

## CONCERNING BAPTISM, MEMBERSHIP, AND OUR CHILDREN



We have an awesome commission as the church to “make disciples of all nations.” This mission entrusted to us by the Lord Jesus is not one that begins in foreign lands, but in our own living rooms. Sure, we are on go and eager to participate in proclaiming the gospel to the unreached peoples of the world. However, if we have children, our most important effort is with them. We must strive to make disciples of our own little beautiful rebels. It is a daunting task. It is a difficult labor of love. Yet, God has set you into a community to co-labor with you in this shared mission of making disciples of the next generation. This is one of the beautiful blessings of church membership.

When Jesus gave the command to make disciples, He instructed the church to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey Him (Matthew 28:19-20). So, we teach our children the Scriptures, and explain to them the necessity of being born-again, repentance and trust in Jesus. But when do we baptize them?

This article seeks to give instruction to parents regarding baptism and its relation to membership. We are not giving an indisputable dogma, but the position of the elders of The Oaks Church regarding baptism and membership as it relates to children before they reach adult maturity. We want to strive together towards making disciples of whatever children God gives us. Celebrating baptism with our kids is something we should eagerly pray for and work towards.

### A DEFINITION

“Baptism is a church’s act of affirming and portraying a believer’s union with Christ by immersing him or her in water, and a believer’s act of publicly committing him or herself to Christ and his people, thereby uniting a believer to the church and marking off him or her from the world” (Jamieson, Bobby. *Understanding Baptism*). In short, baptism is a public profession of faith for a born-again Christian (Acts 2:41). An undisputable doctrine we hold is that baptism is exclusively for believers. We do not baptize any person on the basis of another’s faith, such as their parents. So, we do not recognize infant baptism as Scriptural.

Baptism does not cleanse a person from sin or secure them a place in heaven. Faith in Christ alone accomplishes this. Baptism is a symbolic statement made by a Christian that they have already been united with Christ and forgiven of sin, forsaken their former life, and committed to live a new life of trusting and obeying Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 6:1-14).

Baptism is a formal ordinance that initiates a Christian into the membership of the local church. The fact that baptism is a public profession implies an audience. The audience is the church family which the convert is joining. Through baptism the convert professes allegiance to Jesus and commitment to the body of Christ where Jesus has called him to be an integral member (1 Corinthians 12:13ff; Ephesians 4:1-16). Every believer is part of the universal church when converted, baptism is the rite of passage into the visible, local church.

The church is more than just the audience, however, it also acknowledges the convert as a true follower of Jesus. This is the authority that Jesus gave uniquely to the church (Matthew 16:19; 18:18-20). The person who baptizes the candidate does so on behalf of the church. It is an affirmation and celebration of the whole church of the conversion of the one being baptized.

## CONCERNING OUR KIDS

Every true follower of Christ should be baptized upon their conversion. But what about our children? How can we be sure that they know enough, or are mature enough?

First, baptism is not a mark of maturity, but conversion. Baptism is the beginning of the disciple's journey in following Christ, not the commencement. We should begin by making sure they understand the basics of the gospel they profess to believe. Before your child appeals to the church for baptism, you should question them to make sure they understand the basics of their sin, the consequence of it, who Jesus is, why He came to earth, what He did so they can be brought into a right relationship with God, and what is required of them to receive His offer of salvation. Most of our children are capable of having enough *knowledge* to be saved at a pretty young age. They can easily learn the right answers to these questions with a little teaching. Many of our unconverted kids can already answer these questions, but they may not have genuine conviction and faith. Along with a basic understanding of the gospel, we should aim to discern the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in them. Do they evidence faith and commitment to Jesus? Do they have remorse when they sin (or is it only when they get in trouble)? Do they approach worship and Scripture with eagerness (or do they still look for every possible distraction)? Do they recognize other people they know as lost and desire them to be saved? Do they pray for them? Do they try to share Christ with them? As parents we should recognize in them a pattern of denying self and pursuing Jesus if God has saved them. If this disposition is in them it is evidence of the Holy Spirit.

Second, baptism should never be disconnected from church membership. Perhaps you feel like your child is not mature enough for the responsibilities and accountability of church membership. However, it is an unreasonable expectation that a child of God would mature apart from integration into the body of Christ. They need church membership for their own spiritual well-being as well as for the good of the church. As a child of God they already have spiritual gifts to offer, even if they are immature. They already have a testimony to share. And they really need the reinforcement that comes with the accountability of their church family. Maybe they are not ready to hold adult responsibilities, like leadership roles or voting on matters that may be beyond their maturity level, but they require all the privileges of membership. As a church we will not baptize a convert, young or old, apart from membership. So, we consider those who are not yet mature enough to take adult responsibility to be Young Members. Accepting them as members means that they are subject to church discipline should they subsequently persist in unrepentant sin. So their decision for baptism should be taken seriously. They must understand that they are inviting accountability into their life for their own good and the glory of Christ. It is our hope and expectation that upon reaching a maturity level where they can take on adult responsibility they would become Adult Members by attending Starting Point, an elder Interview, and affirmation of the church as an Adult Member with all the responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> If they refuse, this would be a reason for removal of their membership, i.e. church discipline.

One of the major concerns regarding the baptism of children is that we mislead our children by giving a false sense of security when they are not yet truly converted. There are many stories of people who were baptized young and realized later they were not truly born-again. Some among us have been baptized again, even though the Scriptures speak of "one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). This is a great concern and one of the reasons why it is important that we take membership seriously and do not withhold meaningful membership from a young believer. Better discipleship is the solution, not keeping them from the clear biblical pattern for making disciples. It is also important that great care and pastoral guidance from an elder be employed to discern saving faith in

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<sup>1</sup> Adult Membership can begin around the age of 16, but by 18 we would expect a Young Member to become an Adult Member. We understand maturity levels are different, that is why there is a two-year overlap.

your children. If the child's faith seems suspect, then he or she is not ready, but this is not about age. It's about God's plan and timing. Keep praying. Keep teaching. Keep modeling devotion to Christ. We are in this together for the glory of Christ and the establishment of Jesus as Lord in the hearts of our children!

## **NEXT STEPS**

So, what if my child is eager and ready to be baptized?

1. Talk with them and ask the questions above to discern whether they understand the gospel and evidence a new heart. Ask them several times to repeat the gospel on their own.
2. When you feel like they do, set up an appointment with one of the elders to meet with you and your child. You may proceed directly to the next step, or there may be counsel to take some time studying intently the meaning of conversion and baptism first.
3. If you and the elders together see evidence of salvation, they should prepare to be presented at a members meeting as a candidate for baptism. They will be encouraged to share their testimony with the members, who will then be given at least two weeks to express any concerns before we affirm them in baptism. It would be best for them to tell it or read it themselves, but if they cannot their parents may choose to help.
4. A baptism will be scheduled at a corporate gathering for the whole church to affirm and celebrate together this profession of faith.

What a privilege it is to work together to see our children loved by Jesus through His church and launched into His mission along with us!

## FOR FURTHER READING

[\*Forbid Them Not: Rethinking the baptism and church membership of children and young people\*](#) by Ted Christman. He confronts the tendency of reformed Baptist churches to delay baptism. The book is geared toward pastors, but it would be a great read for parents. There are many more great questions for discerning conversion. The argument of the booklet can be summarized as follows:

1. Childhood conversions *are* discernable, though often with greater difficulty.
2. Every person who gives evidence of true conversion should be baptized, *irrespective of age*.
3. Children who are baptized (with congregational approval) thereby become members of the church.
4. *All* of the means of grace should be extended to and enjoyed by these young members.
5. Some of the privileges and responsibilities of membership must await adult maturity.
6. When adult maturity arrives, that member should formally and publicly covenant to embrace the heightened privileges and responsibilities of church membership.
7. If a childhood conversion proves to be spurious, such a person should be removed (via church discipline) from the membership of the church and no longer allowed to come to the Lord's Table. As the baptism of the individual was approved by the congregation and made public in its declaration, so should his or her discipline be carried out.

[\*Understanding Baptism\*](#) by Bobby Jamieson. This is a great book on baptism and church membership. It is not geared towards baptism of children, but paints a good, biblical picture of baptism that would be helpful for new converts or anyone taking seriously the call to make disciples.