

THE SIGN OF BAPTISM AND OUR CHILDREN¹

Proposed for adoption to the elders at Christ Church West Chester

Nothing is more precious to a parent than a child. And nothing is more important to a Christian parent than their child's salvation. Jesus' disciples were hesitant to let children near him, and they were sharply corrected: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14). By this Jesus taught that those who belong to heaven come in simple and trusting terms like children. While Jesus did not say that these children in front of him belonged to heaven, his posture toward children was, literally, open arms. For this reason, as ambassadors for Christ, we urge our children to be reconciled to God by coming to Jesus by faith (2 Cor. 5:20).

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY?

Thoughtful parents and children will naturally ask about baptism. But what age is appropriate? The best place for us to start is with Scripture. What does Scripture say about baptism in general? Through baptism, a believer publicly identifies with Christ, picturing union with him in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–6). Through this sign they also identify with the church, being "baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:1–6). The church makes a public statement in baptism as well. Having taught his followers to discern genuine discipleship, baptism is how Jesus instructed the church to mark out the disciples she makes (Matt. 7:22; 8:22; 13:20–23; 19:29; 16:18–20; 18:15–20; 28:18–20). Through baptism, the church does not passively observe, but actively affirms a person's salvation.

What do we observe in Scripture on the subject of children and baptism? In the book of Acts, we observe that baptism follows soon after conversion. But there are several other observations that round out the picture. In the New Testament, the only baptized persons whose age is clear are adults.² Moreover, these adults are converted from non-Christian contexts, and their conversions were dramatic and accompanied by confirmations. These confirmations included miracles or persecution.

Children who grow up in believing homes in a culturally Christian context can be genuinely converted. Yet, in these circumstances, identification with Jesus is often not costly but socially encouraged. This means that a congregation's (that is, the members') ability to confidently and publicly affirm these professions is more difficult (see Demas in Col. 3:14 & 2 Tim. 4:10; Simon the Magician in Acts 8:9-25; cf. Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 20:19-23). Because the Bible does not offer clear direction on the timing of a young person's baptism, every church must weigh the Scriptures and establish its own practice.

WHAT IS OUR PRACTICE?

¹We (the elders of CCWC) are thankful to pastors and churches that shared notes, articles, ideas, and resources, as well as their statements regarding baptism. However, this document, in particular, is primarily reliant on the material shared with us by Heritage Bible Church, Greer, SC.

²Scripture does mention the baptism of households (Acts 16:15, 1Cor. 1:16). Households may include extended family or servants. It is not clear whether children were included.

We believe it is helpful in shepherding a congregation to identify the age-range for the normal consideration of baptism.

We heartily affirm that the Lord saves many children at a young age. Yet, because of the nature of childhood and the nature of baptism, and because we are eager for baptisms to be marked by clarity and confidence, we believe it is wise in most cases to wait until they assume adult responsibilities (sometime in late high school with driving, employment, non-Christian friends, voting, legality of marriage, *etc.* or something like “functional adulthood”³) to declare publicly their allegiance to Christ by baptism, as the church observes a credible profession of faith.⁴ It is especially during these years when a young person’s maturity is closer to that of the adults we observe in the New Testament baptisms. Should a young person desire to pursue baptism and membership through the normal process established by the church, we will examine them on a case-by-case basis, with the thoughtful involvement of their parents and other members close to them. By this practice we are seeking qualified clarity. Some would appreciate a more precise age for every person, but a measure of ambiguity is deliberate. In the first place, age is never a precise indicator of maturity. For some historical perspective, it was not unusual in the ancient world for a thirteen-year-old to be married or carry a full-time job. More importantly, the Scriptures themselves leave us with unresolved tension on this topic.

This practice is also forward-looking. This statement is not written to call into question anyone’s childhood baptism. Many who were baptized at a young age follow Christ faithfully as adults, and we do not intend to question those. This practice directs our ministry looking forward.

WHY IS THIS GOOD FOR US?

We have studied, weighed, and prayed about this matter. While there are trade-offs with any approach to the question of age, we expect our Lord to bless this thoughtful practice in ways that are good for individuals baptized, for the church, and the community.

First, we believe this will be instructive for our children and young people.

We believe this practice honors children as children. Children are, by God’s good design, immature. That is, they are dependent, changeable, and untested. This is why it is unnatural for a child to hold a core belief contrary to their parents, to make a major life decision for themselves, or to experience the costs of their deeper convictions. The ambiguity that attends this phase of life is a good thing, but it is also a reason to wait on baptism. Perhaps this is why references to disciples in Acts speak of “men and women” (Acts 5:14; 8:12; 9:2; 22:4). In contrast, the teenage years, and especially the later teenage years, are when many young people show indications of natural maturity. This is when they begin making independent life decisions, settling in their beliefs, and experiencing the consequences of their convictions as they choose Christ in the face of the world’s growing pressure and pull (Matt. 13:20–23).

³For more on “functional adulthood” see Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 215-219.

⁴See Capitol Hill Baptist Church’s “Baptism of Children” here: <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/ministries/children/baptism-of-children/>

By this practice we also hope to strengthen the moment and the memory of their baptism. In the moment of baptism, we want a person to clearly understand the significance of the sign and the event. Then, throughout their life we want them to look back on their baptism and recall with clarity their own decision and the event itself.

A more sober thought, but an important and loving consideration, is that this practice helps us avoid offering a young person a false sense of security. It is a significant moment when spiritual leaders and a church family publicly affirm one's eternal salvation in baptism. Self-deception is natural to the unbeliever and a premature baptism could hinder a sense of urgency concerning his or her soul (Matt. 7:21–23). Of course, affirming a false profession can never be entirely avoided. In the case of children and some young people, however, the prospect of baptizing a false convert is higher than we are comfortable with.

Second, we believe this will strengthen our congregation.

This practice helps us more closely follow the New Testament pattern where the sign of baptism leads into formal identification as a member (Acts 2:41). Waiting allows the individual to reach a level of maturity appropriate for dealing with the church directly and not through their parents. Waiting also ensures that the individual freely grasps the full entailments of membership expressed in our membership covenant, including the sober prospect of church discipline (Matt. 18:15–20).

This practice also helps the congregation fulfill her role with confidence, unity, and joy. We speak rightly of an individual's obedience in baptism (e.g. "the believer's first obedience"), but this must be balanced with the church's obedience to Jesus' great commission, which includes marking out the disciples she makes (Matt. 28:18–20). The question at hand is not whether a young person can savingly believe on Christ, or whether that can be evident to family members, but whether regeneration can be naturally evident to the congregation.

This practice also brings clarity and unity to our ministry to children. As a growing church we have members and children's ministry leaders who come from different backgrounds and approaches to childhood conversion and baptism. Others may have no background. An established approach helps us identify the best resources for training leaders and shepherding families on this all-important subject.

Third, we believe this will enhance our witness in the community.

Through this practice, we hope to protect the clarity and potency of the church's witness in the community. We recognize a certain danger in withholding the sign of baptism from a young convert. Salvation is by faith alone, so there is no danger of condemnation for delaying baptism. But we can imagine a measure of discouragement or a sense that one is disobeying Christ.

However, we see a greater danger in placing that sign on a person prematurely, both for their own sake, which we have explored, but also for the church's witness. One explanation for pervasive nominal Christianity in our own day is the well-intended, but often uncaredful administration of baptism whereby non-believers have been granted a false sense of security

before God. As a consequence, the broader unbelieving community can be deceived as to the nature of true discipleship.

SOME INTERNATIONAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This practice of waiting may seem peculiar to some in modern evangelical churches in the United States. While historical precedent does not form the basis for our practice, it is helpful to know that the practice of baptizing before the teenage years is a recent development limited largely to our own context of the United States.⁵ Before the 20th century, churches practicing believer's baptism were known for waiting until adulthood. Today, American Christians remain the most willing to baptize young children, in contrast to believers in Europe, Africa, and Asia, who often wait until their 20's. This observation strengthens our conviction that our practice is sound. Some will be helped to know that several like-minded churches have adopted a similar practice and we consulted with them in this process.

WHAT SHALL WE SAY TO OUR CHILDREN?

How shall we respond when they profess faith in Christ? Let us say, "Amen! I believe this indicates that God is at work in your life." Then, let us lead them to the means of grace and growth: the Word, prayer, and the church. Over time, let us point them to Jesus' own indications of risk and reward for discipleship.

What do we say when they ask about baptism? This requires care. Here's a suggestion: "It's a sign of God's work in you that you would ask about baptism. I am eager for the day when you get baptized. But not yet. It's important to me and to the church that baptizes you, to know that you are standing on your own two feet as a follower of Jesus, and not just believing because mom and dad do. That gets clearer as you get older and keep on following Jesus. So keep believing! Keep following Jesus! Christ is worth every cost! Let's pray together."

In other words, we celebrate their faith, but stop short of the overt assurance that is the church's to give, and which will be their great blessing one day, Lord willing, to experience.

OUR PRAYER

The subject of children and baptism is important to parents, and it is important to us. We've labored here to handle the Word and our words carefully because we care for the church and for our children. We pray that this practice honors everyone involved, most of all the Lord Jesus, who loves children and who died for his church. May he bless this practice with conversions and with baptisms, for the strength of the church, the spiritual good of our children, and the reach of our witness.

⁵For historical and international perspective, see footnote 6 in, "Conclusion," in *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, by Mark Dever, 153.