

# Bringing Your Child to God at DPC

*<sup>13</sup>People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup>When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." <sup>16</sup>And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

## Mark 10:13-16

In Mark 10, we read of parents bringing their children to Jesus so he could bless them. They recognised that through Jesus they could have access to God and certain benefits. While they had the advantage of being able to directly approach Jesus in the flesh, you as a Christian parent still have ways to accept Jesus' invitation and bring your child to God.

A significant way you can do this is through prayer. Parents can pray that God would be at work in their child's heart. We know that God is sovereign over salvation and that he saves those whom he chooses. Yet despite his initiating role, he invites us to pray for those who are not yet converted. What a joy that God uses the prayers of parents as part of his plan to grow a people for himself.

As a parent, you can also bring your child before God through active participation in church life. At Darebin Presbyterian Church we are passionate about discipling children as we partner with parents. We offer children's programs and a kids' spot during our church service. But one particularly special opportunity we like to offer for parents to bring their child to God at DPC is through a baptism spot or a thanksgiving spot.

We offer both of these options as we recognise that people come from different church backgrounds and have different theological convictions about these matters. As a Presbyterian church that holds a confessional position, we are convinced that baptism is a good and proper means of grace to apply to the children of believers. However, we do not believe in baptismal regeneration or that baptism by water is essential for salvation or that only people who have been baptised are welcomed to be part of our church family. Therefore, we offer a thanksgiving spot as an alternative where parents can have a public moment that is part of their child's discipleship journey.

## Baptism Spot

At DPC we practice what is known as covenantal baptism. We believe that baptism is a sign of the new covenant which is given to God's people and is to be administered to those who become Christians and to those who are born into a Christian home.

This is much like how circumcision was a sign under the old covenant of belonging to the people of God. In fact, Paul links circumcision and baptism as pointing to the same reality of inner renewal by the spirit (Col. 2:9-12). After centuries of giving the covenant sign to their children, it would have made sense for Jewish Christians to apply the sign of the new covenant. This saw an expansion so that it was not just for males but for females too. It's likely that when Peter said the promise of salvation was for his hearers and their children, the Jews would have understood this as covenant language referring to families. Indeed, we read of household baptisms in the book of Acts which suggests there was still an understanding of corporate identity (Acts 10:24-48; 16:14-15; 16:27-34; Acts 18:7-8).

Paul makes the argument that where there is at least one Christian parent, children should be considered insiders rather than outsiders (1 Cor. 7:12-14). In other words, it is the sanctified parent who has the greater spiritual influence in terms of the child's relationship to the visible people of God. This strengthens the argument that children can receive the sign of the covenant. It also explains why we would baptise a child who has only one believing parent.

In baptising a child, we are viewing them as a covenant child rather than as a professing believer. Through the waters of baptism and the word of God, promises are sealed upon them which guarantee that if they grow up to have faith, they will certainly receive the spiritual reality that is signified by baptism.

It is important to note that we do not believe in baptismal regeneration. We do not believe that the waters of baptism can cause anyone to be born again. But we do believe that baptism is a kindness from God which calls us to have faith in him. For some, faith comes first and their subsequent baptism is a confirmation of the inner reality they profess. For others, faith comes later and their prior baptism is a guarantee that what was sealed upon them has come into effect. This is true even for those who were baptised as a youth or adult but we're only truly converted later after a season of wandering. In such a case these people would not need to be rebaptised since the waters of baptism still acted as a seal and guarantee of God's promises.

In a baptism spot during a church service, the parents (or just one parent where only one is a believer) make promises to confirm that they are professing believers and to commit to discipling their child. The congregation also typically make a promise to point the child to faith in Jesus. The child is then baptised by having water sprinkled or splashed over their head.

While it is typical for a covenant child to be baptised while they are still an infant it is possible for older children to receive this sign. They still do so on the basis of their parents' profession of faith. This might be the case where parents convert after having children and the whole family is baptised or where baptism has been delayed for some reason. While such a child may make certain public commitments, they would typically go on to make a public profession of faith at a later date before partaking of the Lord's Supper.

For further information on the biblical basis for baptising children, please refer to the resources below.

### **Thanksgiving Spot**

For those who are not convinced of applying baptism to children we are still pleased to be able to offer a thanksgiving spot. This is an opportunity to bring the child before God and to pray for God to be at work in their life and to strengthen their parents.

It is important to clarify that we would prefer to not call this a dedication or a christening. While people may have different understandings of these terms, we feel they may be unhelpful or confusing.

In the Old Testament, people who are dedicated (or consecrated) to God are given over to his special service. The Levites were dedicated to God's service and ministered at the temple (Num. 18:6). Samuel was dedicated to God and he went to live with Eli, the high priest (1 Sam. 1:11). When Jesus was dedicated at the temple, this was in relation to how the firstborn of each Israelite family belonged to God

and had to be redeemed by an animal sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24). Clearly, this is not what would be expected to happen when dedicating a child at church!

The practice of christening someone is most properly tied to conversion and giving someone a new name – their Christian name. Technically it's about "Christianising" someone (the word can mean "to bring to Christ" but this is not how it's best understood). In popular usage, the term is sometimes employed interchangeably with baptism or used in dedication services that don't involve baptism. Clearly, the term is ambiguous and misleading. We are not "Christianising" people in baptisms.

A thanksgiving spot is much more appropriate as it is an opportunity to celebrate that Jesus welcomes people of all ages and that his kingdom is for kids, not just adults. It is also an opportunity to give thanks for the gift of life and to pray for the blessing of eternal life.

We would still typically ask parents and the congregation to make promises around discipling the child and pointing them to Jesus. It is not a "waterless baptism" since there is no sign being applied to the child and God's promises are not sealed upon them. In baptism, a certificate is given to confirm this significant step has taken place but in a thanksgiving, there is no certificate. Yet there is still a celebration of God's goodness and his love for children. We pray expectantly, asking him to work the miracle of regeneration in the heart of the child.

### **What next?**

Talk to your spouse about what you would like to do. Do some reading and pray about this decision. Then invite one of the elders to visit you and talk through the options. After his visit, he will make a recommendation to the Session and once that is sorted out, plans can be made.

*"And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."*

**Matthew 18:5**

### **Further Reading**

- Why Do We Baptize Infants? – Bryan Chapell (32 pages)
  - *A brief summary of the key arguments.*
- Covenantal Baptism – Jason Helopoulos (154 pages)
  - *A concise summary of a covenantal framework for baptism, with a particular focus on baptising the children of believers. A very helpful overview of the concept of covenant. There is an extended section entitled "Questions and Answers on Baptism" which is excellent.*
- How Our Children Come to Faith – Stephen Smallman (28 pages)
  - *A brief and thought-provoking book that will encourage parents in their efforts to disciple their children. He speaks of conversion as the point when a regenerate person personally takes hold of Christ by faith.*