

## The Sacrament of Blessing Children

**T**HE blessing of children is a sacrament in which the child is the object of the covenant entered into by God, parents, and the church. It is enjoined by God, a minister of the Lord is required, it is a sacred ceremony, and it uses the symbolism of the laying on of hands. The recipient is unable to understand that which is done, and there is no prescribed wording, but its sacramental nature is caught up in the sacrificial commitment of parents and the church to minister to the child under divine grace.

### CHRIST BLESSED THE CHILDREN

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the incident in which parents brought their little children for Jesus to touch them. The fullest detail is given in Mark: "They brought young children to him, that he should touch them; and the disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw and heard them, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, and put his hands upon them, and blessed them."<sup>1</sup> This incident evidently occurred more or less spontaneously while Jesus was teaching the multitude on other matters. He took advantage of this opportunity not only to bless the children, but to teach the disciples and the people that the Father in heaven is concerned with us at all stages of our development. He also used the occasion to emphasize that the kingdom of heaven is available only to those who possess certain childlike characteristics.

A more striking insight into Christ's love for all people, including children, is given by his blessing of the Nephite children. To appreciate the incident, it is helpful to read the entire account of Christ's visit as recorded in III Nephi. The Nephites accepted Christ for what he is. Because this was so, he was able to give them a much richer ministry than what he could give in any public gathering with the Jews in Palestine. On the day of his first visit to the Nephites, he taught them at some length, and selected twelve disciples for special ministry among them. Then he perceived they were weary, and he was about to leave. But as he looked upon them, he discerned they wished him to remain a little longer. In compassion he called for them to bring forth their sick, and all were healed. Then he commanded that their little children should be brought.

"So they brought their little children and sat them down upon the ground round about him, and Jesus stood in the midst, and the multitude gave way till they all had been brought unto him. ... And when he had said these words, he wept, and the multitude bear record of it, and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. And when he had done this he wept again, and he spake unto the multitude, and saith unto them, Behold your little ones. And as they looked to behold, they cast their eyes toward heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were, in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about; and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them, and the multitude did see and hear, and bear record; and they know that their record is true, for they all of them did see and hear, every man for himself."<sup>2</sup> After this he remained with them long enough to serve the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and to give them certain

further instructions. Note that in this instance Jesus took the initiative in instituting the blessing of children, and that he did it in much the same spirit of compassion with which he healed their sick and prayed for the multitude at large.

## OTHER SCRIPTURAL PRECEDENTS

It is interesting to note that there is no mention either in the Bible or Book of Mormon of Christ having commanded the apostles or other ministers to perform the ordinance of blessing children. Nor is there any record of the ministers having performed this ordinance. This does not mean, of course, that the ordinance was never performed by anyone other than Christ.

The only specific commandment concerning the blessing of children is found in Doctrine and Covenants. "Every member of the church of Christ having children, is to bring them unto the elders before the church, who are to lay their hands upon them in the name of Jesus Christ, and bless them in his name."<sup>3</sup> Note that this counsel is included in that revelation which made up the basic law of the church until the law was amplified by further revelation. However, no further instruction concerning the blessing of children has ever come to the church through the prophets. That which was then given has evidently been deemed adequate for the guidance of the church.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE BLESSING OF CHILDREN

"There is little in the Scriptures as to the specific nature of the *blessing of children* other than what the words imply, and that which is revealed in the example of Jesus in taking little children in gentle kindness and conferring upon them his blessing. It could not mean less than that there was given them something which would be of value throughout life."<sup>4</sup>

While it may be difficult to define the exact nature of the blessing received, there can be no doubt that this ordinance does confer a special spiritual blessing upon the little child. To be sure, all of us who come into this life are recognized of God, and are in a sense under his care. He has provided the elements in the physical world which make possible physical growth. In a general way he has also provided for the spiritual nurture of all who come into the world: "[Christ] was the true light, which lighteth every man who cometh into the world; even the Son of God."<sup>5</sup> Even so, in this ordinance there is a special measure of blessing conferred. Otherwise there would have been no point in the Lord's commanding that this special blessing be performed by the laying on of hands of the authorized ministry. The prayers of the parents on behalf of the child, important as they are, are evidently inadequate to do that which can be accomplished by the laying on of hands of the elders.

When the parents bring forth their child for blessing, they are in effect saying, "Lord, we recognize the responsibility we have before thee in bringing up this child in truth and righteousness. We intend to set a righteous example by the lives we live. We also will do our best to teach this little one the principles of righteousness. We shall continue to pray for this little one. But we recognize that the best we can do of ourselves is not good enough. We therefore present our child to thy servants for thy special blessing, that this child shall be nurtured by thy Spirit in these critical formative years."

There are those who testify that in some instances the health of the child has improved following the blessing. This can indeed be one of the beneficial consequences. But protection from sickness and disease is not the prime function of the blessing. The purpose is rather that the special help of God is invoked for the nurture of the whole personality, including emotional, spiritual, moral, and physical development. The entire

course of one's life is strongly influenced by the patterns of personality which begin to be established very early in life. Surely the special blessing of God is designed to help in these areas of growth.

There are some things not done by the blessing:

The child is not in any special way "dedicated" to the work of God. The blessing simply provides a special measure of God's care for the child, as discussed above. Some parents have specially dedicated a child to the work of God, just as the prophet Samuel was dedicated to the Lord's work even before he was conceived.<sup>6</sup>

When done with adequate understanding by the parents, and with proper training of the child so that such dedication may become effective, this is undoubtedly pleasing to God. On the other hand, no parent can irrevocably commit a child to a life of service to God. To do so would deprive the child of the agency he acquires as a birthright. Even Samuel retained the freedom to choose whether he should live as a servant of God. Yet the environment in which he grew up predisposed him to make the choice he did. God called him as a servant, and he responded to that call.

The act of blessing does not commit the child to become a member of Christ's church. Ordinarily we would expect that when the parents are sufficiently concerned to have their child blessed, they will also teach the child in such a way that the child will be baptized when old enough. But in this, as in other matters, the child retains his agency regardless of whether he was blessed as a baby. Moreover, since the blessing of a child is not directly related to church membership, it is not required that the parents of the child be members of the church. But where the parents have not themselves been baptized into the fellowship of the church, it behooves the elders to see that the parents are sufficiently instructed as to the purpose and effect of the blessing.

The blessing is not an assumption of additional responsibility by the parents. The parents are already held accountable by God for the proper upbringing of the child. The blessing does constitute a public acknowledgment by the parents of their responsibility, and provides help for the parents in meeting that responsibility.

### **THE PLACE OF CHILDREN UNDER THE GOSPEL TEACHINGS**

Little children are incapable of sin and have no need of repentance. The Scriptures are rich in teachings on this point. "Little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world, through mine Only Begotten; wherefore they can not sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable before me."<sup>7</sup> "Little children are holy, being sanctified through the atonement of Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup> "And little children also have eternal life."<sup>9</sup> "Little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of

Adam is taken from them in me, and it hath no power over them. . . Little children need no repentance, neither baptism."<sup>10</sup> "Jesus hath said, Such little children) shall be saved."<sup>11</sup>

### **GROWTH BRINGS ACCOUNTABILITY**

"Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world. And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying, Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so, when they begin to grow up sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good. And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore, they are agents unto themselves."<sup>12</sup>

This quotation and the accompanying text in the sixth chapter of Genesis clearly indicate that the understanding of these principles was conveyed to Adam and his posterity. The principle is reaffirmed in latter-day revelation: "You must repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ; for all men must repent and be baptized, and not only men, but women; and children who have arrived to the years of accountability."<sup>13</sup> "No one can be received into the church of Christ unless he has arrived unto the years of accountability before God, and is capable of repentance."<sup>14</sup>

These early revelations clearly indicate that children grow into accountability and hence are eligible for baptism. But it was not until Section 68 was received that a specific age was indicated, "Inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance; faith in Christ the Son of the living God; and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands when eight years old, the sin be upon the head of the parents."<sup>15</sup> This is the only Scripture in any of the Three Books which mentions a specific age.

Although this quotation appears to limit the responsibility to parents who live in stakes of Zion, it is the responsibility of all parents in the church to teach their children to understand the principles of the gospel so that they can be baptized when eight years of age and can understand what they are doing. The ability to accomplish this, however, is especially enhanced when the family lives in the Center Place or other highly organized centers of church activities. Here they have the best opportunity to control the environment of their children and provide them with the best teaching.

An objection has sometimes been raised that a child who is only eight years old is incapable of really making his own decision about baptism, or that he is too young to understand what he is doing. It is indeed true that some children are not ready for baptism at age eight. It is also true that some people of eighteen or even eighty are not ready for baptism. This is true whenever persons have not been properly instructed as to the significance of the baptismal covenant.

Nevertheless the wisdom of God tells us that children who have been properly taught from early childhood shall be ready for baptism when they are eight years of age.

It is interesting to speculate as to what might have been selected as the age of accountability had the decision been left to a committee of child psychologists. In any event, the current consensus seems to be that the character and life pattern of the child is more or less set by the time he is eight years old.

"No one can be received into the church of Christ unless he has arrived unto the years of accountability before God, and is capable of repentance."<sup>16</sup> This passage implies that accountability before God is not only a matter of chronological age; it also involves the capability of repentance. This suggests that some unfortunate persons who are mentally retarded may never reach the age of accountability, because they are incapable of sufficient understanding to repent. Such persons would therefore never be proper subjects for baptism. The decision as to how to treat individual situations of this kind should come as a result of specific direction of the Spirit. "Whoso having knowledge, have I not commanded to repent? and he that hath no understanding, it remaineth in me to do according as it is written."<sup>17</sup>

Since children begin to become accountable at about age eight, especially after proper instruction, it would seem more appropriate to perform baptism than blessing when the child is eight or older. This principle has been reaffirmed by General Conference action which states that "children under eight years of age are not eligible for baptism in the church"<sup>18</sup> and "That the ordinance of blessing should not be administered to children who are old enough to be baptized."<sup>19</sup>

## RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARENTS TO THEIR CHILDREN

It is an accepted principle of civil as well as spiritual law that the parents are responsible for the physical care of their children. "All children have claim upon their parents for their maintenance until they are of age."<sup>20</sup> "Ye will not suffer your children, that they go hungry, or naked."<sup>21</sup> God is also concerned that our children receive adequate general training as a part of their physical care. The following quotation evidently refers as much to secular as to spiritual learning: "You [William W. Phelps] shall be ordained to assist my servant Oliver Cowdery to do the work of printing, and of selecting, and writing books for schools, in this church, that little children may also receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me."<sup>22</sup>

The parents are also responsible for the spiritual nurture of their children. After God had given Adam instruction concerning the fall and atonement, and the necessity for repentance and baptism, he added, "Therefore I give unto you a commandment, to teach these things freely unto your children."<sup>23</sup> This principle is abundantly reaffirmed in latter-day revelation. When children are not properly instructed, hence not ready for baptism, "the sin be upon the head of the parents. . . . And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord."<sup>24</sup> Frederick G. Williams was specifically reprimanded for his failure in this respect. "I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth, but verily I say unto you, my servant Frederick G. Williams, You have continued under this condemnation; you have not taught your children light and truth, according to the commandments, and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction. And now a commandment I give unto you, if you will be delivered: you shall set in order your own house, for there are many things that are not right in your house."<sup>25</sup> Sidney Rigdon was given similar counsel in the paragraph following.

The Nephites were taught similarly. "Ye will not suffer your children . . . that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil;... but ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another."<sup>26</sup>

There was a saying among the Israelites, "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it."<sup>27</sup> It is true that a child trained in righteousness is more likely to be a righteous adult than a child not so trained. But it is also true that no matter what the early training of the child, as he grows into maturity he is still free to make his own choices. No man is compelled into righteousness; otherwise there would be no agency. In effect then, while the parents are responsible for the training of the child in righteousness, and while this may predispose the child to a life of righteousness, the parents are no longer responsible when the child reaches the age of self-determination. And there is no absolute guarantee that the grown child will follow in the ways of his parents. This is undoubtedly one explanation as to why children have grown up in righteous homes and still rebelled against the truth. This happened among the children of Lehi and among other children of biblical record. It is a matter of all too common experience in the church today. Of course, the failure of the parents to teach and set the example is a factor in many instances. But there are undoubtedly good and conscientious parents who have done all they could, and who have reproached themselves unnecessarily because of the failure of a child to respond to the gospel. In such instances heartache is inevitable, but brooding over the situation to the point of interfering with constructive work now to be done is surely displeasing in the sight of God. The parent who faces this situation has experienced a little of that which Christ felt when he wept over Jerusalem.

## **SUMMARY**

Little children are "whole," "in capable of sin," "have no need for repentance." Even so, the experiences of our very early years strongly influence the tone of our entire adult lives. If in early childhood we are blessed by the Spirit of God, we are likely to arrive at adulthood in better spiritual, emotional, and moral balance than otherwise would be the case. Hence the blessing of the child is important not only for the very early years, but for all of life. Moreover, the blessing of the child is an assistance to the parents in their responsibility of teaching and training so that the child will, at the age of accountability, be prepared to enter into a covenant relation with Christ by way of baptism.

## **PRELIMINARY COUNSELING WITH PARENTS**

Parents should be instructed to make advance arrangements with the pastor, allowing adequate time to prepare for the service. Planning for worship services should be done carefully. As a result, most of the pastors prepare their worship services several weeks in advance. Each element of the service is there for a purpose and "last minute" changes can alter the mood of the service.

Preparation for the ordinance of blessing of children should begin with a counseling session with the parents of the child. No child should receive this rite without the full consent of both parents. This is very important! If it is at all possible, both parents should be present at the blessing, and scheduling of the service should take this into consideration.

The parents should receive instructions as to the meaning of this ordinance, the purpose of the rite, and specific instructions as to deportment during the service (how to present the child, where to stand, where to sit, and so forth).

## **PARENTAL DEPARTMENT**

The parents should be seated in the congregation near an aisle so there will be ease in moving forward at the appropriate time. It is preferred that they be located fairly near the front.

It is suggested that an infant should be fed shortly before the service begins and all other precautions taken so he will be comfortable. This will help prevent restlessness and crying during the blessing.

Parents should come, having made spiritual preparation. Prayer and fasting may help them to make this preparation.

One of the parents should be instructed to carry the child to the altar with his head to the parent's right so that the transfer into the arms of the assisting elder will place the head nearest his heart. In this position, the child is able to hear the heartbeat of the elder and this tends to be a quieting factor.

"Where a child is too large to be held, it may be seated on a chair or in the lap of one of the parents, in which case the elders would lay their hands upon its head to pronounce the blessing."<sup>28</sup>

After placing the child in the care of the elder, the parents stand together in the attitude of prayer while the prayer of blessing is made.

## **MINISTERIAL DEPARTMENT**

Only members of the Melchisedec priesthood may officiate.<sup>29</sup> It is preferable that there be two of them but, in case of emergency where there is only one available, it is permissible for one to do so.

The function of the assisting elder is to console and keep the child quiet, presenting it in such a manner that the officiating elder may place his hands upon the child. He may keep his eyes open to be thus alert to the care of his charge. He should see that all pencils, pens, and other material is removed from his inner pockets so that he presents a smooth breast against which the child may rest. He should be careful to hold it securely (not tightly), close to him rather than in extended arms. He should see that the child's head is slightly raised. He should face the congregation.

The officiating minister should place his hands lightly upon the child. His prayer should be brief and loud enough for all the congregation to hear. He should lift his chin so his voice carries to the congregation, taking care that he does not speak into the child's ear.

Points generally covered in the prayer:

- a. Address and approach to God
- b. Acknowledgment of our priesthood
- c. Acceptance of the child at the altar of God
- d. Recognition of the good desires of parents
- e. Thanksgiving for the sacrament
- f. Invocation of the blessing
- g. Request for physical protection
- h. Request for rich spiritual expression
- I. Request for direction of parents that they may provide for the physical and spiritual needs of the child
- j. Invocation of a blessing on the home, church, and family for the good of the child

If a sermon is included as part of the order of worship, the message should be appropriate to the occasion. If the message is upon an unrelated subject, it will tend to make the sacrament of blessing secondary.

"It is desirable but not imperative that the elder use the name of the child in the prayer of blessing. This is facilitated if it be read from a written announcement by the presiding officer."<sup>30</sup>

The practice of kissing the child after the blessing is to be discouraged.

It is the responsibility of the officiating elder to see that a statistical report of the blessing is prepared promptly. He should rely on no one else but if the branch recorder prepares the report the elder should check to be certain that it is sent in. If in doubt, he should prepare the report himself. It is better that two reports are given the statistical department than for the blessing to go unrecorded. This gives the elder an excellent opportunity for a visit in the home of the parents. Another visit can be made later to see that the *Certificate Of Blessing* has been received.

A special booklet entitled *Of Such Is the Kingdom* is available from Herald House for presentation to the parents of the baby.

## **OTHER FOLLOW-UP MINISTRY**

The parents should be encouraged to enroll their child in the cradle roll department. Through this means a constant contact is maintained. When the child is older, his parents should be urged to bring him to church school.

The church and family will be benefited in the long run if the home and church work together in the guidance of the children toward good saintly living.

## ARRANGEMENT OF THE ORDER OF WORSHIP

The order of service should include appropriate music, prayers, Scriptures, ministerial message and charge, and proper worship setting. The hymnal becomes one of the most valuable aids of worship planning. It should be consulted for the proper hymns to be used. Hymns may be sung by the congregation or as choral numbers, or used for solos. They may also be used as preludes, postludes, and meditative music. Their words may be used for poetic calls to worship.

The service should follow the general pattern of all good orders of worship (see Appendix). Distinctive elements of the sacrament of blessing of children are specialized hymns, charge to the parents and the church, and the prayer of blessing.

The specialized hymns are suggested in the hymnal. Depending upon the wording, the hymn may be used just before the blessing or immediately afterward. The charge to the parents and the church should include a statement of the purpose of the rite, the responsibilities of the parents to the child, and responsibilities recognized on the part of the church to provide an environment for Christian nurture. The prayer of blessing is addressed to God by the Melchisedec priesthood.

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1. Mark 10:11-14; also Matt. 19:13, 14; Luke 18:15-17
2. III Nephi 8:13, 23-26
3. D. and C. 17-19
4. Charles Fry, *Nature*
5. John 1:9, 10
6. I Samuel 1:11
7. D. and C. 28:13
8. Mosiah 8:60
9. Mosiah 8:60
10. Moroni 8:9, 11, 13
11. Matt. 19:13
12. Gen. 6:56-58
13. D. and C. 16:6

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14. D. and C. 17:20
  15. D. and C. 68:4
  16. D. and C. 17:20
  17. D. and C. 28:14
  18. General Conference Resolution 552, April 15, 1904
  19. Resolution 701, April 9, 1913
  20. D. and C. 82:2
  21. Mosiah 2:25
  22. D. and C. 55:2
  23. Gen. 6:61
  24. D. and C. 68:4
  25. D. and C. 90:6
  26. Mosiah 2:25-27
  27. Prov. 22:6
  28. *Priesthood Manual*, page 57
  29. D. and C. 17:19
  30. *Priesthood Manual*, page 57