

believer who is baptized makes public, through immersion or sprinkling, the witness to this conversion and a pledge of personal discipleship. The focus here is more on the believer's conscious reception of God's grace.

The Role of the Community of Faith in Infant Baptism and Infant Dedication

In Luke 18:15-17, Jesus welcomes children into the kingdom of God. The kingdom includes all believers. As children are brought to the sacrament of baptism, they are baptized into the gracious care of God whose purposes are worked out in and through the church. Therefore, every time a child is baptized the community of faith receives the child as one of Christ's own and commits to share the responsibility of caring for and nurturing both the child and the parents in a deepening faith in Jesus Christ. Every member of the congregation is invited to commit in word and deed to pray for and guide, to nurture and encourage the child to know and follow Christ.

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, God calls both parents and the community of faith to nurture children in faith. As children are brought to the service of dedication, the parents and the congregation are invited to dedicate themselves to support and care for the child. The congregation is called to commit itself to extend God's grace, love, and care to every child in its midst. It pledges by word and example to help parents raise and nurture their child in the hope that the child will come to acknowledge his or her personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Whether a child is baptized or dedicated, therefore, every member of the body of Christ is asked to commit to the support, care, and nurture of that child, through word and action, in the hope that the child will respond in faith to the loving presence and grace of Jesus Christ.

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RECEIVE A CHILD INTO THE CHURCH?



INFANT BAPTISM AND DEDICATION



The Evangelical Covenant Church practices both infant baptism and infant dedication. Through pastoral counseling and the support of members, the congregation joins the parent or parents in the discernment process as they consider whether to baptize or dedicate their child, and deepen their understanding of these sacred rites.

In making this decision, the first question for parents is, what is your relationship with Jesus Christ? Your faith is crucial to the way in which God will work in the life of your child, bringing him or her to personal faith in Christ. Baptizing or dedicating your child is also a time to affirm that you have given your life to Christ, and are committed to a lifelong growth as Christ's disciple. Always remember that your example is the most influential model your child will have concerning what it means to be an authentic and growing follower of Christ.

In bringing your child to the community of faith to be either baptized or dedicated, you are acknowledging your desire and the child's need for the gathered church to help children come to faith and to grow in faith throughout their lives. Baptism and dedication, however, are not the same. Baptism is a sacrament, an action ordained and commanded by God. Dedication is a practice of the church developed in relation to believer baptism.

Infant Baptism

The Evangelical Covenant Church celebrates the sacrament of baptism as commanded by Christ in Matthew 28:19-20. This sacrament is a visible sign of God's invisible grace. It signifies that it is through God's love and grace and by God's initiative alone that God:

- created us,
- redeemed us through the death and resurrection of God's Son,
- promised us the forgiveness of sin and eternal life through Jesus,
- placed us in the community of believers, that we might be nurtured and encouraged in faith,
- is present as the Holy Spirit to transform and guide us into an ever-deepening faith in Jesus Christ and eternal life.

The sacrament of baptism, through the sacred means of water and the word, is a sign and seal of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, whereby God cleanses our sin and welcomes us into the family of God.

When parents bring their child for baptism, they acknowledge in the sacrament God's promise and the unmerited gift of God's prevenient and redeeming grace. Its emphasis is not on our response, but on what God has already graciously done for us through Jesus Christ. God has already provided the means of salvation and nurture within the community of faith, with the hope that one day the child may acknowledge his or her acceptance of new life in Christ. Through water and the word, the child is indelibly marked with the sign of the covenant, conveying a new identity to the baptized in the name of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Parents who baptize their child emphasize the unique way in which the child is tied to the believing community. While the elements of hearing, repenting, and believing are necessary in the reality of conversion, the presence of word and sacrament in the community of faith recognizes the ongoing work of God in a child's life making it difficult to pinpoint where one of the three is a distinct experience.

Infant Dedication

The Evangelical Covenant Church recognizes and values children who have not been baptized as infants to be full participants in the community of faith. The rite of blessing a child, also commonly referred to as the dedication of a child, is a service for parents who want the blessing of God on their child but believe that baptism is to be reserved for those who make a conscious choice in confession of faith. Grateful for the gift of a child, the parents are accepting their responsibility of nurturing the child in the love and grace of God. The emphasis in infant dedication is on the personal pledge of parents to raise and nurture their child in a loving Christian home. There is anticipation and hope of the child's future personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ.

This service is rooted in the biblical celebration of the blessing of life and birth. It recalls Jesus's blessing of the children as a sign of the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13-16). It proclaims the message of God's saving deeds in Christ for all, including children.

Parents who dedicate their child look forward to the day when the child hears the word, repents, believes, and is baptized. The