

**Emmanuel Presbyterian Church
Introduction to Emmanuel Class
General Information**

Purposes:

- 1) To provide an introduction to the beliefs and culture of Emmanuel
- 2) To prepare for membership at Emmanuel, should one desire to join, by providing an understanding of the meaning of the five membership promises.
- 3) To provide a context in which newcomers can make friends and discover ways of getting involved at EPC.

Meetings:

We will meet for two sessions. The first will be after church on 2/26, from 12:45-2:15pm. The second is a full morning (from 9:00 am until 1 pm) on the following Saturday, 3/4. For those who would like to join, or who have questions about joining, there will be a 25 minute membership interview with members of the Session/elders (you can sign up for interviews at the class).

Homework:

You should read through this packet in advance of the class, pages 1-22. You should also try to read through the Emmanuel's Orchard booklet and take preliminary steps towards developing a plan for spiritual growth over the next year (you can get that at our website, www.emmanuelnyc.org, under "resources").

Jot down questions (questions on the readings, or other things you would like to find out), and raise them in class (we will not go over all of the readings).

The packet includes additional readings which we think may be interesting or helpful. You are not required to read them, but you may find them of interest. This includes: A History of Emmanuel (the first 10 years), pgs 23-33; An article on infant baptism (so you can understand the approach of Emmanuel) by Dennis E Johnson, pgs 34-47.

To Bring to Class

You do not need to bring anything to the class, but may find it beneficial to have the following:

- (1) a Bible (if you want to look up references to passages cited as part of teaching/discussion)
- (2) something to take notes with (notebook, laptop, etc.)
- (3) this packet (you can print it or have it with you electronically)

For Those Who Intend To Join Emmanuel (become a member)

Attendance at both class sessions is required, and an interview with 2 elders (we will discuss in the class what the interview is). If you are unable to make one of the class sessions, be in touch with the Pastor about options.

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Class Outline

1. Introductions
2. Why church membership?
 - why do we believe you should join a church?
 - membership process: interview
3. What does it mean to be Presbyterian?
 - Reformed theology
 - Elder led government
 - Presbyterian Church in America
- 4a. Membership vows¹ 1-3 – what does it mean to be a Christian?
- 4b. Membership vows 4-5 – what does it mean to be part of a local church?
5. Vision of Emmanuel and Core Values
6. Worship at Emmanuel
7. Who's Who at Emmanuel (leadership and staff)
8. Challenging Issues
(some of the positions that Emmanuel holds that are counter cultural, or not agreed upon by all churches)
9. The culture of Emmanuel – church life

¹ you can find the 5 membership vows on pg 7

Emmanuel Presbyterian Church
Vision Statement
[July 2005]

¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Colossians 1:17-18)

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

(Jeremiah 29:7)

Our Identity: Who are we?

Emmanuel Church is a community of believers, centered in the Morningside Heights area of New York. We are a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America who warmly welcome people from all church backgrounds and none. Committed to the historic Christian faith as summarized in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and rekindled by the Protestant Reformation, we are also committed to articulating that faith contextually. We call ourselves "Emmanuel" ("God with us") because we believe that Jesus has brought God near to us. God's nearness brings life to all that we do—to our worship, our friendships, our families, our thought life, our studies, and our work. We embrace Emmanuel's love for the city and seek to share his beauty, truth, and goodness with the diverse communities where we live and work.

Our Mission: Why are we here?

To know Emmanuel and to advance his peace in our community.

- To know Emmanuel is both to know about him and to experience him. We therefore seek continually to be renewed in our faith.
- To know Emmanuel is to glorify and enjoy God through his Son by the power of his Holy Spirit (who indwells us, changing our hearts, showing us the Father's love, and making Jesus the Lord we love to follow). We seek therefore to see the relevance of Jesus Christ and his gospel to every issue in our lives and our world, and we pray continually for the Holy Spirit to fill our efforts to keep Christ central.
- Emmanuel's peace, the full expression of which awaits his return, is God's wholeness and peace, his promised renewal and transformation of all things--in nature, in human nature, in human relationships, and in human work.
- Our geographical community is Morningside Heights and the areas immediately surrounding it, particularly West Harlem, Manhattan Valley, and Harlem Heights, extending to the northern reaches of Manhattan.
- Our personal community is that group of people near whom we live and with whom we work and study.

Our Core Values: What are we passionate about?

- 1. Vitality through knowing Jesus Christ:** We seek much more than Christian information: we seek to see and know Jesus as he reveals God to us in the gospel, for to see him is to experience continual renewal in our lives and ministries. We know Jesus better through regular and intentional participation in the means of grace—fellowship, Bible study, prayer, the sacraments, and a missional life. Worship, public and private is very important to us.
- 2. Equipping and discipling:** Noting the high level of turn-over in the city and in our congregation, we seek to disciple and equip those who come to us so that when they leave they are able to make a significant contribution to the places and churches to which God sends them.
- 3. Community life:** We strongly believe that significant growth happens only in the context of safe, honest and caring friendships. For this reason we provide small group and one-on-one mentoring relationships.
- 4. Holistic ministry:** We look to see the influence of Jesus' transforming lordship in all things and in the whole of our lives. Teaching the Bible and showing love in practical ways are of equal importance—as are evangelism and academics, prayer and social justice, doctrinal orthodoxy and beautiful music, strong relationships and responsible care for the environment. How we think at and about work and school is as important as how we think at and about church.
- 5. Incarnational living:** We seek to emulate Jesus' modus operandi in our pattern of life and ministry: As Jesus, lovingly committed to our healing, fully entered our experience while remaining faithful to his Father, so we seek, lovingly committed to our world's healing, to enter genuinely and faithfully into the communities and workplaces where God has placed us, while also seeking to be faithful to Christ in those places. Such engagement meant suffering for Jesus, and we should not be surprised or disheartened if it means suffering for us.
- 6. City loving Attitude:** We choose to love NYC—its people and its institutions. We choose neither to stand aloof from the city nor to be swallowed up by its values where they are fallen. Instead we choose to be its friends—to feel its pains, to enjoy its glories, to pray for its peace, and to subvert it to the King by sacrificial love. We exist not to make ourselves a great church but to make New York a great city.
- 7. Local focus:** We see ourselves as a local church, existing to enhance Jesus' loving reign in our part of town, especially at the university and among the local poor. We are not just in this part of town, nor are we all from here; but we are for this area. Over time we would rejoice to know that the neighborhood in and around Morningside Heights, including West Harlem, Harlem Heights, and Manhattan Valley, is a better place--a

kinder place, a more just place--more reflective of God's plan, because we have been here.

8. **Church planting:** We believe that church planting is our Lord's preferred means of seeing his kingdom expand. We ourselves are a church plant and we seek to plant other urban churches, especially in New York.
9. **Prayer for the victory and honor of God over all things and all people.** We believe that God is at work through the gospel to overthrow the deeply imbedded antipathy towards him that exists in every person, every activity, and every institution in this world—including the church. We further believe that God alone can win this battle, and therefore we pray for his hand to be in everything we undertake.

Our Ministry Focus: Whom are we aiming particularly to serve?

In our efforts to serve the community where God has placed us we note especially the importance of ministry to Columbia University (and the other local academic institutions) and the local poor.

Emmanuel Presbyterian Church
Some Advice from the Elders on Joining
(February 2004)

We warmly welcome any who find their way into our community life. You may be burnt out from a past church experience and just need to "hide" with us for a while. You may be unsure of what you believe and come to us from time to time to figure things out. You may be a committed member of a church outside the city and are here with us only for a short time while you pursue a degree or a job assignment. You are always welcome, no strings attached.

But if you live in New York, and if you are a committed Christian, you ought at the very least to be thinking seriously about membership, if not at Emmanuel Church, then somewhere. We believe you should for at least two reasons.

Reasons for Joining

First, we encourage you to join a local church because we are convinced that it will do you good. Commitment fosters growth. Joining a church in our understanding is not simply putting your name on a roll; it is committing to a group of people, "warts and all" (their warts and yours). Joining a local church is a little like getting married. In both cases public promises are made that make love specific. We may be enthusiastic about the concept of "being in love". But we do not actually start loving until love is hard, and a commitment obliges us to work at it. As long as we remain church floaters--unattached by public promise to any specific group--we will avoid having to love obnoxious and boring people (people like ourselves--every church has them). This may be convenient but it is a recipe for stunted personal growth.

Even more important, we encourage you to join a local church because we believe that Jesus wants you to. When in Matthew 28 he commanded the apostles to baptize, he was implicitly commanding them to form local assemblies marked by loving accountability, for baptism functions as the sign of incorporation into such assemblies. The Lord loves us too much to allow us to drift alone through the years of our pilgrimage.

Commitments We Ask of You

If you choose to join EPC, there are a number of commitments that we will ask you to make. Please note that we do not see these commitments as rules for **becoming a Christian**. We see them, rather as a picture of what **being a Christian** looks like in practical terms. Salvation is always by grace, and it should be no more difficult to enter the church than it is to enter heaven. You are, in fact, already a member of Christ's universal church if you are a believer, for on the day you first believed, according to 1 Corinthians 12:13, you "were baptized by one Spirit into one body". Committing to a local church is simply the way in which we live up to the reality of who we already are.

By asking you to make these commitments, it is not our intention to “swallow you up” in Emmanuel. Your Christian involvements (your giving and your fellowship, for example) will no doubt be broader than those that you undertake with us—and we applaud this. But we do want to help you to give substance to the vows you will take, should you join us.

The Vows (specified by our denomination) and Their Application in Our Setting

The Vows:

1. Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope save in his sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to promote its purity and peace?

Our understanding of the meaning of the Membership Vows in our context:

1. **Personal growth.** We encourage steady, focused involvement in the life and the ministry of the church. We do not encourage the sort of frenzied over commitment that will only burn you out. (Ask for our booklet, **Emmanuel’s Orchard: A Plan for Growing in Jesus Christ**; it will help you identify where you need to grow and what you can do about it).
2. **Regular attendance at EPC worship.** It is tempting to have a consumer mentality about worship, especially in New York, where so many options exist (there is always a better “show” or a more convenient time). We strongly discourage this way of thinking. Church is not an event we attend; it is a people to whom we commit. Public worship is the one regular community event at EPC. The preaching unites our minds around the same vision and set of ideas, the interactions before and after help to build friendships and community. It is difficult for us to see how you can “support the church in its worship and work” (Promise 4) without making a priority out of attendance at public worship. Public worship, furthermore, is the place where we regularly enjoy ordained preaching and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, both of them means appointed by Christ for our spiritual health. Worship by convenience not only works against the formation of community; it stunts our spiritual growth. Note the admonition in Hebrews 10:25:

²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

3. Regular commitment to intentional fellowship

Jesus commands us to love one another. Sunday worship, for all its necessary benefits, does not provide the sort of setting that enables us to do this. We need smaller groups. For this reason we strongly urge you to attend our **Retreats** (we have one or two yearly), join one of our **Home Fellowship Groups** and/or enter an **Accountability Relationship** with one or two people (we have an accountability workbook to help you get started).

- **Retreats** are one of the best ways to get “inside” the Emmanuel family.
- **Emmanuel HFGs** are particularly important in such a transient and busy city. Even though Emmanuel is a size where it is easier to get to know people (which becomes a challenge in large churches, so home groups seem more essential), we have found that those who don’t commit to a regular meeting during the week with the same smaller group of people are at risk of lacking a real and meaningful connection. A home fellowship group is one of the best places to make real the following picture of vital fellowship found in Colossians 3:

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

As iron sharpens iron, so does one friend help sharpen the countenance of another. (Proverbs 27:17)

4. Regular service in some Emmanuel ministry and in some community

outreach. This involves more than the occasional use of special gifts you may have; we always need help in the “household chores” of the church—tasks like chair setup, refreshments, teaching Sunday school, running the sound board or projector during worship, sitting at the welcome table, and ushering. We also provide opportunities to serve our city and neighbors, with a particular focus on those struggling with needs, and would like everyone to be involved in some way.

³⁸ Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6)

- 5. Regular and proportional giving to EPC.** Though there is no fixed New Testament rule for the precise proportion, at least 10% given freely (God does not need our money, but he wants our hearts) is a good place to begin. As you consider your giving bear in mind a few things. First, it makes sense to us that the largest proportion of your giving should come to EPC, since that is the place where you are primarily nurtured. Second, EPC is both strategic and fragile. God has given us many talented young people, an exciting stewardship; but young people do not have much money. To carry on our ministry in such an expensive city, we need everyone who is part of our church family to give as much as he or she possibly can.

⁷ But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. ⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich... (Ch 9) ⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (2 Cor 8,9)

- 6. Thoughtful (not blind) submission to the loving oversight of EPC's leadership.** EPC's leadership does not plan to be overbearing, nor do we pretend to be perfect (a good reason never to be overbearing!). Nevertheless we believe that Jesus gives leaders to his church to steer and shepherd it in his name. And it is therefore a safe and healthy thing to pray for leaders and to let them lead. In practice this means (a) speaking your mind fully whenever you feel you must about the direction of the church, but, when all is said and done, supporting the direction that the leadership takes; (b) praying regularly for the leadership (how can they lead well without wisdom?); (c) attending congregational meetings (there are only one or two each year, but a quorum is always needed for voting).

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13)

⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18)

We understand that you may have many good questions about joining Emmanuel that this paper does not answer. What should you do if you know that you are going to be in New York for only a few years (we have lots of students)? What should you do if you are a staff worker in a parachurch ministry and find yourself having to live out many of these commitments in a setting that is not, strictly speaking, Emmanuel? What should you do if you are living out these basic commitments in the context of another church but believe, for some compelling reason, that you should be a member at Emmanuel? We welcome your questions and will be happy to talk about them with you during your membership interview.

- The EPC Session

Worship at Emmanuel Presbyterian Church

Introduction: Worship is the most important thing that we do. It is also the thing that we do all the time, whether we are religious or not. To worship is to devote your life to something, and we all do that. One of the best ways to figure out what you worship is to ask this question: “What is it that I cannot live without?” That something may be a relationship, or your health, or success, or peace of mind, or being left alone, or any number of other things. The really important question, then, is “What (or who) do you worship and is that person or thing stable and good enough to bear the weight of your life.

At Emmanuel Church we believe that the proper object of our hearts’ deepest trust is the God who made us, who has spoken to us through the Bible, and who has redeemed us through Jesus Christ. The smartest and most satisfying thing we can ever do in life is to learn how to worship him.

We believe that worship involves everything we do; perhaps its most concentrated expression is found in what we do when we get together with one another intentionally on the Lord’s Day to offer him our praises and our attention. What follows is a one-sentence definition of worship in this narrower sense followed by a discussion in more detail of each phrase in the definition. We hope that it will help clarify for you why we worship as we do.

I) A summary definition of public worship:

Corporate worship happens when, by the grace of God and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (knit inseparably together with our hard work), we all draw near to God in the ways appointed by Him, for the purpose of listening to His voice and responding in a variety of appropriate ways. Those ways include adoration, petition, promising, and exhorting, hearing the Word of God preached, and receiving the sacraments by faith.

The details:

“by the grace of God”:

True worship, like everything in the Christian life, is the free and undeserved gift of God. We are by nature dead to His praise, blind to His deeds, and deaf to His voice. This means that we try continually to guard against the error of thinking that, if we could “just” fine tune this or that, if we could “just” replace the preacher or change the style of worship, then the heart of our worship problem would be solved.

Because we depend on grace so much we urge one another to pray, continually, humbly, and specifically—during worship--for that grace in our worship (nineteenth century preacher Charles Spurgeon’s elders routinely prayed throughout the services he preached at).

Knowledge of God's grace encourages us not to continually "beat ourselves up" for the imperfections that we bring to our worship. Of course we must work on things, but not under the ultimately arrogant burden that it all depends on us.

Lastly, the God of grace urges us not to cast about frantically for "that one key thing" that will make our worship "really take off". On the flip side, he urges us never to become complacent if we think we have found that "one key thing or formula". We try to remember that Jonathan Edwards, the minister at the heart of the First Great Awakening, seems to have preached some of the most powerful revival messages in US history in a monotone.

"through the ministry of the Holy Spirit"

We try to rely particularly on the Third Person of the Trinity for living worship. He is the One who "convicts the world of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8), He is the One who "witnesses to our spirits that we are the children of God" (Romans 8), He is the One who "leads us into the truth" about Jesus (John 14,16). The Holy Spirit is the reason to hope that our worship will steadily improve, for He loves to glorify the Father and the Son through His people. Because we need the Holy Spirit's help so much, we hold a church-wide prayer meeting for 45 minutes every Sunday before worship.

"knit inseparably together with our hard work"

...work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, to will and to work according to His good pleasure. (Philippians 1:12-13)

We try not to make the mistake of thinking or acting as if genuine worship is either the product of our very best efforts or the ministry of the Spirit. To opt for the latter at the expense of the former is to invite laziness – an outrageous attitude in those who deign to come into the presence of the God of glory. But to opt for the former at the expense of the latter is to be outrageously arrogant. God can of course do whatever He wants whenever He wants (Jesus said he could raise up sons of Abraham from the stones on the ground). But the truly wonderful thing is that ordinarily this is not God's way. He prefers to work His wonders as we work, giving the very best we can.

Hard work can mean many things: long, specific prayer covering every facet of the worship service in question, careful preparation of an ensemble number, much thought regarding the selection, order and tempo of choruses, long and inconvenient ensemble rehearsals. For those who are "in the pew" hard work may involve praying and reading the Bible the night before, getting enough sleep, arriving early so that they can get settled in. Worship does not "just happen". It is a choice that we all must make. We prepare for it as we would for an important interview.

"we all..."

Let all be done decently and in order ...so the church may be edified (1 Corinthians 14:40,5).

Corporate worship involves everyone. It is not a spectator sport. The appropriate question to ask after worship is not, “How did it go?” but rather “How did I do?” Somehow we must continually impress upon every worshiper that God intends for all of us to be involved.

The corporate nature of worship has another implication. It means that my love for those around me may need to limit my free expression and preferred style somewhat. I will, in other words, need to be as concerned about my neighbor’s freedom and edification as I am for my own. I may find myself putting up with prayers and songs I can’t stand, and I may have to restrain a bit what I do in my “prayer closet:”

“drawing near”:

“So [the unbeliever] will fall down and worship God, exclaiming ‘God is really among you’ (1

Corinthians 14:25)

This expression points to the goal of authenticity in worship. Our aim should be genuinely to meet God, and this should lead to expectant preparation. Going through the motions or arriving on the scene half prepared is not ideal. In order to encourage such an encounter we choose lyrics that address the Lord directly—songs, in other words, that talk about God as “You” rather than “He”. We also do all that we can in worship to “keep things vertical”. Rather than editorializing (“and now we are going to sing hymn 247...” —this sort of announcement draws our attention to the person up front)) we make it clear in the bulletin what is coming next so that people can stay focused upward. We choose not to tell people how to feel, trusting that, if we can keep them focused upward, God will take care of the feelings.

“in the ways appointed by Him”

“When you come to the land that I will give you, do not ask ‘How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.’ You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates...See that you do all that I command you; do not add to it or take away from it” (Dt 12:30-32)

We are no more permitted to pick our own terms of approach than we are to pick our own kind of God. Imagine a marriage in which the husband is continually indifferent to his wife’s preferences on how he is to express his love to her: she wants him to listen more, to give her time, but he routinely ignores this, instead giving her a new car every year. Eventually she can’t stand it any longer, drives the newest car into a tree and runs off with

another man. There is no genuine love when the lover ignores the desires of the loved one. And this is as true of worshipping God as it is of “worshipping” one’s spouse.

We should limit ourselves to God’s appointed ways for a second reason: love for each other. Since corporate worship is not optional (Hebrews 10)—that is, since everyone must participate in it—it is oppressive to require anything in public worship beyond what God has required. For to do so, is to force some people to express their worship in a manner that is not mandated. One person’s freedom can be another’s bondage and stumbling block.

The principal “way appointed by him” is “through the Lord Jesus Christ.” This may sound obvious, but it is fascinating, and depressing, to note how easily we move away from this reality in our actual practice. Worship from beginning to end must be a celebration of grace: it is by grace (as mentioned all ready), and it is about grace. And the central figure in our experience of grace is Jesus Christ. We can only know God as Father through the imputed righteousness and the indwelling presence of the Son. We worship “in Spirit and in truth” only by the presence of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts (Hebrews 2).

What does this mean in practice? It means that we choose our hymns carefully. We love, for example, songs that celebrate God as our Creator and Sustainer, but we choose not to let them stand alone. They must be always supplemented by songs that celebrate his kindness to us in our Messiah Jesus. We also love to hear personal stories in worship; but we are careful to be sure that those stories articulate the crucial role that Jesus and his cross have played in the person’s pilgrimage. We sing lots of praise songs in lots of different styles—rejoicing in the diversity of God; but we are careful that the lyrics of the songs do not over-stress our piety and our response to God. We take preaching very seriously at EPC (some folks even complain that the sermons are too long—and sometimes they are!). Essential to our understanding of what makes a sermon good is a “yes” in response to the question, “Did this message help us to see God more clearly in the Person and work of his Son?” According to the apostle Paul the purpose of the Bible is to “make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15), and this is what we aim to do. To put the matter simply, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4)—not the other way around. Likewise, we grant him worth (“worship” is a conflation of “worth ship”) because he has granted us worth in assuming our flesh, living as one of us, and then dying as one of us in our place.

What follows are some of the passages that point out how central Jesus the messiah needs to be to our worship.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Hebrews 1)

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? (Hebrews 12)

¹⁰ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises." (Hebrews 2)

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) ⁷ Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 10)

II) Why do we have liturgy as part of our worship?

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Let the whole earth stand in awe of him.

Emmanuel worship contains a balance of different elements, including written creeds and responsive prayers. There are a number of reasons for the "liturgical" material that we use.

1) Liturgy helps us to get out of ourselves. We are all prone to "me-centered" spirituality, in which authenticity tends to be defined by my words, my feelings, my time and age, my culture. When we use liturgical language a number of things happen. (1) We are drawn outward to a "kingdom-centered" spirituality in which we discover afresh that "church" is much bigger than our local experience of it. Time honored prayers and creeds remind us that we belong to brothers and sisters across time and cultures. (2) We are drawn upward to a "God-centered" spirituality in which mystery has its rightful place. The content of some written prayers and creeds is often far too rich to take in all at once; to say them in worship is to be reminded that certain (many) realities are true even if we cannot fully understand or control them.

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the

church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12)

⁹ After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Rev 7)

- 2) Liturgy helps us to love others.** C. S. Lewis once wrote that the church music he found most edifying was the church music that he did not like--since that music gave him the opportunity to love the person in the pew next to him who did. Liturgy, especially for those who do not prefer it, serves a similar purpose. It gives them the chance to love those in the congregation who prefer it. Those who prefer it may be from liturgical traditions, or they may be brand new believers for whom the measured thoughtfulness of carefully crafted prayers and creeds is much less frightening or off-putting than large doses of extemporaneous praying. Written prayers make it possible (potentially) for everyone to participate, even those who are not yet (or ever) comfortable crafting their own public prayers.
- 3) Good liturgy helps to protect us from bad worship.** What extemporaneous worship may gain in congregational involvement it may lose in quality. We all need to learn how to pray. Well-designed, theologically sound written prayers can help us pray better. Good prayers challenge those who are participating to evaluate their own belief.
- 4) Good liturgy honors our beautiful God and attracts people.** God is a beautiful God and liturgical language, generally more carefully crafted and apt than extemporaneous language, exalts his beauty. Beauty, furthermore, draws people who might not at first be willing to hear the gospel.

Some Underlying Assumptions

- 1. To be authentic one does not need to be spontaneous.** It is tempting to believe that we cannot be "real" unless we are speaking our own words, off the cuff. Anyone who has tried to write a love letter knows that this is not necessarily so. Sometimes it takes hours to articulate what is on our hearts, and often the words of a good poet say far more accurately than we ever could what it is that we are desperate to communicate. Hymns and praise songs often fire our devotion, and they are nothing more than written prayers set to music. If we can live with hymns we ought to be able to live with liturgy.

2. **Authenticity and worship are not necessarily the same thing.** We can say things "from our hearts" which are damaging and wrong.
3. **We can never escape form in worship.** Whether or not we use written prayers, we all have "orders of worship" that we follow, whether consciously or unconsciously. So the proper question is never whether we employ forms in worship; it is rather, "Which forms do we seek to use and why?" Our goal should be to develop a genuine "catholicity" in our worship, so that we are able to worship with equal genuineness regardless of whether we are using a personal prayer language, praying spontaneously aloud in English, or reciting the Nicene Creed.
4. **For worship to be genuine it need not always or fully engage the mind.** While Paul taught that edification must be given high priority in worship (1 Cor 14), he also taught us that "we do not know how to pray as we ought" and that, therefore, the Holy Spirit "groans in us with groans that are too deep for words" (Romans 8). Worship is not a lecture with some hymns on either side for spiritual window dressing. It is an encounter with the God of all glory and mystery who meets us at multiple levels simultaneously (he comes to us, for example, through our senses, and not merely our minds, when we take the Lord's Supper). We need not, therefore, demand that our mind be able to latch on to and process every part of a service (even the verbal parts) for those parts to be valid. If we did, we would have to jettison large sections of every sermon and most of every hymn and praise song. There is always much too much to take in. We should no more drop a good liturgical prayer because it is too rich than we should refuse to sing stanzas 2-4 of "Holy, Holy, Holy" because the hymn as a whole has too much to assimilate.

Preparing for worship

(some things to recognize and to do before and during public worship)

1. **Recognize:** Genuine worship, like everything else in the Christian life, is a gift of God's grace. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing". Paul wrote, "We do not know how to pray as we ought," and "No one says Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit." Jesus, and Jesus alone (by his Spirit), warms our hearts to experience the Father's love, opens our eyes to see the meaning of Jesus' work, and softens our hearts to delight in God's commands. Jesus has promised never to leave us and always to work in and among us.

Do: Come to worship expecting the Lord to do something there, in you and in those who are gathered. Pray before and during the worship for him to work in you and in all those who are gathered.

2. **Recognize:** Jesus lived a life of perfect worship on your behalf, making your worship today (for all its deep imperfections) as acceptable to the Father as your worship will be 10,000 years from now.

Do: Come humbly and boldly into God's presence when you worship. Don't be inhibited in your public praises and prayers by fears that you don't sound holy or eloquent enough.

3. Recognize: Corporate worship grows out of personal worship. Therefore, the most fundamental preparation for Sunday worship is the worship that flows from being a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1-2) and having a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17).

Do: Ask God for a heart of worship and brokenness each day, beginning now.

4. Recognize: You cannot expect to rush into church after an exhausting week-end and "be worshipful". The Lord gave us a Sabbath Day (not just a Sabbath "Hour") to rest and worship.

Do: Try to get a reasonable night's sleep so that you can come to church refreshed and alert.

5. Recognize: Conscious acknowledgement of who God is will prepare your heart for coming into his presence.

Do: On Saturday night, before sleeping, read individually (or pray with your roommate/spouse/children) passages of Scripture which remind you of who God is and pray that even as you sleep, the Lord would prepare you to worship Him.

6. Recognize: We are naturally blind and deaf when it comes to encountering God. Our hearts desperately need to be prepared.

Do: Spend time alone in prayer and meditation before coming to church.

7. Recognize: You cannot prepare adequately just before worship if you are late arriving. At EPC we attempt to start a service promptly at the specified times.

Do: If you enjoy talking with friends before the service, come early and do so. But keep your eye on your watch and head in to the worship area at 10:20 or 10:25 so that you won't miss the call to worship.

8. Recognize: What you are really doing when you come to worship is joining with "the general assembly and the church of the first born who are in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23). We worship with the whole of God's elect from every time and place - including the angels! (Hebrews 12:22)

Do: As you come into church, imagine the host of brothers and sisters (saints from all ages and angels) who are waiting to worship with you.

9. Recognize: There is a healthy balance between greeting friends and being quiet before the service starts.

Do: Feel quite free to be quiet before a service with your head bowed. If you are greeting someone, be considerate of those around you who are privately preparing.

10. Recognize: Worship takes as much effort as solving a complex problem in your checkbook or playing a good set of tennis.

Do: Think as you worship. It will never be possible to take everything in, but focus on a phrase or two as a creed or hymn goes by. Occasionally stop singing in the midst of a hymn and listen for a word or two from the Holy Spirit.

11. Recognize: Worship is much more than hearing a sermon. The opening portion of our service at EPC is not "window dressing" or a warm-up for the message.

Do: Concentrate on the meaning of each part of the worship as it occurs.

12. Recognize: Worship should change us.

Do: Come expecting that the Lord is going to speak to you and resolve to do one concrete thing as a result of what you hear.

13. Recognize: We do not come to worship primarily for what we "get out of it". We come for what God "gets out of it". Do not expect to be entertained but to give worship to God.

Do: After the service, ask, "How did I do?" rather than "How do I feel" or "How did it go?"

An Overview Of The Theology Of Emmanuel (Reformed Theology)

Members at Emmanuel are required to have only a broadly Christian faith, and while the leaders (Elders) have to agree with the particulars of our tradition, members do not, so long as they fall within the bounds of the generally agreed upon theological views of the historic church (like those expressed in the Apostle's and Nicene Creed).

If you want to read in great detail what the leadership at Emmanuel believes, you can read the Westminster Confession of Faith, along with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. These are not easy reads, but concisely summarize our commitments.

Below is a briefer summary/overview of our theological standards, put together by BB Warfield, a respected figure in our tradition who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary in the 19th century. In this, Warfield shares his views on 13 key areas.

1. **The Bible** I believe that my one aim in life and death should be to glorify God and enjoy Him forever; and that God teaches me how to glorify and enjoy Him in His Holy Word, that is, the Bible, which He has given by the infallible inspiration of His Holy Spirit in order that I may certainly know what I am to believe concerning Him and what duty He requires of me.

2. **God** I believe that God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and incomparable in all that He is; one God but three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, my Creator, my Redeemer, and my Sanctifier; in whose power and wisdom, righteousness, goodness and truth I may safely put my trust.

3. **The Creation** I believe that the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, are the work of God's hands; and that all that He has made He directs and governs in all their actions; so that they fulfill the end for which they were created, and I who trust in Him shall not be put to shame but may rest securely in the protection of His almighty love.

4. **Man** I believe that God created man after His own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, and entered into a covenant of life with him upon the sole condition of the obedience that was His due: so that it was by willfully sinning against God that man fell into the sin and misery in which I have been born.

5. **The Fall** I believe that, being fallen in Adam, my first father, I am by nature a child of wrath, under the condemnation of God and corrupted in body and soul, prone to evil and liable to eternal death; from which dreadful state I cannot be delivered save through the unmerited grace of God my Savior.

6. **Grace** I believe that God has not left the world to perish in its sin, but out of the great love wherewith He has loved it, has from all eternity graciously chosen unto Himself a multitude which no man can number, to deliver them out of their sin and misery, and of them to build up again in the world His kingdom of righteousness: in which kingdom I may be assured I have my part, if I hold fast to Christ the Lord.

7. **Christ** I believe that God has redeemed His people unto Himself through Jesus Christ our Lord; who, though He was and ever continues to be the eternal Son of God, yet was born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem them that are under the law: I believe

that He bore the penalty due to my sins in His own body on the tree, and fulfilled in His own person the obedience I owe to the righteousness of God, and now presents me to His Father as His purchased possession, to the praise of the glory of grace forever: wherefore renouncing all merit of my own, I put all my trust only in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ my Redeemer.

8. **The Lord** I believe that Jesus Christ my Redeemer, who died for my offenses was raised again for my justification, and ascended into the heavens, where He sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty, continually making intercession for His people, and governing the whole world as head over all things for His church: so that I need fear no evil and may surely know that nothing can snatch me out of His hands and nothing can separate me from His love.

9. **The Holy Spirit** I believe that the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ is effectually applied to all His people by the Holy Spirit, who works faith in me and thereby unites me to Christ, renews me in the whole man after the image of God, and enables me more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness; until, this gracious work having been completed in me, I shall be received into glory: in which great hope abiding, I must ever strive to perfect holiness in the fear of God.

10. **The Gospel** I believe that God requires of me, under the gospel, first of all, that, out of a true sense of my sin and misery and apprehension of His mercy in Christ, I should turn with grief and hatred away from sin and receive and rest upon Jesus Christ alone for salvation: that, so being united to Him, I may receive pardon for my sins and be accepted as righteous in God's sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to me and received by faith alone: and thus only do I believe I may be received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.

11. **Good Works** I believe that, having been pardoned and accepted for Christ's sake, it is further required of me that I walk in the Spirit whom He has purchased for me, and by whom love is shed abroad in my heart; fulfilling the obedience I owe to Christ my King; faithfully performing all the duties laid upon me by the holy law of God my heavenly Father; and ever reflecting in my life and conduct, the perfect example that has been set me by Christ Jesus my Leader, who has died for me and granted to me His Holy Spirit just that I may do the good works which God has before prepared that I should walk in them.

12. **The Church** I believe that God has established His church in the world and endowed it with the ministry of the Word and the holy ordinances of Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Prayer; in order that through these as means, the riches of His grace in the gospel may be made known to the world, and, by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit in them that by faith receive them, the benefits of redemption may be communicated to His people: wherefore also it is required of me that I attend on these means of grace with diligence, preparation, and prayer, so that through them I may be instructed and strengthened in faith, and in holiness of life and in love; and that I use my best endeavors to carry this gospel and convey these means of grace to the whole world.

13. **The Future** I believe that as Jesus Christ has once come in grace, so also is He to come a second time in glory, to judge the world in righteousness and assign to each His eternal

award: and I believe that if I die in Christ, my soul shall be at death made perfect in holiness and go home to the Lord; and when He shall return in His majesty I shall be raised in glory and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity: encouraged by which blessed hope it is required of me willingly to take my part in suffering hardship here as a good soldier of Christ Jesus, being assured that if I die with Him I shall also live with Him, if I endure, I shall also reign with Him. And to Him, my Redeemer, with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, three Persons, one God, be glory forever, world without end. Amen, and amen.

B. B. Warfield, "A Brief and Untechnical Statement of the Reformed Faith". *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield v. 1*. John E. Meeter, ed. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, pp. 407-410.

Emmanuel Presbyterian Church
A History: The First 10 Years
(By Charles Drew)

I: Beginnings

In June 1998 at the annual meeting of the Presbyterian Church in America (called the General Assembly) Charlie Drew asked Tim Keller, founder and Senior Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, what the prospects were for church planting in the city. That conversation reopened one that had begun three years earlier and culminated in Charlie joining Redeemer's staff in September 1999. The expectation in this new arrangement was that in two or three years Charlie would plant a Redeemer daughter church somewhere in the city. Emmanuel Presbyterian Church of Morningside Heights (our full name) is that church.

Emmanuel is one of a number of churches inspired by the vision of Redeemer to saturate New York with city-loving churches committed to the great God-centered doctrines of the Protestant Reformation. Redeemer's vision is, in turn, kindled by the conviction that Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations is best fulfilled by establishing new churches in urban areas. Cities like New York are centers of cultural influence: churches that reach New Yorkers are churches that reach the world.

A lover of the arts who had served churches in university towns for twenty years, Charlie was drawn almost immediately to Morningside Heights. He found the socio-economic diversity and the mix of internationals, students, musicians, families, and the urban poor exhilarating and challenging. With the permission of the Redeemer leadership he began a series of monthly "Vision Meetings" in May 2000 and a weekly prayer meetings in June.

During this time our leadership began to grow. A strategic planning group of four, meeting for the first time in early July, evolved by September 9 into a task force of ten that we called our Launch Team. Comprised originally of Keith Clements, Iara Peng, Deb Christensen, Jeannie Drew, Cynthia Lyman, Mike Kuo, Sarah Han (later Kuo!), Andre Solomon, Selma Smith, Kathy Riddle (later Chao!), and Rosemary McCullough, we met regularly in Cynthia's apartment to dream, plan, coordinate, pray and work to give shape to our vision. Embracing the goal to be "up and running by March 2001," we hunted for office and worship sites, set up task forces for university ministry, prayer, home fellowship groups, Sunday operations, and community outreach.

II: 2001--The "Tabernacling" Period

To our delight and encouragement we secured the Seventh Church of Christ, Scientist on 112th Street and were able to begin weekly evening worship in late October, four months ahead of schedule. The following excerpt from our November 2000 newsletter captures the excitement of that first night:

On October 29 we began weekly worship in our beautiful new space. An hour before the service was to begin, the place began to hum with energy as a score of volunteers rushed purposefully about, setting up the audio, preparing communion, finalizing the bulletins, praying in the balcony, prepping for child care, setting up refreshments, and rehearsing for special music. It felt very much like an opening night (I guess it was!). To our immense encouragement nearly 120 folks gathered for a rich time of worship. I spoke from Acts 1 on the necessity of waiting for the Holy Spirit, stressing that without his help we could not possibly fulfill our mission, nor would we care to.

Following the service about twenty of us celebrated at a nearby restaurant. The "opening night" highlight for me was the privilege of chatting comfortably about the gospel over dinner with a mainland Chinese graduate student who had been brought to church by a friend. She had been to Christian worship only three times in her life, all within the last few weeks since her arrival in New York. Suddenly, and to her delight, the whole group gathered around and surprised her with a cake and a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday". I had just preached on Acts 1:8, where Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And here we were, the "ends of the earth" brought to our doorstep, bearing witness to his life and love.

Office space at a very good rate became available at the turn of the year and with the generous help of a number of gifted volunteers we were able to design, furnish, and move into our beautiful office overlooking Morningside Heights by March 2001.

With Emmanuel's "launching" in late 2000, the Launch Team began to phase out and the Exec Team began its work. A sub committee of the original Launch Team, the Exec Team (comprised of Chun Lai, Jeannie Drew, Mike Kuo, Andre Solomon, Rosemary McCullough, and Larry Christensen--with the later additions of John Chao, Scott Strickman and Melissa Locher) began to meet once or twice monthly for what was to exceed two years to consult with Charlie Drew, to pray, and to shape our ministry. Under their guidance we became a Mission Church (June 2001), incorporated and elected trustees (September 2001), developed budgets for 2002 and 2003, and continued to grow and minister.

Building Community and a Prayer Life

Impressed by the description of the church in Acts 2, we gave a great deal of attention in our first year to fellowship and prayer. The weekly prayer meeting in the summer of 2000 evolved into a midweek prayer time twice monthly in the fall and weekly prayer before worship once we had our space at Seventh Church. In addition, elder teams offered prayers for healing a number of times during communion, our monthly Mission and Prayer Meeting (MPM) began, and our first retreat (described below--from our newsletter) was dedicated to prayer:

On Saturday February 3 over thirty folks crammed into [the Drew's] apartment for a six-hour prayer retreat. We followed the ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication)

approach, dividing our time among these four types of prayer with lots of singing, concluding with the Lord's Supper together. The numbers (close to 40% of our average worship attendance) encouraged us greatly. The quality of our time and its evident fruit encouraged us even more. One participant said, "I have known about the ACTS model for some time; but this is the first time I have seen it in action. I know how to do it now." A seminary student who helps oversee our small group ministry echoed the reaction of many when he told me at worship the next day, "I feel like the quality of our community life has just taken a quantum leap forward." I had to agree with him. The numbers (over 110) and the energy at worship the next day attested to it.

Praying together for the kingdom to come is a worthy enterprise in itself. But it has many marvelous by-products, one of which is the binding together of those who pray. To quote the apostle Paul there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all." We taste this reality when we come to him together--heads, hearts, and voices centering on the things that matter to him. And this reality is particularly attractive to the lonely people of the city, of whom there are many.

Fellowship was another priority. Much of it happened informally as scores of us routinely enjoyed dinner together in a variety of local restaurants after church. Our spring overnight retreat drew 70 and eager requests to take a full weekend next year. We saw as especially important our home fellowship groups and had Scott Strickman, our seminarian, focus his attention on them. The single greatest challenge these groups faced was church identification. Since Emmanuel had developed out of the Redeemer network, many groups had a mix of people from both churches. One of the stated purposes of our small groups was that they be "staging points" for ministry in the church and in the community--a purpose difficult to realize if the groups lacked a strong connection to our church and vision. We determined to give the process time--to allow the groups to grow and multiply along church lines.

When in June 2001 presbytery approved our request to be a mission church, Charlie reported that "We are 'Redeemer local--but without the bankers' ...strategic and fragile." Of the nearly 100 who signed the petition virtually half were students, undergrads and graduate students, largely from Columbia. Our leadership began to pray for older, more seasoned Christians. We also began to grapple with the fact that we were something of a revolving door. We determined that rather than wringing our hands at the prospect of so much instability, we should see ourselves with a remarkably strategic calling--to do everything we possibly could to equip these young people for service in the church and the world. To that end we introduced our Growth Partnership Network at the fall retreat in September. GPN provided a mentoring program aimed at helping folks enter into mutually edifying one-on-one relationships and close to 50 signed up to participate.

Reaching Out

We determined from the beginning to try to strike a biblical balance between "inreach" and outreach. Knowing that Emmanuel's draw for many was the sense of belonging and warmth that a small church enjoys, we kept trying to lean against self-absorption.

Through frequent personal stories and resistance to religious lingo in our preaching, we sought to keep our public worship accessible to inquirers. We set up our Community Relations Team whose task was to define for us a local mission and to implement at least one initiative. At Christmas 2000 we took a special offering that enabled us to send water treatment kits to 1400 third world children, most of whom are constantly at risk due to water-borne disease. At about the same time we set up a prayer table on the sidewalk near church one Sunday afternoon and offered prayer for any passersby who desired it.

September 11 drove us out of ourselves to the steps in front of Lowe Library at Columbia. The following excerpt from our newsletter describes what happened:

Few of us will forget the devastation of September 11. As I type this, I need only glance up to behold the smoking ruins of what used to be the World Trade Towers. On the evening of that harrowing day about 150 of us gathered on the broad steps that descend from Lowe Library at the center of the Columbia campus to hear God's Word, to pray, to sing, and to inform one another of ways we can help our fellow New Yorkers. Many faces in that crowd I recognized, but many I did not as people, troubled and shocked, were drawn toward the presence of Christ. From my vantage point at the base of the steps I could see the façade of the magnificent domed library where are etched the words, 'For the Public Good and to the Glory of Almighty God'. And here we were pleading in humble desperation to Almighty God for the public good.

The next morning I sent a note by email to our church family, a portion of which follows:

"Psalm 46 reads in part, 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea...Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts...Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the nations....' God does not change and he is good. To this great reality we must cling. The greatest testimony to his faithfulness is not the stability or ease of our present circumstances. It is rather the promise he made and kept at the cross to rescue his people from sin and death. Some of our number are still unaccounted for (as I write this newsletter one is still missing). We have the hope with respect to them that not even the worst-case scenario is a match for God's provision in Christ. We know that in the end God will wipe every tear from our eyes and make all things new (Revelation 21). We know that our God is just and in the end all wrongs will be righted and all things done in secret will be brought to his judgment. Remember and preach these things to yourself. Take time to "be still and know that he is God."

On Christmas 2001 fifty of us went caroling through the neighborhood after worship (what follows is from the January newsletter):

On December 16 we held our second annual Service of lessons and Carols to a packed house. In my message I said, among other things, that God's choice to become a carpenter ratified the

holiness of all creativity. And the beauty, excellence and variety of the music God gave us through our church family on that occasion proved the truth of that observation. A string quartet opened. We heard a contemporary setting of the Magnificat and Frank's traditional setting of "O Holy Night", both exquisitely rendered. A violin duet graced us with a movement from Bach's double violin concerto, a vocal ensemble performed "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree" brilliantly, and a jazz guitar duet jamming "Go Tell it on the Mountain" brought the house down. Following the benediction we all rose and sang the Halleluia Chorus stirringly accompanied by our organist. So fired up were we that about 50 of us went caroling together afterwards on Broadway, bringing cheer and handing out "Finding God in New York", a presentation of the gospel I had recently written. Our caroling took us to numerous restaurants and to the local Fire Station where we were invited in. We ended singing in front of one of the libraries at Columbia.

Along the way I met Juanita, a Columbia grad student who latched on to us as we walked the streets. I handed her "Finding God" and then, noticing her tears, asked if I could pray for her. I have no idea what was troubling her but it was a great joy to commend her to God's care. Please pray that God will keep sending "Juanitas" our way.

During 2001 we also established our Mercy Fund, whose resources we distributed to members and friends of our church family. Though we had little space for children's ministry and only a few very small children, we hired Jennifer Billings as our part-time Coordinator of Children's Ministries in the fall of 2001 in order to spearhead our ministry to families in the area. Our 2001 children's Christmas party drew a remarkably diverse socio-economic group of local families.

In the fall we offered our first membership class and thirty were received as charter members the first Sunday of November, one year after we had begun regularly worshipping together. Throughout the year weekly attendance climbed steadily, from an average of 80 in January 2001 to about 100 in January 2002. Though we spiked to 146 on September 9 and to over 170 the Sunday following 9/11, we did not have the space or infrastructure to retain such numbers. Students continued to comprise a significant portion (about 1/3) of our worshipers. We enjoyed a steady stream of people from overseas, as the following newsletter excerpt indicates:

Following worship one recent Sunday (in January 2001), I spoke in succession with three people. One (Tim) was a native of Singapore who attended Yale as an undergraduate and is now at Columbia Law School. He made a point of coming up to introduce himself and interact appreciatively about the sermon. The second (Yemi) was a Nigerian doing a PhD in art history at Columbia, with whom I had already enjoyed a lively discussion on another occasion about the arts and evangelism. He asked for a copy of the sermon to share with a friend. The third (Ying) was a young woman from a city deep in the center of mainland China pursuing graduate work in sociology, also at Columbia. A week or so later my wife Jeannie and I joined Ying and a mutual friend for dinner at a local restaurant followed by dessert at our uptown apartment, where we talked at great length about her many questions regarding the Christian faith.

It would mislead you to suggest that these three friends represent the whole, or even the major, constituency of Emmanuel Church. They do not. But they do represent a significant and strategic group in the community where God has placed us, and it delights me immensely that God is bringing folks like this to us. We impact the world, and not simply Morningside Heights, through such friends. Please keep praying for us.

III: 2002—Growing in Our New Morning Worship Space

Throughout most of 2001, and with increasing urgency, we had been looking and praying for more space, and morning space. So frustrating was our search that we had begun to abandon our hopes for morning space altogether. Additional space at almost any time of day was proving equally difficult. When Charlie Drew revisited Union Theological Seminary, bracing himself for another no, he was astonished to learn that the James Chapel (seating 250), together with two classrooms and a storage closet, was available for eight hours every Sunday.

Leadership Development

What we had called our "tabernacling period" ended in February 2002 when we began regular Sunday morning worship at Union. With room to grow we began to focus our attention especially on leadership development. About thirty leaders attended a daylong leadership retreat in February 2. In July we took on Scott Strickman as our first full-time intern. He helped us enormously in developing our mercy and home fellowship group ministry, and we provided him with a supervised pastoral internship as he prepared for ordination and sought to test his calling as an urban church planter. We also introduced "lay" leadership training during this period. In April and May we nominated candidates for our Session and our Emmanuel Mercy Team (our diaconal workers). They were trained through the fall, examined in January, and elected by the congregation on February 9. At that same meeting we voted to call Charlie Drew (hitherto the New York Metro Presbytery's appointee) as our pastor. With these developments we now had the makings of a permanent session (board of elders), thus qualifying us to become a full-fledged (or "particular") church. On February 23, 2003, our presbytery formally organized us as a PCA congregation.

Community and Prayer

Our Mission and Prayer Meetings continued through the year, with as many as 25 gathering monthly to hear about developments at EPC and to pray for the world, our city and our church. We made a fresh commitment in September to weekly prayer before worship and held a day of prayer in February (2003), in which thirty participated. Home fellowship groups continued to meet, as did their leaders with one another, directed by our intern. The spring retreat was, as had been requested the previous year, a two-day affair focusing on calling, and drew as large and enthusiastic crowd as had the one in 2001.

Reaching Out and Growing

With so much of our energy focused on leadership cultivation and preparation for particularization, we did not see much development in our vision for community impact during 2002. There were, however, a number of important initiatives. One was the opening of a weekly outreach Bible study for internationals--an encouraging beginning in our efforts to reach the thousands of overseas students in our neighborhood. A second was the development of a world-view course, offered on the Columbia campus for undergraduates. Put together by four Emmanuelites (three graduates of the University and a present graduate student), it aimed at helping Columbia undergraduates address the many faith-challenging questions that arise in the Contemporary Civilization course they must take in their second year. A third encouraging development during 2002 was the dramatic increase in our Mercy Fund giving (jumping from under \$2000 in 2001 to nearly \$8000 in 2002). Through this fund we were able to help people significantly who were struggling to make ends meet while searching for employment in our slowed economy. We also refined our process for addressing financial needs so as to make our decisions more clear, accountable, and fair. On another front, we instituted "Prayer Triage Teams", whose purpose was to provide prayer and (as appropriate) limited financial assistance after worship on Sundays.

A particularly notable opportunity came our way when we received a \$20,000 grant to assist people from our neighborhood who had been adversely affected by 9/11. What follows appeared in our newsletter:

After church on Sunday, September 8, a number of us had the privilege of dining with some 9/11 victims whom we have been able to help with the grant.... One was an experienced actress ("Law and Order", commercials, and a one woman show) whose livelihood evaporated with the catastrophic falling off of entertainment revenues in New York after the attack. Another was "George", a 65-year-old gentleman who has lived in our neighborhood for forty years. George is a hard-working small business entrepreneur who had just sunk \$100,000s into a viable high-tech venture when the terrorists struck. "Within 24 hours," he said, "I knew I was ruined--dead in the water; venture capital was no where to be found, my personal investment gone." By January George was facing eviction from four months' back-rent. He was so despondent that he was seriously contemplating suicide: "The bridge began to look very good to me." Government agencies, claiming that he did not live near enough to Ground Zero, refused to help him. In fact they treated him with disdain and mistrust--"like a criminal" is the language he used as he told his story (this attitude eventually changed, but it took another six months). Some time in January George met Sue (the Emmanuel Church person who was administering our grant), told his story, and received some substantial help. The combined assistance from us, a relief agency, and a New York law firm (who freely took on all George's legal issues) lifted George and his company out of deep distress. Though he is still not completely out of the woods--he still cannot go down to the site of the attack--his situation is much better. As George, with thankful tears, told us his story, I was deeply moved by two thoughts: (1) Jesus, the Lord of our city, had shown great kindness to this man; and (2) Jesus had graciously permitted our little church to be one of the conduits of that kindness.

George has worshipped at EPC a few times. It is always good to see him and it is a joy to have partnered with our Lord in a demonstration of the sort of "no-strings-attached" love with which he loves us. Please pray for many such demonstrations in our great city.

In the spring of 2002 three of our musicians asked if we would host a series of chamber music concerts they wanted to organize through the 2002-2003 season. Their desire was two-fold: (1) to offer something beautiful, free of charge, to our neighborhood, and (2) to draw a number of their musician friends into the orbit of the church by asking them to participate in the concerts. Between 30 and 50 (many of them from outside the church) attended the Sunday afternoon concerts, each of them begun by a brief word, usually from Charlie Drew, aimed at drawing the connection between beauty and the gospel.

Growth continued in 2002. Average worship attendance increased by 38 % over the previous year (the final quarter saw a 70% increase over the same period in 2001). We received an additional thirty members on Easter, and another twenty in December, bringing our membership to 83. With an average age of 28 our committed congregation, as of February 1 2003, broke down as follows: 25% students, 14% in the arts, 10% each in finance and technology, 5% each in medicine, teaching, publishing, and stay-at-home parenting, and 21% in a range of fields (administration, art history, executive assistance, marketing, Christian ministry, the police, psychotherapy, real estate, and social services).

We also continued to see people come to Christ. The following excerpt from our December newsletter tells some of the stories:

The week before Thanksgiving a Barnard senior came to see me. From an unchurched background (she described her parents as lapsed Catholics), she told me that a college friend had brought her to Emmanuel last spring. She had left worship unimpressed, but for some strange reason found herself returning repeatedly this fall. To paraphrase her remarks: "Something very strange has begun to happen to me in worship. I find myself believing in God, even loving him. I almost feel guilty about it because so many of my friends still don't. What's going on?" I told her that she has experienced the mystery of spiritual rebirth.

There are other stories like this. About a month ago, stirred deeply as one of our members (presently auditioning for the New York Philharmonic) played for the offertory the slow movement from a Mozart bassoon concerto, a young person gave his life over to Christ.

Around that time a consultant (born in America to Buddhist parents) who had been worshipping with us for a number of weeks prayed with me in a similar way following the service.

IV: Reflecting on Our First Two Years

2002 was a year of new challenges for us in at least two related areas--expenses and vision. Our internal giving was up appreciably (30%) over 2001, but it was still not enough to meet our costs. With the downturn of the economy and the prospect of the external "seed" money decreasing to nothing by the end of 2003, we had to look hard at our expenses. In

preparing the 2003 budget we cut salaries and operational costs, and agreed to look for more outside money to carry us through 2004. At the same time our vision compelled us to take two faith steps. One was to agree to "tithe" our inside giving in 2003 to benevolences (local mercy ministry, church planting, and missions). The other was to take Scott Strickman on for another year--this time as an ordained minister--to round out his training as a church planter.

When we formally organized, and with two years of actual experience under our belt, we began to ask a number of important questions about our vision. How did our actual way of "doing church" correspond to the stated vision when we began? Who was actually coming to worship, and who was not coming? Why was this so? Given our actual constituency, could we afford to "do church" in the way we had been doing it? How were we to cope with the inevitable fact of high-level congregational turnover, given our young and mobile constituency and the consumer mentality that is so much a part of our culture? Given our actual constituency, how much of a neighborhood church were we? What sort of impact were we having on the local community, given our aim to be a parish church? Was it enough? If not, why not, and what could we do about it? Was the strong family feeling which drew many of us at the outset beginning to fade? If so, why? What should, or could, be done about it? Were we becoming too professionalized? How were we different from our mother church's west side church, and from other churches in our neighborhood? Did we need to be different? Was public worship what we had hoped it would be? If not, what could or should be done about it? Should we move to multiple services with different styles? If we do, what impact would this have on our sense of family?

Good Questions and Certain Hope

These were all good questions, and we saw that they were inevitable. We remembered that when we first began to meet just two years earlier, all we had was a vision. Now we had two things: the vision and our actual experience, with the inevitable gaps between the two. We reminded ourselves that this sort of thing happens with every church plant in its first few years of existence. And in our case, the timing for serious self-reflection could not have been more appropriate, since (with organization as a particular church) we finally had our own officers, chosen by us, to help us find our way. We agreed to be patient and we began the important process of rethinking our vision and our practice.

When we organized in February 2003, Charlie Drew made the following statement:

"Someone has wisely said, "If you aim at nothing, you are bound to hit it." We must, and will, keep grappling with our calling as a church. But as we do, we must never forget Jesus' words about the mustard seed:

What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet

when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade. (Mark 4:30-32)

Perhaps, over the next five years we will grow to 600, have a huge impact on our neighborhood, and plant three daughter churches. Perhaps we will remain relatively small, plugging away at loving our neighborhood and building community among ourselves in the face of our constant turn over. Or perhaps we won't be here. We can make educated guesses (and we have reason to be optimistic), but there is so much that we do not know. There is one thing, however, of which we can be certain: Our faithfulness today, in whatever form, will not be wasted. The smallest seed, faithfully planted, brings the plant of our Lord's choosing in our Lord's timing. And that plant will be great and good--a shelter of Emmanuel's design."

V) Fast Forward to September 2005

During the two and a half years since we organized we continued to revise our vision so as to make more clear where we seek to focus our local ministry efforts and to make more prominent what we are passionate about (see our vision statement elsewhere on the website).

We also continued to grow in every way. Our vision for music developed so much so that we took on a part-time music coordinator to oversee it. Our children's ministry grew, requiring more staff time and additional space. Our budget in 2005, including the benevolence tithe, was close to \$450,000. And our attendance, which at times exceeded 250 during the '04-'05 academic year, convinced us that we needed to move to multiple services on Sunday mornings—a change we implemented August 28, 2005. Our Benevolence Tithe enabled us to give substantially to missions, and we rejoiced to see steady involvement of our own missionaries, both short-term and long-term, all over the world. We also continued to influence people world-wide—evidenced by the internationality of the forty-one new members who joined the church in November 2005. They were from Malaysia, Singapore, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, and all over the United States. One of them, a Taiwanese graduate student from a Buddhist home, prayed the following just before she was baptized:

Before knowing you, I found myself looking for approval from others for the things that I do.

While knowing you, I still found myself looking for approval from others to confirm my faith.

After knowing you, I look inside my heart, and I find your love and grace...

Gracious God, thank you for loving me with everything you have. Most of all, thank you for sending your Son Jesus to suffer death and hell in my place. Thank you for the price you paid for my redemption.

Our commitment to church planting continued through this period and took on a particularly strategic expression. Two church-planting interns trained with us in '04-'05—one of them leaving to start a church in Berlin and the other to church plant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In August 2005 we took on two new church planting interns—one of whom will return to Philadelphia where he hopes to start a church in 2007. Plans are afoot to have the other launch our first New York daughter church in the fall of 2007.

During our fifth anniversary celebration in early November 2005 we rejoiced to consider all that the Lord has done through us, despite our small size, the costliness of the city, and the high-level turnover that we have experienced. We determined to press on, not because it is easy but because it is right.

V) Through to 2010—Our Tenth Anniversary

In the course of the second five years, we pressed on in the priorities that we had established. We added a monthly prayer meeting (“First Fridays”) to the weekly Sunday morning prayer times and the twice yearly days of prayer. Eager to reach a more varied constituency, we experimented in the fall of 2009 with an evening service and began to make plans to begin regular evening worship in the fall of 2010. We kept up regular ministry to people in need, especially the homeless. We continued to receive people from all over the world, especially students—from such places as Colombia, Canada, Italy, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Togo, Nigeria, Uganda, Israel, Korea, Singapore, Honk Kong, Malasia, Japan, and especially China. Noting the substantial turnover in our church, we formalized and began to implement a plan for Christian growth (Emmanuel’s Orchard), the most prominent feature of which were monthly church family lunches focusing on topics of particular importance (“Orchard Sundays”).

We witnessed substantial growth in our ministry to children, to the point where they routinely comprised 20% of our congregation on Sunday mornings, requiring us to rent additional space from Union Seminary. Noting this growth we devoted more staff attention to developing our long term plan for ministry to children.

On the church planting front we saw the “birth” of our first daughter church (Uptown Community, in Washington Heights) under the leadership of Reyn Cabinte, who had trained with us. We also trained more church planting interns, bringing the total to 7, and rejoiced to see them move on to Berlin, Philadelphia, and places all over metropolitan New York (Brooklyn, Midtown East, the area around Wall Street, and Washington Heights).

We began a weekly Bible study/conversation group with internationals, and rejoiced to see a half-dozen of them baptized over the time since. We saw a small network of tent-makers and EPC converts begin to take shape in China (“Emmanuel East”).

A Letter On Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed²

Dennis E. Johnson, Ph.D.

Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Seminary California

[Emmanuel attracts individuals from various Christian backgrounds, a many will come from churches that do not baptize infants. If you will be at Emmanuel, you will witness infant baptisms in our worship service, so we are providing this resource to help you understand the position of the church. This is a good resource, in particular, because it is personal – a father is writing to his daughter who is struggling with the doctrine, and explaining how came to understand infant baptism as biblical.]

Here at last is my long-overdue letter to explain why I believe it's consistent with the Bible to baptize the infants and children of believers. I want to let you know what biblical evidence changed my mind from holding a "believers' baptism" position to the conviction that both those who are converted as adults and the infants and children of believers should be baptized.

You know, of course, that I don't consider this issue one on which our trust-relationship with Jesus depends. Nor should differences on this issue disrupt our fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ who see things differently. On the other hand, since we all want to show our gratitude for God's grace by living our lives to please him, and since we learn what pleases him in his Word, we all want to get as clear a picture as we can of what the Word teaches.

The difference of views on infant baptism unfortunately does affect Christians' ability to demonstrate in practice our unity as the Body of Christ. "Infant baptizers" can and do recognize the baptism received by "believer baptizers" as genuine Christian baptism (although we may think that it's administered later than it should be in the case of children of Christian parents). But "believer baptizers" cannot acknowledge that believers who were baptized as infants have been baptized at all. So if "believer baptizers" are right—if people who have received infant baptism have not received biblical baptism at all—then there have been hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Christian believers who have never obeyed the Lord's command to be baptized in his Name, believers such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, J. Gresham Machen, J. I. Packer, John Stott, R. C. Sproul, etc. On the other hand, if "infant baptizers" are right, then it's sad that the convictions of "believer baptizers" prevent them from recognizing the baptism of so many other members of the Body of Christ. So our difference of understanding on this issue does hinder our putting into practice the unity of the church.

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Although this question is not a matter of salvation, it is certainly worth our investing time and thought and study, to see whether we can come to unity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I Changed My Mind

First a little autobiography (I may have told you this before): It was a major change of mind for me to come to accept infant baptism. I was baptized as an infant in First Covenant Church of Los Angeles, but by the time I was an early adolescent we had a different pastor (in the same congregation!), and our new pastor didn't believe that infant baptism was valid. My parents had not really studied this question or taught me whether there was a biblical basis for infant baptism, so I had no reason to question what my pastor said when he taught that my baptism as an infant wasn't genuine Christian baptism. Therefore, after a time of instruction in Bible doctrine (in effect, a catechism class), I publicly confessed my faith in Christ and "joined the church," being baptized by immersion on the basis of my personal profession of faith.[2] (This means that, whichever view of baptism is right, I personally am covered!) I went through high school and Westmont College assuming that only people old enough to believe and testify to their faith should be baptized.

This was my view even as I started my seminary studies at Westminster, although I was puzzled that my seminary professors, who understood the Bible so much better than I in so many areas, seemed to have missed the obvious point that in the New Testament people are called to believe, and then they are baptized. I suppose I concluded that they believed in infant baptism because that was what they were accustomed to. (That explanation, however, didn't fit everyone: Dr. Strimple had remained a Baptist throughout college and his studies at Westminster, and had taught at a Baptist Bible college in Canada for many years before he became convinced that infant baptism is biblical.) "I'm accustomed to this" is not a good reason for believing or doing something as a Christian, but sometimes what we're used to does influence our faith and our conduct. In any case, at Westminster I had to face the possibility that I was the one operating on the basis of what I was accustomed to, dismissing infant baptism because of assumptions I had picked up as a teenager and had reinforced through college. In particular Westminster forced me to examine my assumptions about how to search the Bible for the answer to a theological question like this.[3]

How Should We Expect the Bible to Answer the Infant Baptism Question?

I had to face the question, how should I expect the Bible to answer my question, "Should the babies of Christians be baptized?" I was expecting the Bible to answer the question with an explicit statement in one or more verses. I read verses like Acts 2:38 ("Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.") or Acts 16:31-34 ("Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household . . . Immediately he and all his family were baptized . . . he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family."). The order of things seemed so clear: first repentance/belief, then baptism. What could be plainer and simpler?

Everybody Agrees that Adult Converts from Judaism and Paganism Must Be Baptized.

But then someone pointed out something to me: Throughout the Book of Acts we read about the conversion of people who were not Christians, nor had they grown up as the children of (New Covenant) Christians, before the Apostles preached to them—either Jews or Gentiles. The preaching and examples of conversions in Acts all have to do with missionary situations, in which the Gospel is entering the lives of individuals and families and communities for the first time. Everyone, “believer baptist” and “infant baptist” alike, agrees that in circumstances like these, when people have not grown up in Christian families and the “covenant community” of the Church, those converted as adults need to receive baptism when they confess their faith in Jesus.

But Acts Is Silent About Children Born to Christian Parents.

Acts never explicitly describes a situation that would make crystal clear how the apostles handled the situation of children born to Christian parents. (Obviously, if Acts had spoken directly and clearly on this point, the discussion between “believer baptist” and “infant baptist” would have been settled long ago.) In particular:

(1) Acts never tells us about an adolescent or young adult who had been raised from infancy by parents who believed in Jesus, and who then received baptism only after he or she personally expressed his/her faith in Christ.[4]

(2) Although Acts records the baptism of whole households, it never explicitly states whether or not there were infants or young children in any of these homes, or whether infants in the household were excluded from receiving baptism because they were too young to express personal faith in Christ.

(3) Acts and the rest of the New Testament never record any statement by Jesus or the Apostles that the infants of believers are now to be treated differently in the New Covenant from the way that the infants of Israelite believers were in the Old: namely, that, whereas Israelite children were treated as part of the covenant community, the children of Christians are to be treated as outside the covenant community that is under Christ’s Lordship. The other changes that occurred with the coming of Christ are clearly indicated in the New Testament: Circumcision is not to be required of Gentiles (Galatians), but both Jews and Gentiles who come to faith must be baptized (Acts). Animal sacrifices are done away with because of Jesus’ final sacrifice (Hebrews 10). The kosher dietary laws no longer apply because Jesus cleanses people from all nationalities (Mark 7; Acts 10-11). The temple in Jerusalem is replaced by a “living temple” made up of people (1 Peter 2). But the New Testament never hints that the relationship of believers’ children to the church community has changed: The New Testament never suggests that, although before Jesus’ coming Israelite children were “inside” the covenant community and received the covenant sign of circumcision (the boys, that is), now since Jesus’ coming the children of believers are “outside” the community and therefore excluded from the covenant sign of baptism.

We'll come back to this topic of the way the New Testament views the children of believers, but for now I simply wanted to show you how I came to recognize that there is no New Testament text that answers pointblank the question, "Should believers have their children baptized?"

Starting from Broader Themes Where the Bible Speaks Clearly

So then, where do we go from here? We approach this question, like other, even more important questions (the Trinity, the mystery of the Person of Jesus as both fully God and fully man): We approach it from the perspective of broader, bigger questions that the Bible does answer clearly for us. Then, since God's Word is consistent from beginning to end, we carefully draw conclusions from what we know the Bible teaches.

This is more complicated than simply pointing to a verse or two, but it's also safer than drawing our own conclusions from what a particular verse says or does not say. Suppose every Christian concluded that Jesus' words in Mark 10:21 are addressed literally to us all: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor. . . . Then come, follow me." We all need to beware of being "owned" by our possessions, but if we all sold everything, could we also obey 1 Tim. 5:8 ("If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever")? Would there be anyone in the church for Timothy to instruct to use their wealth in doing good (1 Tim. 6:17-19)? We recognize that we have to understand Mark 10:21 in the context of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man, and in the context of the teaching of other passages of the Bible. We need to do the same with infant baptism.

Circumcision Was Administered to Infant Israelite Boys.

The clear place to start is with the fact that circumcision was administered to infant Israelite boys at the age of 8 days (Gen. 17:9-14). This sign of God's covenant was given to Abraham long before the Law was given to Moses in Mt. Sinai. Apparently all of those circumcised that day in response to God's command were older than infancy: Abraham was 99 and Ishmael was 13; other males (including servants) were no doubt of various ages (Gen. 17:23-27). But their age, and thus their mental/spiritual ability to respond to God's promise in faith, was irrelevant. All were circumcised because Abraham believed God.

Circumcision Was a Sign of Salvation Blessings that Are Received by Faith.

God calls circumcision a "sign" of his covenant, so we can ask what circumcision "signified," what it "pointed to" in terms of the relationship of Abraham and his family to the Lord.

A Sign of Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit)

Later in the Old Testament God makes it clear that external circumcision of the flesh was a sign or symbol of a spiritual cleansing that God calls "circumcision" of the heart: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deut. 10:16). Moses prophesies that the Israelites will disobey God and receive the judgments they deserved (especially the Babylonian Exile). But after this God will re-gather them to the land (return under Ezra and Nehemiah), and "The Lord your God will circumcise your

hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Deut. 30:6). I believe God is referring to this promise when he says through Ezekiel: “I will gather you from all the countries. . . . I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees. . . .” (Ezek. 36:24-27).

But Outward Circumcision Did Not Guarantee Circumcision of Heart

Now, receiving external circumcision did not guarantee that an Israelite boy had received spiritual circumcision, or would later receive spiritual circumcision. ““The days are coming, declares the Lord, ‘when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab—and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart” (Jer. 9:25-26). How shocking for an Israelite to hear these words, to be grouped among the uncircumcised, unclean Gentiles! But only if they never understood that circumcision was a sign pointing to their hearts’ need for cleansing by the gracious Spirit of God!

Sign of the Righteousness We Receive by Faith.

In the light of God’s teaching in the Old Testament we can understand Paul’s comments on circumcision in Romans. First Paul points out that the “circumcision” that counts is “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit,” and that without this spiritual cleansing the external surgery brings no blessing or favor from God (Romans 2:25-29, especially verses 28-29). Then he comments on God’s first command to Abraham to circumcise his household: “[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). So Paul says that Abraham is not only the spiritual father of uncircumcised Gentile believers (4:11b), but also of “the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (4:12). Circumcision symbolized the righteousness that believers (like Abraham) receive by faith, just as it symbolized cleansing and renewal of heart by the Holy Spirit. Yet God commanded that it be administered to Israelite baby boys at 8 days old, before anyone could tell whether God had changed or would change their hearts by his Spirit, whether he would enable them to trust his promises!

A Sign of Union with Christ in His Sacrificial Death

Since the blessings of the New Birth and righteousness by faith came to Abraham and other Israelites (BC) and come to us (AD) only as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice, we could even say that circumcision symbolized union with Christ in his death—his being “cut off from his people” for us (Gen. 17:14; see Isaiah 53:8), even though he didn’t deserve the curse, since he was circumcised both in flesh (Luke 2:21) and in heart. In fact, Paul pretty much says just this in Colossians 2:11-12: “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” Christ was cut off for us, put to death for

us; so his death for our sins is counted by God as our own death. Circumcision symbolizes this reality of Christ suffering as our substitute, and so does baptism.

Circumcision Was Applied Before Anyone Could Know Whether a Baby Had Received or Would Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolized.

Before we move on to consider what baptism symbolizes, we need to reflect on the fact that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the blessings that come to believers (like Abraham) by faith in Christ: cleansing and transformation of heart, forgiveness of sins, right standing before God, all through the sacrifice of Jesus. This symbol was applied to adult Gentile converts when they abandoned their idolatry and confessed faith in the God of Israel; but it was applied to the children (well, just the sons) of Israel 8 days after they were born—before Mom or Dad or priest or rabbi could tell whether that baby would later receive, through his faith, the reality symbolized in circumcision.

Baptism Symbolizes Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit), the Righteousness of Faith, and Union with Christ in his Death.

Water baptism symbolizes the same spiritual blessings that circumcision symbolized: renewal and transformation of our hearts (Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:23; etc.) by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), who brings us into a community of faith, a Body (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism speaks of being united to Christ, clothed with Christ, right with God by faith, Abraham's seed, and heirs of God's promises (Gal. 3:26-29). It speaks of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, so that his death for us is counted as our death before the justice of God (Romans 6:3; Col. 2:11-12).

Water Baptism Doesn't Guarantee that the Person Receiving It Has Received or Will Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolizes—Even When Adults Are Baptized after Confessing Faith!

Just as the external act of circumcision could not guarantee that the recipient would prove to be a recipient of the spiritual reality it symbolized, so also the external act of water baptism does not guarantee that its recipient will prove to have received the spiritual reality it symbolizes. Simon of Samaria was baptized, but his later attitude toward the Holy Spirit showed that he was still "captive to sin" (Acts 8:12-13, 20-23). Peter emphasizes that the flood waters that "saved" Noah and his family were pointing ahead to baptism—not merely the "removal of dirt from the body" (external water baptism) but the inner spiritual reality it symbolizes: the pledge of a good conscience toward God (1 Pet. 3:21). Sadly, some churches have practiced infant baptism (and others have practiced adult "believer baptism") under the misunderstanding that the external ceremony automatically produces the New Birth it symbolizes, or guarantees that the New Birth is bound to follow eventually because of the outward ceremony. But the Bible shows that the purpose of the sacraments (circumcision, Passover and other animal sacrifices in the Old Testament; baptism and the Lord Supper in the New) is to show us our need for the spiritual blessings and to call us (as the Bible and preaching do) to receive these blessings by trusting in Christ himself.

Why Apply Circumcision/Baptism to Infants Before We "Know" Whether They Will Become Believers?

When I was a “Baptist”, my biggest problem with infant baptism was that baptism symbolized the spiritual benefits of union with Christ, which are received only by faith; and parents and pastors couldn’t know whether or not an infant had or would have this saving faith. But then I began to see that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the same blessings of union with Christ, which Old Testament believers received by faith and which unbelievers in Israel did not receive. So we face the same question for both the Old Testament sign and the New Testament sign: “Why apply a symbol before we know whether or not the reality is there?” I see three main reasons:

(1) To emphasize God’s gracious initiative to us in our helplessness. Circumcision and baptism are not events in which the recipient acts, but in which someone else acts (in God’s name) on or for us. This is true, of course, when an adult is converted and comes for baptism: she doesn’t baptize herself, but a pastor applies the water of baptism to her. The Apostles’ instruction to adults is not “baptize yourselves” (reflexive) but “be baptized” (passive: receive baptism from someone else). But it’s even more obvious, when infants are baptized, that baptism is “announcing” to us that God graciously gives a change of heart that we in our spiritual death could never produce in ourselves.

(2) To emphasize the mysterious role of the family in the communication of God’s covenant grace down through the generations. This role really is mysterious. On the one hand, the Bible is so clear that being born into a believing family is no guarantee of salvation: every individual is accountable to respond to the Gospel in faith, or endure the consequences of rebellion. (And, by the same token, to be born into an unbelieving family doesn’t condemn a person to a life of unbelief, rebellion, and condemnation. God’s grace welcomes Gentiles [Pagans] and turns them to Jesus (Acts 14:27).

I was reading Ezekiel 18 in my devotions earlier this week, and was struck by how powerfully God makes the point that “family tree” doesn’t guarantee an individual’s salvation or his condemnation. On the other hand, God has set up the family as the context in which his Word is to be taught and lived before children as they grow up. In contrast to our American emphasis on individualism and democracy, God clearly viewed Abraham as the head of his household, with the authority to command even his servants to undergo the painful procedure of circumcision! “I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (Genesis 18:19).

Apparently the ancient Israelites tended to look at themselves only from the standpoint of their family connection: those in the right family (Abraham’s) were in (no matter what), and everyone else was out. In twentieth-century America we tend to look at ourselves only from the standpoint of our personal individualism: we think we stand as isolated individuals before God, and our parents’ relationship to the Lord presumably has no influence on the benefits we have received from him or the responsibilities we bear toward him.

But God seems to view us both as members of a family, influenced (for good or ill) by our family context and identity, and as individuals, bearing responsibility for our own response to his Word of grace. This is God's perspective not only in the Old Testament, when virtually all the covenant people were of one physical family (Abraham's—although Gentiles such as Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and Naaman were also included); but also in the New Testament, as the Gospel goes out to all the families of the earth (Acts 3:25). This is what I find striking about the baptism of Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14-15) and of the jailer and his household (Acts 16:31-34). There's no way to tell for sure whether or not there were babies or children in those households, so both sides in the infant baptism dialogue read these texts in light of their own presuppositions. But what we can agree on is that in these texts the Holy Spirit speaks of the persons involved not as disconnected individuals but as "households," as families (or perhaps even families with resident servants). Doesn't this suggest that in the New Testament God does not discard the family as a means for extending his gracious covenant-kingdom, but rather he spreads his grace to and through more families, to households not previously reached with his salvation?

Infant circumcision and infant baptism in themselves emphasize the balance: they are administered to infants not because we presume to know or predict the infant's spiritual state, but because the child is in the home of and under the authority of Christian parents (hence the sign belongs not only to "birth-children" but also to adopted children). Yet the fact that circumcision and baptism are administered to infants at all is a testimony to the fact that birth into a particular family is no guarantee of ultimate spiritual blessing, rather that something more is needed, something that only God can do for us through the shedding of Christ's blood and through his resurrection, applied through the regenerating power of the Spirit, in order for us to become children of God.

(3) To emphasize the life-or-death consequences of our response to the Gospel of Christ. Earlier I showed the spiritual blessings that both circumcision and baptism symbolize, but that is not the whole story. Both circumcision and baptism are double-edged. They have a solemn side as well, because each in its own way "pictures" the judgment that our sin deserves, the judgment that will be received some day by those who do not trust Christ. Circumcision, which of course involved shedding of blood, symbolized the penalty of breaking God's covenant, being "cut off" from God's presence and God's people (Gen. 17:14). Baptism symbolizes not only cleansing, forgiveness, and the Spirit's transforming presence, but also judgment and death. The floodwaters that "saved" Noah were also God's instrument of judgment on those who refused to heed Noah's preaching (1 Pet. 3:19-21). Jesus spoke of his own death as a "baptism," a painful ordeal (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). So it's not surprising that Paul views both circumcision and baptism as symbols pointing to Christ's death (Col. 2:11-12). By symbolizing the deadly consequences of being unfaithful to God's covenant—the shedding of blood, being cut off, being overwhelmed by floodwaters—circumcision and baptism reinforce the message of the Word as we read it and hear it preached: the only place of safety for guilty rebels like us is close to Jesus, trusting in Jesus, who bore sin's guilt and penalty for those who believe in him. So I see circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New as ongoing testimonies to children raised in Christian homes that there are severe, eternal consequences if they turn

away from the grace offered in the Gospel. But of course these warnings are intended by the Lord to work along with the wonderful promises of his grace to encourage us to stick close to Jesus in living, intimate faith and love.

Circumcision and Baptism Mark the Boundaries of the Community that Is Under Christ's Lordship.

Now, the fact that circumcision and baptism both symbolize spiritual blessings that are received by faith in Christ and the fact that circumcision was administered to infants before they could give evidence of faith doesn't prove that now, in the New Testament, baptism should be administered to covenant children before they personally give evidence of their faith. It suggests to me, however, that the fact that an infant cannot express faith doesn't exclude her from receiving the sign that points to blessings that are received by faith.

If circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New do not absolutely guarantee that the person receiving the sign has received or will receive the spiritual reality, what is the purpose of these covenant signs? They mark the boundaries of the community that acknowledges Christ's covenant Lordship and authority, the church. Since we can't infallibly read others' hearts, the church as we see it on a day-to-day basis may not correspond exactly to God's perfect knowledge of his chosen ones (2 Tim. 2:17-19). Even when an adult convert is baptized, we do it not because we have supernatural knowledge that he is born again but because he confesses to believe in Jesus, seems to understand what that means, and his life is beginning to bear fruit consistent with his confession of faith. Sometimes, however, church leaders are mistaken or misled, and a person who once seemed to be a believer will turn away from the life of faith he had seemed to start (remember Simon of Samaria). So as an elder I have to admit my limitations: I can't read hearts to know for certain who is "born again" from the Spirit; all that I can do is to evaluate whether people acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus both in their words and in the general direction of their behavior.

In the New Testament, Are Believers' Children "Inside" This Community or "Outside"?

I'm leading up to this important question: In the New Testament, if parents confess Jesus as Lord, are their children inside this community, the church, or are they outside? Clearly in the Old Testament the children were included in the community of God's covenant, receiving the mark of the covenant (circumcision), participating in the feasts of the covenant (for example, Passover, Exodus 12:25-27), being taught the Law as the guide for their grateful response to God's redemptive grace (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25). But what about the New Testament? When Christ comes, is there a change in the composition of the community of God's covenant?

The Trend in the New Testament Is to Include People Who Used to Be "Outside."

There are changes in the composition of the covenant people as we move from Old Testament to New, but they are not in the direction of excluding a category of people because of their age or mental immaturity. The most obvious change is that Gentiles, people from other physical families than Abraham's, are welcomed in droves. As we see in Matthew's mention of Rahab, Ruth, and others in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1), even in

the Old Testament God did welcome a handful of Gentiles into his community; but with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of the Spirit which he poured out on the church, the floodgates of grace are thrown wide open to Samaritans, Greek, Romans—even the Swedes and Scotch-Irish! Secondly, the sign of the New Covenant, baptism, is one that can be and is applied to females as well as males (Acts 8:12), in contrast to Old Covenant circumcision, which was only for males. Although the New Testament still speaks of a distinction in role between men and women in the family and the church, baptism makes clear what was implied in Genesis 1:26-28: in terms of creation in God’s image, and now new creation in the image of Christ, and in terms of personal value and worth to God, women and men are equal (Gal. 3:28). Hence women worship with men in Christian congregations, not in a separate courtyard as in the Jerusalem temple or behind a screen as in some Jewish synagogues. So now, with Gentiles welcomed in and women more fully included by receiving the covenant sign along with males, does God now take a very different stance toward the children of believers, excluding them from his covenant people as he is welcoming other groups in?

Peter at Pentecost: The Promise to Jewish Converts, Their Children, and Gentiles “Far Off.”

Probably the most direct answer to our question comes from Peter’s lips on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the climactic turning point of the transition between Old Testament and New because on Pentecost the crucified, risen, ascended, enthroned Lord Jesus baptized the church with the Holy Spirit—as John the Baptist had prophesied (Acts 1:5). Peter’s audience were Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism from throughout the Roman world, and some of them (despite their heritage as covenant people) had committed treason against God’s Messiah, Jesus. When they realized what they had done, Peter told them to repent and receive baptism in Jesus’ name (Acts 2:38). Then he added: “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (2:39). “All who are far off” are the pagan Gentiles.[5] This is consistent with the expansion of the reach of God’s gracious covenant that I mentioned above. But now notice this: the children of these people who are at the point of repentance, faith, and baptism are not bypassed as Christ’s promise goes out to the pagans. The promise of forgiveness and renewal by the Spirit is spoken specifically to the children of Peter’s listeners. As these children grow and understand the promise and the Promise Maker, they of course bear the responsibility to respond in personal trust (just as Peter’s Pentecost audience do and the Gentiles “far off” will). But the point is: In expanding his community of grace to the Gentiles, God will not expel the children.

Jesus: The Kingdom Belongs to Little, “Useless” Children.

This continuing inclusion of children in Christ’s community is what we would expect when we reflect on the way Jesus rebuked his disciples’ adult arrogance in trying to shield him from “insignificant” (in their minds) children (Luke 18:15-17). In fact, I’m convinced that it was precisely children’s “insignificance” and “uselessness” that Jesus had in mind when he said, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” When some people hear these words, they think romantically of the “innocence” or “simple trust” that they suppose children have. But Jesus knew children better than that. His point

is: Unless you come to the kingdom without any claim that you deserve it, you will never enter it. Apparently by Pentecost Peter had absorbed the point that Jesus made that day: Jesus does not expel children from his community, for his kingdom belongs to them (those left outside are those who refuse to swallow their pride, who refuse to come as insignificant children, unworthy in themselves but dependent on the King).

Paul Talks to Children in the Church, Calling Them to Obey “in the Lord” without Distinguishing Between “Insiders” (Who Have Confessed Faith and Been Baptized) and “Outsiders” (Too Young to Be Baptized as Believers).

This perspective—that children are not excluded from the community of the King with the coming of the New Testament—also explains why Paul can address children in his letters with instructions that presuppose Christ’s authority over them: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ which is the first commandment with a promise ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’” (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20: “for this pleases the Lord.”) Paul does not talk to two categories of children: (1) children who have confessed faith and been baptized; and (2) children who have not been baptized, and are presumed not to be believers. Rather, he speaks to all the children present in the congregation, and he implies that their identity “in the Lord,” their trust in the promises of God, and their desire to do what “pleases the Lord” should motivate all these children to obey their parents. Of course, these congregations may include some children who are not born again, not believers; but Paul is not presuming to read individual hearts at long distance. He is simply treating the children, as a group, as members of the King’s community, under the King’s authority, and therefore responsible to the King for their response to their parents.

What About Infant Dedication as a Way of Symbolizing that the Children of Christian Parents Have a Special Place and Special Responsibilities?

Now, we could ask, couldn’t a “dedication” ceremony such as that practiced at many Baptist churches serve the same purpose as infant baptism in recognizing that the children of believers do have some sort of special place in the community of Christ’s covenant? Well, yes and no.

Yes. Infant dedication in Baptist churches seems to reflect a sort of Spirit-prompted “instinct” that, even though (in such churches) they are treated as unbelievers and outsiders by being denied baptism, the children of believers actually do have some sort of a relation to Christ and his church. It would be more consistent, it seems to me, for churches of “believer baptism” convictions not to replace infant baptism with dedication, but simply to wait and see what path kids choose (faith or rebellion) as they grow up. Typically the dedication services I have heard still imply that believing parents are doing something in relation to the Lord on behalf of their infant children. Wouldn’t it be more consistent to wait until children are old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to be dedicated to God? And yet, frankly, I’m glad that Baptist churches are inconsistent enough to have infant dedication, and that Baptist parents bring their children to church and teach them the Gospel at home and sing “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know” with their kids. The way I see it, in all these ways they are acting as though their children have a place in the community of Christ, even though Baptist parents don’t acknowledge that their children

can receive the sign of inclusion in Christ's community, baptism. And since (in my view) the Bible teaches that believers' children have a place in the community of Christ (though that doesn't guarantee their salvation!), the more that Christians act in ways consistent with the Bible (even if our understanding of its teaching is unclear), the more the Lord is glorified.

No. A Biblical Case for Infant Dedication in the New Testament Is Far Weaker than the Case for Infant Baptism. If we are looking for a biblical justification for how we treat the infants of believers, it seems to me that it is far harder to make a case for dedication than for infant baptism. Consider the biblical examples of infant dedications: There was Samuel, whom his mother Hannah promised to return to the Lord for tabernacle service even before he was conceived (1 Sam. 1:11, 24-28). But Hannah's dedication of Samuel did not replace his circumcision, of course. Rather, it made him a "Nazirite," whose uncut hair signified his special consecration as a servant of God (1 Sam. 1:11; Numbers 6:1-21). Nor is it treated as an ongoing pattern for Israelite infants in the Old Testament, let alone for the children of believers in the New Testament. There were Samson and John the Baptist (also Nazirites from conception), whom God had promised to barren parents and set apart for his own special purposes even before their conception (Judges 13:3-5; Luke 1:13-17).

Then there is the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-24) when he was about 41 days old. (He was circumcised at 8 days, and then 33 days later Mary could be "purified" following her son's birth, Lev. 12:37). But we should notice that this presentation fulfills the command that came from the Exodus from Egypt, and specifically the night when the Passover lamb died in the place of the Israelites' firstborn: "Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord" (Exod. 13:2). Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed as holy to the Lord (Exod. 13:12). Firstborn sons were to be redeemed (Exod. 13:15). It is hard for me to see how this Old Testament custom, which had to be observed carefully for Jesus since he came to fulfill every requirement of the Law of Moses, could be viewed as a model for Christians dedicating their children. Christian infant dedication services don't mention the ceremonial purification of the infant's mother after the birth; they are performed not only for firstborn sons but also for later children—of both genders! They do not involve offering sacrifices for the redemption of the child from death or the purification of the mother. In all these ways Christian infant dedication services today are very different from Jesus' presentation to the Lord at the age of a month and a half—and they should be! The Old Testament sacrificial system, which included the redemption of Israel's firstborn and the ceremonial cleansing of Israel's mothers, was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Because I find no convincing biblical command or example that would provide a basis for infant dedication by Christian parents today, if we have to choose between infant dedication and infant baptism on the basis of biblical evidence, it seems clear that the weight of biblical evidence favors infant baptism, because of the continuity between circumcision and baptism as signs of entry into God's community.

"Dedication" Focuses More on the Parents' Action Than on God's Promise of Grace through Faith. Finally, infant dedication as a ceremony lacks an important element that infant

baptism has: Infant baptism encourages us and our children to trust in Christ by symbolizing the promises of God, achieved for us by Christ and received by faith alone. Dedication tends to focus more on what we do than on what Christ has done. As parents look back on that day with their kids, they are saying, "We dedicated you to the Lord's service when you were a baby." On the other hand, as "infant baptist" parents look back on the day of their child's baptism, they say to her, "On that day long ago, the Lord Jesus promised to you that if you trust him he will wash away your sins and give you a heart to love and serve him by the power of his Spirit. Just as the water 'cleansed' your baby skin, so the Holy Spirit will make your heart clean if you trust in Jesus, because Jesus died for the sins of everybody who trusts in him." You can see the difference. Both sets of parents are calling their kids to respond in faith and both sets do so by teaching the Gospel about what Jesus did for us in his sacrifice on the cross, but children baptized as infants have received a sign/symbol that points directly to that gift of God's grace.

So I would say that infant dedication is better than nothing (since it is a way of recognizing that the children of believers have the privileges and responsibilities of being included in the Lord's community), but it seems to me that infant baptism has much stronger biblical support than does infant dedication in the New Testament church.

Fatherly Encouragement: Study the Scriptures. Pray. Think. Ask

Since I've walked the road between "believer baptism" and "infant baptism," I appreciate the fact that you want to re-examine childhood assumptions in the light of what God's Word teaches. Go to it! I also sympathize with you, since we both realize that this issue is not as "cut-and-dried" as whether Jehovah or Baal is God, or whether we are saved by faith in Jesus or by our own obedience to the Law. The biblical answers to those questions are plain and clear. But sincere believers who love the Lord and want to follow his Word have drawn very different conclusions on this question of infant baptism. So I would just encourage you to study the Bible's teaching, not only in individual verses that contain the word "baptism" but also in passages that explain the symbolism of circumcision and baptism, that show how God treats children in the Old Testament in the New, that show us who belongs to the community of Christ on earth (both ancient Israel and the Church today), and that explain ideas like "covenant" and the role of the family/household in God's plan for his covenant people. I would encourage you to think and pray over what you have read. No doubt I haven't covered in this letter all the questions you may have, so please feel free to ask them and I'll do my best to give you answers that are faithful to God's Word.

Love,

Dad

[1] This is not a polished, published document yet, but I reserve the right to turn it into one in the future. It is circulated for the benefit and discussion of students at Westminster Seminary California and, with permission, to other Christians who may be helped by it.

[2]My pastor also believed that immersion (Romans 6:4) is the *only* right *mode* by which to apply the water of baptism. He would not recognize sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2; Ezekiel 36:25) or pouring (Acts 1:5; 2:17-18, 33: “You will be baptized with Spirit” = “I will pour out my Spirit”; see Titus 3:5-6), even though these methods of applying cleansing liquid (water/blood) are used repeatedly in Scripture, and sometimes tied directly to the language of baptism (as in Acts 1-2). The verses above suggest that baptism symbolizes not only death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, but also cleansing from sin’s uncleanness (sprinkling) and the gift of the Spirit (pouring). Therefore it seems that any of these modes is appropriate, since each mode points to some aspect of the spiritual reality of which baptism is a sign.

[3]Over Labor Day weekend I was preaching in Portland, OR, and spent the afternoon with a couple in the church there. We were talking about infant baptism and I learned that the husband had come to faith in a Baptist church and had then come to believe that infant baptism is biblical while he was studying at Western Conservative *Baptist* Seminary. I asked him what had changed his mind, and he mentioned especially coming to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of “the righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:11), and yet Abraham was commanded to circumcise infants who were too young to demonstrate faith. If that was so in the Old Testament, he concluded, it could also be true of baptism in the New. I’ll pick up this idea below, but I thought you would be interested to learn of this brother’s experience of coming to believe in the appropriateness of infant baptism not in an “infant baptist” seminary like Westminster but in a “believer baptist” seminary like Western.

[4]Timothy is the only individual whose “childhood history” we know much about, but it’s likely that both he and his mother were, so to speak, “Old Testament believers” until Paul arrived in Lystra, bringing the news that God’s Old Testament promises had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Acts 16:13; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:10, 15). Since Timothy’s mother taught him the Scriptures “from infancy,” apparently she would have had him circumcised as an infant as the Law commanded, were it not for the fact that his Gentile father forbade it. Paul circumcised him as a young adult not because circumcision is a sacrament/sign still applied to believers under the New Covenant, but simply to remove a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of Timothy’s ministry among Jews. Anyway, we don’t ever read about when Timothy was baptized.

[5]The expression is from Isa. 57:19 and is applied to Gentiles in Acts 22:21; Eph. 2:13, 17.