

Baptist Basics



9 Children in the Church

Jesus showed an exceptional love and regard for children. On one occasion a disciple asked him, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'. In reply, he placed a child in their midst. He then said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matthew 18:1-5). If Jesus is the revelation of the Father (John 14:8-9), we are bound to believe that this is how the Father views them. A child can act as an example for life in the kingdom of God. It is not the innocence of children that Jesus has in mind but their humble and lowly status in the ancient world. Whereas the disciples were concerned with who would be great, a child was an example of humility and lack of concern for status. God has always been against the proud and for the humble (Luke 1:51-52). He is the God who defends the widows and the orphans because they are humble and vulnerable (Deuteronomy 24:17-22). Children are of great significance to God, and also to the church.

Children in the Bible

In the Bible, children are regarded as a blessing from God. God gave the command in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28). Sons were a heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5). Daughters gave birth to and nurtured the next



generation (Psalm 1:8; Ruth 4:11-12). Survival and security depended upon children being born, which is why the inability to have children was regarded as a tragedy. It was the duty of parents to pass on their faith and its ways to the next generation, and this was done by a process of story-telling and instruction (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Children were regarded in Israel as belonging to the covenant people by virtue of their birth into the nation. In the New Testament, the promise of salvation is clearly understood to be inclusive of all nations and people, not just Israel. It is 'for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:39). The church is therefore open to all people, young and old, and the benefits of God's salvation are offered to all, not least to children.

Children and the church



In keeping with the attitude and actions of Jesus, the church welcomes children. It takes seriously his invitation, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matthew 18:5). To receive a child in his name, is to do honour to Jesus and to receive his grace through the child. It could be said that how we treat children is a sign of our true devotion to Jesus. Jesus' invitation is immediately accompanied by the warning, 'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea' (Matthew 18:6). To hinder or damage a child is identified here as a very grievous sin. A child is

in the process of formation and to distort this is to leave a trail of damage that will last into adulthood and produce great unhappiness. Churches therefore should be places where children are safe from harm, welcomed, supported, guided and loved in a secure and wholesome environment.

There are ways in which churches set about the task of providing such a hospitable community for children, both in how they are welcomed and in how they are protected. But the most important concern is our mentality, how we think of children. Children should not be considered less important than adults but as equally valuable. They are partners with adults in the life of the church, should participate according to their growing faith in its worship, learning, fellowship and service and even in its evangelism. It should be remembered that the Holy Spirit can speak through children, that they have gifts that need to be discovered and developed and that they can be included in the idea of 'the priesthood of all believers'. Churches should do as much as they can to include children in their whole life.

Welcoming children



Baptist churches do not baptise infants because they believe that the decision to be a disciple of Jesus is one that can only properly be made at a later stage of spiritual development.¹ However they do welcome children into the community by means of a special service known as 'Infant Presentation' or 'the blessing of children and the dedication of parents'. For most people, the process of

becoming a Christian is one that takes place over time as we become aware of the call of God and then fully committed in response. This process is sometimes called 'a journey of initiation' and there is every reason why it should begin early in life as people are introduced to the way of Christ.

The presentation of children is a practice rooted in biblical example. It celebrates the gift of children, their presence within the Christian community and the hope of the Gospel that is offered to them and to all. This is based upon a further incident in the life of Jesus that is worth quoting in full: 'People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is

to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them’ (Mark 10:13-16).

The presentation of children is based on this passage and involves both thanksgiving and blessing. Although churches and ministers have their own ways of doing this, it usually takes place in a regular service of worship and has the following pattern:

- When a child is brought by their parent or parents they are welcomed and introduced by name to the congregation. The service itself is explained as one of thanksgiving, dedication and blessing.
- Selected Bible readings are read, such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Matthew 18:1-7, Acts 2:37-39 and usually end with Mark 10:13-16.
- A prayer of thanksgiving for the child is offered.
- The parent or parents are asked to dedicate themselves to bringing up the child in a loving way and teaching them the Christian faith.
- The congregation is asked to stand, as a way of indicating its support and its own willingness to play its part through prayer and nurture in the child’s upbringing.
- The minister leading the service blesses the child by name with words from Numbers 6:24-26, ‘The Lord bless you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.’
- Further prayers are offered for the child and parents, expressing the hope that the child will, in time, come to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and confess him as such in the waters of baptism.
- If the child is still a baby they will often be taken around the congregation to be welcomed before being returned to the parents. A Bible or some other gift will then be presented.

Churches are sensitive to the varying circumstances in which people come

to them whether as single parents, cohabiting couples, or those of, as yet, uncertain faith. They will be anxious to uphold the integrity of the service. They are often more than willing to adapt it so that it fits people's situations in the belief that the child's welfare and blessing is the most important thing. They will also be concerned that no-one is asked to make promises that they are unable or unwilling to fulfil.

Infant presentation does not claim to make the child a Christian. This can only happen as the Spirit of God awakens faith and the response of repentance and faith is given (Acts 2:38). This can happen in early childhood or in later years. But the service celebrates the fact that children belong within and are embraced by the Christian community. It provides an opportunity to speak genuine and powerful words of blessing over them in Jesus' name and so assists in their healthy growth.

Protecting children



Having welcomed children, it is the church's duty to ensure that they are kept physically and emotionally safe when in church. The Baptist Union of Great Britain has developed guidelines known as Safe To Grow, to assist churches with setting in place the necessary processes, checks and balances to ensure both best practice in this area, as well as the fulfilment of government legislative requirements. These processes will include ensuring that children are only ever in the care of adults who are fully aware of their responsibilities and have a satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosure or other relevant legal clearance. The Union offers expert safeguarding, guidance and training in this area.

Infant presentation and infant baptism

Infant baptism is sometimes justified on the basis that the children should be brought to Jesus for baptism and not hindered, as in Mark 10:13-16. But when the children were brought on this occasion Jesus did not baptise them but blessed them, and this was enough. It is also argued that baptism occupies the same place as circumcision in the Old Testament and should be administered shortly after birth. But in the new covenant we do not become members of God's people through birth but through new birth (John 3:3). This should be the occasion for baptism therefore, not when we are born but when we are born again as believers in Christ. For children to be in the Christian community is a privilege both ways. The community has the blessing of young lives growing in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52). Children have the benefit of being surrounded by a worshipping community, hearing of Christ and being in an atmosphere of faith. Whether or not they continue in the faith, and many will, this should be a legacy that influences them for good for the rest of their lives. This is indeed a blessing. Baptists have found it hard to believe that children who die before they are able to come to a responsible decision of faith are lost to God. They have found it even more difficult to believe that their eternal salvation depends upon what has been done to them (or not) in infant baptism. Most Baptists would believe that children who die are in a special category as far as God is concerned and that as Christ died for them also it is entirely right to be totally confident about their place in the love of the Christ-like God.

¹ See Baptist Basic – Believers' Baptism

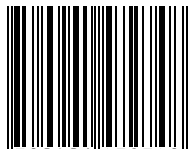
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