worshiptraining.com/media/historical-origins-and-development-of-child-dedication>

2 Those who practice believer's baptism teach that a person should be baptized when that person is able to give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

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Theological and historical convictions aside, it is appropriate to respond to the birth of a child in a way that acknowledges the person-forming work of God. The christening or baptism of infants was not only the application of particular church doctrine, but it also provided the opportunity to celebrate the creation and blessing of new life and offered a time for parents to commit themselves to faithfully raise their children in the faith. Most likely, the rejection of infant baptism created a significant void in the church that the dedication of children filled.

T. L. Underwood noted that for “Christians who adopted an anti-paedobaptist position in the Reformation Era, two practical questions presented themselves. First, ought they themselves to be re-baptized as believers, or was their first baptism as infants sufficient? Secondly, ought some type of dedicatory service...be performed for their children who would not be baptized until [later]...?”<sup>3</sup>

It was in answer to that second question that the dedication service was established and is still commonly practiced today in churches that practice only adult or believer’s baptism.

## 2. Does the Bible teach that parents must dedicate their children?

Three of the most common passages in the Bible that have been used to support the practice of child dedication in the church are 1 Samuel 1:27-28 (Hannah presenting Samuel at the temple after he was weaned), Luke 2:22-24 (Joseph and Mary presenting Jesus at the temple), and Mark 10:16 (Jesus blessing the children):

*And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.*

It would be difficult to make a strong case from these or other biblical texts for requiring the dedication of children in the church, just as it would be difficult to make a case for forbidding it. However, there are good, biblical reasons why I have encouraged parents to dedicate their children and have recommended occasional

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<sup>3</sup>T.L. Underwood, “Child Dedication Services in the 17th Century,” *Baptist Quarterly* 23.4 (October 1969): 165. (Past Editions of the Baptist Quarterly can be accessed at [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_08.php#vol23](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_08.php#vol23))

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dedication services in the church. The following are some of those reasons:

- It is fitting in the context of corporate worship to glorify God and praise Him for His amazing, person-forming work and His gracious generosity and creative power (Psalm 111:1-2; Psalm 145:10-12).
- It is an opportunity for parents and the church to publicly acknowledge our children as gifts of God, to celebrate His blessing, and to give thanks to Him for these gifts (Job 1:21; Romans 11:34-36; Psalm 127:3).
- It is an act of surrender and submission to God and His will for our children, who were ultimately created for His glory and His purposes (Isaiah 43:6-7; Isaiah 46:9-11; Ephesians 1:3-4).
- It is a declaration of parental and congregational commitment to be examples of godliness and to raise our children in the fear, knowledge, and joy of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 20-21; Ephesians 6:4).
- It is a corporate appeal to God for His grace for the sake of our children in the hope that they will be in Christ, holy and blameless before the Lord (Ephesians 1:4) and belong wholly to Him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

### **3. What practical benefit does a public dedication have for parents and the church?**

- Calling people to make public their resolve to faithfulness and obedience as parents encourages them to be faithful and obedient.
- It reinforces in the church a biblical understanding of children and our corporate responsibility to pray for, encourage, and model Christlikeness for them.
- It provides a focal point and a significant event for parents to remember and to build upon as they welcome a child into their home.
- It serves as a reminder for all of the parents in the congregation of the solemn responsibility that they have as parents and provides an opportunity for them to strengthen their resolve to parental faithfulness.

#### **4. Should parents dedicate only their babies?**

Regardless of a child's age, parents should feel the freedom to "offer [their] children up to God for His wise and sovereign purposes in their lives and offer [themselves] up to God for the holy responsibility of being biblical parents and raising [their] children in the fear, knowledge, and joy of the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

Parents who are part of a church that practices child dedication will usually dedicate their children within the first three years of life. However, it is not uncommon for parents to dedicate children as old as eight or nine, especially when they did not have the opportunity to do so when their children were younger.

Let's turn our attention now to the five dedication promises and consider their significance and relevance for any Christian parent, whether or not they officially make these promises or publicly dedicate their children in the church.

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<sup>4</sup> See "Child Dedication—A Working Definition" on page 8.