

Baby Dedications and Raising Disciples of Christ

By Dr. Bob Harrington

One of the greatest experiences in life is to be the parent of a child. When my children were born I was literally awestruck by the wonder, blessing, and privilege that God had given to me. Like me, if you have children, you want to give them the best possible life and the best possible path to God. The following article has been written to help parents to develop the right perspective on their children – from the early days when they are dedicated to Christ through until the end of their lives.

We must first begin with our goal in mind. Many parents look ahead and make the mistake of thinking that the goal is to get their children saved. This is a very important goal, but it is not the full goal of parenting. The full goal of Christian parents is to raise children who get saved and grow up to become fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ.

Until recently, within mainstream, historic, Protestant Christianity, there has been a consensus that those who are truly saved are those who end their lives as obedient disciples. This is clearly the Biblical position and we must not let poor Biblical teaching on obedience deter us from embracing the truth that to be saved, we must be faithful – and stated differently, to be a faithful person, is to be a saved person. Without a life that truly trusts and truly demonstrates such trust by an obedient lifestyle, our children will not be saved.¹

Beyond this, and most importantly, our goal should be to raise children who become fully devoted disciples because this brings glory to God and enables our children to experience God's best in this life and the next. This ultimate goal of parenting means that scholastics, sports, hobbies, social life and all other things, as important as they may be, must be placed as secondary issues compared to the truest and highest goal of parenting.

There are four practices that I believe provide the best and most secure future for our children. Stated differently, I believe that the following four-fold path is the best way to equip our children to trust Christ, to live as his followers, and to go to heaven with him.

Prayer

The first practice is prayer, which includes the laying on of hands and prayer by the whole church. In Matthew 19:13-14 Jesus himself left us the pattern:

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

On a personal level, I have found that parents of children who have grown up to become faithful Christian most often point to prayer - and the active hand of God - as the

significant factor in their children's spiritual development. I cannot over-emphasize how important it is to pray for your children daily and to regularly ask friends and godly relatives to help you by their prayers.

This is why it is important to have a group of friends/relatives join with you as you dedicate your children to God. These are the folks that you explicitly ask to help you to raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Ask them to regularly pray for your children, ask them to help you where they can, and even consider finding a special couple who will commit to help teach and influence your children to know the Lord in the event of your death (god parents).

Parental Training

The second, but equally important element, is parental training or discipleship, where parents teach their children God's way at home and in their daily lives. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 gives us the blueprint:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

It is important to notice the ongoing, daily nature of this training. It is also important to notice the father's role, as Ephesians 6:4 makes clear: *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* I firmly believe that a mother should help the father in this task (it should be a partnership), but the father is commissioned by the Lord to make sure that this spiritual training is being carried out with faithfulness and passion in his home.

Many women carry the weight for spiritual training in the home, which is a great substitute when a father cannot or will not do his part. But God's best for your home will be found when the father and mother join together in the spiritual training of the children, with the father leading the way.

Parental Example

The third factor is example, where parents show, by their lives, the way of the Lord. The apostle Paul boldly put it this way in Philippians 3:17: *"Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."*

As the years go by, I am learning that consistent and earnest example (which is constantly explained through scripture reference) –by parents – is the single biggest predictor of the behavior of teens and young adults.

As the old adages go, "children have never been very good at listening to their parents, but they have never failed to imitate them" and "you can't teach, what you don't know –

you can't lead, where you don't go." More than they realize it, parents influence their children to follow the Lord. Attitudes about church attendance, Bible study, prayer, giving, and the like, are *caught from the example of parents*, more assuredly than when they are just *taught by parents*.

Active Involvement in a Biblically Faithful Church

The fourth factor is active, consistent involvement in a Biblically faithful church, where other adults and young people pursue the same goal of fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ. We should look in the church for other parents trying to raise their children as we are trying to raise our children. We should, at an early age, help our children to form friendships with other committed Christian children in the church, so that they can help and encourage one another as peers and friends. We should make sure that our children are actively involved in church and insist on strong discipleship programs for our children, where they learn the Word of God and how to walk with God.

We should insist that the church provide a basic instruction or "catechism class" in the period just before adolescence (when children are explicitly instructed in the key doctrines of the faith so they can make the decision for themselves). This has usually been designated as the "age of accountability" and the age of spiritual and moral responsibility. This concept fits in very comfortably with the Biblical teaching on believer's baptism (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:27), where children trust Christ and give their lives to him, when they have reached an age where they can make the decision for themselves.

We provide this opportunity through our 5th and 6th Grade program and periodically again in both junior and senior high, for those youth who have not received this training.

When our children are in junior high and high school, we should insist on strong youth programs and our children's active involvement as one of our top parenting priorities. In a strong youth program, children form a strong bond with adult mentors and other youth. These relationships should become primary because this will often be a primary means of encouragement and support in the goal of living as faithful disciples.

A strong youth group and active friendships with other committed Christian teens are essential components in the discipleship and faithfulness of your children. This is one the most important transitions into Christian faithfulness in adulthood and too many parents do not realize how formative a youth group is in the pursuit of a Christ-centered life. Do all that you can so that your children can get the benefit of active involvement in such a group.

The College Years

Before we know it, we are watching our children enter into the final transition to adulthood during the College years. If we continue to remember the goal during these

years, then we will know that for our children who do not attend College, a strong College age attachment to church and vital Christ-centered relationships are indispensable.

For those going to College, I believe that we should do all that is within our power to help our children find a good Christian-College. Many people finalize their beliefs in College, find their future spouse, and set their career paths. Up to 80% of Christian youth turn their backs on Christ during the College years. In my experience, a good Christian college is very important during these years. If we have helped our children to lay a good and healthy Christian foundation, a Christian College will further the discipleship process as our children refine their beliefs, possibly meet a Christian spouse, and develop an initial career path. These life changing decisions are best done in the environment of a Christian College or, at a minimum, with the help of a strong Christian group on a secular campus (for those who simply cannot find the finances for a Christian College).

I am personally thankful - almost everyday - that I went to a Christian College. This is where I learned how to think about different subjects in a Christian manner, this is where I met the godly Christian woman who became my wife, and this is where I worked out my initial career path. Now, as parents, my wife and I are committed to making the sacrifices necessary so that our children can follow this same path because it had such a positive impact on our lives.

Dedicating Babies

The who process begins at the beginning, with babies. Unfortunately, we cannot seal and ensure the eternal destiny of our children by a ceremony like infant sprinkling or baptism, because this is not taught or authorized by the Bible. But God, through the Holy Spirit, has given parents encouragement that through prayer, spiritual training, example, and the help of the local church, children will likely grow and commit themselves to Christ and live faithfully for him. I believe that parents should employ these four means (and others) for the benefit of their children with the goal of bringing them up to become faithful Christians. The best place for parents to formally initiate the discipleship process is through a special baby dedication.

This dedication is best thought of in two special settings: one personal and one public.

The personal setting involves a special time with those who are spiritually close to you and your child. The people that you involve will be those people (let them know your intentions ahead of time) that you are going to ask to help you (through prayer, advice, and support) to raise your child to be a faithful Christian. The best way to think of this is a gathering (perhaps over a meal) where you invite these friends/relatives to meet with you. During this meeting you will discuss the spiritual dreams and aspirations that you have for your child. Then you will ask your friends/relatives to help you and you will explain exactly how they can do this (it is better if you can be specific). You may want these people to take on a role similar to that of “god parents” in certain Christian traditions (some may even choose this terminology). Sometimes Christian parents will

even ask their spiritual friends/relatives to use their influence in spiritual matters in the unforeseen event of a tragic death, so that the children will have someone tell them, at some point, of their parents highest dreams and spiritual goals.

In other circumstances, you may just want to ask people that you are close to now (and whom you respect) to help you with your children (this is for those who are not ready for something like the “god parent” concept). The idea, at one level or another, is that you find one or more persons and that you explicitly ask for their help and support in a personal setting (even if you just ask them to help you through prayer). Even though this is a personal setting, make the decision somewhat formal and seal it with a special prayer time. Raising faithful children is just too much of a challenge to do without this kind of Christian support and I want to encourage you to ask for it in some kind of formal way.

The public setting involves a special time at church where the pastor-elders and the whole church join together with you in dedicating your child to God. This is for families who are members at HCC. This makes formal and explicit – to God and your church family – your deepest desires and requests. At this time, we recommend (but do not, in any way, require) that those close friends/relatives who have committed to help you, be given the opportunity to stand up with you before God and the church.

In this way, you also invite the whole church to help you to raise your child to trust and follow Christ. This small ceremony is a great source of encouragement and strength – and it gives you a special marker to look back upon to remind you that your child has been specially dedicated to God.

Call one of the pastor-elders to arrange a baby dedication. Please note that we typically like at least two weeks notice to arrange for this special time in our main assembly. And feel free to call the church office if you have any other comments or questions about baby dedications (790-0104).

¹ Calvinistic Christians have believed that this faithfulness is essential to determine those who truly are “the elect.” And many Arminian Christians have understood that this faithfulness is essential because it shows those who possess genuine and enduring faith. Neither group believes that a person falls in and out of salvation based on period sins, struggles, and trials. Apostasy – however understood – is a deliberate rejection of Jesus Christ and his lifestyle (Hebrews 10:26-27).