

Waverly Place Baptist Church
Shepherding Paper:
Childhood Conversion, Baptism & Membership

Introduction

Children are gifts from God. As parents, we want nothing less than the best for our children, which is why we want to see them redeemed and grow into godly men and women. And many of us have seen God work powerfully in the lives of children!

Even from an early age, children can display wonderful sensitivity to spiritual truths. Both as parents and as a church, we want to encourage that growth and spiritual development in our children, not hinder it.

Now, if our child professes faith, the natural question arises: should they be baptized?

This is a difficult and sensitive topic.

It's difficult because the Bible gives no clear teaching when it comes to an appropriate age for baptism. New Testament (NT) baptisms all seem to be adults coming out of a non-Christian context. We could further argue that the saving and baptizing of entire households (Acts 10, Acts 16, and 1 Corinthians 1) only acts to muddy the waters here, since we aren't told who lived within those households.

With that said, there simply aren't third or fourth generation Christian families in the early church in Acts trying to discern if or when they should baptize their child.

And it's sensitive, for we certainly don't want to discourage our children if they're genuine believers. But on the other hand, we don't want to deceive them if they're unbelievers. There are risks either way we go.

With that in mind, how then should we move forward as parents, and as a church family in thinking about childhood conversion, baptism and church membership?

That's the aim of this Shepherding Paper. In order to answer this question in a such a way that honors God and his Word, we'll explore what Scripture says about baptism, how baptism relates to children, and how it relates to the privileges of church membership.

Finally, we'll seek to think through conversion in children and answer some of the questions you may naturally be asking.

Baptism & the Bible

To begin, we need to be clear on what baptism is. According to the Bible, baptism is a Christian's public profession of faith in Christ, and the church's public declaration of that faith, thereby uniting the believer to the church and marking him off from the world.¹

It's both an individual and corporate act. It's how an individual goes public with their faith. But it's also a corporate act, with the church given authority by Jesus in affirming that faith. This is primarily because local churches are the institution God authorizes on earth to represent Jesus (Mt. 16:19, 18:16-20).

In matters of membership (Mt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:2,13; 2 Cor. 2:6), discipline (Mt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13), doctrine (Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 4:3-4), and leadership (Acts 6:1-7; 14:23; Gal. 1; Titus 1:5), the church speaks for heaven on earth.

In the NT, believers aren't baptized into free-agency, but into local churches (cf. Acts 2:37-41 and the rest of the book).² Paul says to be united to Christ in baptism, is to be united to his body (1 Cor. 12:13). The NT simply doesn't have a category for one who claims to publicly identify with Jesus, and yet refuses to identify with that living expression of his reign and rule on earth - the local church.

And within the local church, the NT delineates the various duties and responsibilities of its members—responsibilities that draw upon membership, doctrine, discipline and leadership. We see these responsibilities primarily in the 'one another' commands. These include the command to love one another (Rom. 12:10), instruct one another (Rom. 15:14), comfort one another (2 Cor. 13:11), serve one another (Gal. 5:13), admonish one another (Col. 3:16), encourage and build one another up (1 Thess. 5:11), stir one another up to love and good works by meeting together (Heb. 10:24-25), confess our sins and pray for one another (Jas. 5:16), and many more.³ Therefore, to go public for Jesus in baptism is to commit yourself to his body in all these various, practical ways. It's to become a member of his body. In other words, baptism confers church membership.⁴

It's how one formally steps out of the world, and into the local church.

¹ For more on this, read Robert Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016)

² The only exception is the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-40, for this was in a missionary context where there was no established church. In fact, church history tells us that this man more than likely left his baptism to go plant the church in Ethiopia.

³ For further consideration of this principle, listen to Plowing & Planting Podcast, *Episode 1.6: What does the church do?*

⁴ To put it another way, "membership" is a theological term that summarizes the relationship between a Christian and a church, which baptism (and the Lord's Supper) both imply and normally create. For more see Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism*, chapter 4.

By way of analogy, baptism is to membership what wedding vows are to marriage. In the same way that the wedding vows summarize the relationship and commitments of the individual to their new spouse, so baptism summarizes the relationship and commitments of a Christian to Christ, the Head and His local church, the Body. Thus, to be baptized and not be a member of a church is a bit like taking wedding vows but refusing to live together in marriage. The two ought to go hand-in-hand.

Baptism & Children

When it comes to baptism and children, at one level we treat them like any other baptismal candidate. Like we do with any baptismal candidate, we'll look for the following: Does the individual give a credible profession of faith? Are they able to articulate the gospel? Do they have a testimony consistent with one who is dead to sin and alive in Christ? Is their conversion clearly evident to the community around them?

Ultimately, it's us as a church family who are responsible for weighing and answering these questions, not just the child's biological family. This truth is seen most clearly in Matthew 16, where Jesus entrusts the keys of the kingdom not to moms and dads, but to the covenant gathering of His people. In other words, Jesus invested the local church with the authority to "bind and loose," that is to declare and protect the "what" (Mt. 16:16) and the "who" (Mt. 16:18) of the gospel.

Practically speaking, the baptism of children professing faith creates at least two challenges.

First, while functionally parents are in the closest position of assessing a child's profession, theologically the church has to make that determination. And as the church, we are not called to assess mere sincerity, but genuine credibility.

Jesus himself warns us about the dangers of mere sincerity: "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 7:21). He also cautions us regarding false professions in the parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. Some will have an initial appearance of growth and godliness, but in fact there's no root. It's why Jesus says true Christians are known by their fruit (Mt. 7:16-20).

So how can a church assess genuine credibility in children? That's more difficult.

Children have malleable minds and hearts. They naturally (at least for a time) want to please their parents and act like their peers at church. Thus, in many respects they will look and talk like Christians. It's only as they mature and sometimes leave the home that their beliefs and decisions truly become their own.

Think of a young child's heart as a tightly-closed flower bud. The child loves Jesus, and he loves his parents. In fact, it may be that the child loves Jesus because he loves his parents; and it may be that he loves and obeys his parents because he loves and wants to obey Jesus. At this stage, these two loves are as inseparable as the petals of a budded flower.

But to discern whether a profession of faith is credible, a church has to discern whether a person's love for Jesus is really for Jesus, or the result of something else. We have to ask if a person will follow Jesus or family, Jesus or friends, Jesus or acceptability, Jesus or self, if and when these things diverge — and our lives tell us that they will!

To do that kind of questioning and prodding in the heart of a young child, though—to pry in and try to distinguish between the two in order to determine if one exists independently of the other—would seem too much like trying to force some distance between that child's love for his parents and his love for Jesus, a distinction that isn't supposed to be there at that age. It would seem like trying to force the bud to open before its time.

But by the pre-teen and teen years, the bud begins to open on its own.

Teens naturally begin to question their childhood beliefs and adopt their own. They become self-aware, capable of critically evaluating Christianity, of making a personal decision about whether they really do believe in Jesus, and also of deciding whether they believe themselves to be a sinner in need of a savior. In short, the flower has opened, the petals have separated a bit, and therefore we can see much more clearly—without prying—whether that person believes in Jesus of their own volition, or whether their early belief in him has fallen away as they've become more independent from their parents.

A second challenge when it comes to the baptism of children relates to their maturity. There are reasons why we prohibit driving, drinking, voting, enlisting, marriage, etc. for children. For the most part, they lack the maturity and responsibility to carry out these functions.

The privileges of church membership are no less weighty!

Members are charged with guarding the discipline and doctrine of the church. They are called to live out the church covenant together.

Will the child be able to sort-through sensitive membership matters? Will the child be prepared to cast votes on cases of church discipline and church budgets? Will the parents be prepared for their child to come under church discipline if necessary?

If we are concerned that such conversations might be too mature or too difficult for their young ears, or that the duties are beyond their abilities (parent or child), we ought to reassess whether they're ready to be baptized.

None of this is to say that children can't be saved! Praise God for every 4 year-old he spares from a life of sin and sorrow!

It's simply to say that assessing a credible profession of faith, and discerning the ability of a child to live out that faith in the fellowship and duties of membership, is no easy task.

Lastly, a few observations from history.

Baptists baptizing their children is actually a new phenomena. In previous centuries, they waited until something closer to adulthood. Given the prevalence of nominal Christianity and "re-baptisms" within many Baptist churches today, one wonders if baptizing at younger ages is at least partly to blame.⁵

Additionally, while it is not generally known among American evangelicals today, the practice of baptizing pre-teenage children is of limited geography (largely limited to the United States, and places where American evangelicals have exercised great influence). Baptist Christians around the world today are still much more cautious than modern American Christians, often waiting in Europe, Africa and Asia to baptize until children are grown and are in their 20's.

Conversion in Children

As pastors, we love to meet and talk with the parents whose children are seeking to know Jesus Christ. We love to see children asking questions about God, learning to love Jesus, deepening in their understanding of the Bible, and growing in their discernment of spiritual things. Afterall, isn't this the very aim of parenting and of our Waverly Kids' children's ministry?

Having read this far, you understand some of the tensions that weigh on our hearts, as both parents and shepherds of this flock, when we approach the question of when a child should be baptized and become a member of the church.

With you, we long to see our children saved by Jesus and then encouraged in their faith, and we want to do everything possible not to discourage them in their love for Jesus in any way.

So parents, remember that conversion is first and foremost God's supernatural work, not simply a one-time decision a child makes or a simple prayer they pray. And neither sorrow over sin nor interest in spiritual things alone is sufficient evidence of a regenerate heart (Acts 8:9-25; 2 Cor. 7:10; Heb. 12:17).

⁵ In SBC life, there was a 250% increase in baptisms under age six between 1977-97. Sadly, evidence suggests many of those individuals were not in fact Christians. Similarly, a 1993 study done by the North American Mission Board of the SBC found that 60% of adult baptisms were "re-baptisms." When asked why, they admitted they were not regenerate when they were first baptized. See John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 111-112.

Therefore, parents should be vigilant in looking for some or all of the following signs of God's converting work in their child before moving forward with conversations with them and with the pastors about baptism:

- **Conviction of sin.** Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit, who uses God's laws and commands to bring sin and the necessity of trusting Christ home to the child's conscience (2 Kings 22; Rom. 7:7-9). Does your child demonstrate sorrow and remorse over his/her sin? Do they grasp the difference between godly sorrow that leads to repentance, and worldly sorrow that leads to death (2 Cor. 7:10)? Does your child recognize that he/she has sinned against God and not just against others? Does your child confess his/her sins to God and ask for His mercy without your prompting? Does your child demonstrate commitment to Christ in the midst of strong temptation to disobey?
- **Understanding and Faith.** Revelation is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he reveals the thoughts of God so that a person may obtain a true understanding of Christ and his word (John 10:26-27; 1 Cor. 2:6-16). Does your child understand that he/she is a sinner and cannot save himself/herself? Does your child understand that his/her sins deserve death and punishment in hell? Does your child understand that Jesus died as a substitute for his/her sins? Does your child understand that he/she is saved only by God's grace and not because of any good within himself/herself? Does your child demonstrate a growing understanding of the Scriptures when they are taught or is your child put off by the Scriptures?
- **New Life in Christ.** Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives life to a dead soul, and produces a credible profession of repentance and faith (John 3; Rom. 6; 10:9-10), as well as a new valuing of the Scriptures (John 6:45). Does your child demonstrate a genuine interest in spiritual things? Does your child pray or read the Scriptures on their own initiative? What sins has your child repented of? In what ways does your child show evidence of fighting sin and putting it to death? Does your child go to those they've sinned against and freely admit his/her wrongdoing? Does your child desire to talk with you about the Scriptures? How does your child demonstrate trust in Jesus? Is your child submitted to your authority and the authority of others in his/her life? Does your child demonstrate a genuine desire to tell others about Jesus?

As we weigh all these factors and seek to navigate the tension between discouraging genuine believers versus deceiving nonbelievers, the pastors of WPBC encourage parents to continue discipling their children and discuss baptism as something that could take place in their pre-teen to teen years.

Baptism & the Membership Process

For all the reasons listed above, *we do not require a certain age for baptism*; but because it is also more difficult to discern the credibility of a persons' faith the younger they are, we are a bit more cautious when it comes to children. Below we have outlined how we plan to exercise that caution with any pre-teen or teen who desire baptism under the age of 16.

1. Work through *Helping Your Children Understand the Gospel* booklet with your child. Parents will work through the contents of the *Helping Your Children Understand the Gospel* booklet with the child who professes faith in Christ. This booklet lays out, in ways that are easy for children to understand, the gospel in detail. We encourage parents to take their time working through this with their child, asking lots of questions and discerning whether their child has a good grasp of the gospel, conversion, baptism and church membership, and how their heart is affected by these truths

2. Schedule an Elder Interview. After working through this booklet with their child, if parents believe their child has a credible profession of faith, the next step is to schedule a meeting with an elder where he will ask questions to dig deeper into the child's heart regarding not just their knowledge of the gospel, but the effect it has had upon the child's heart and life.

3. Work through the two booklets on Baptism with your child. If the elders are comfortable in moving forward towards baptism and church membership, then the parents will begin working through the booklets, *Preparing Young People for Baptism & Understanding Baptism*. We again encourage parents to take their time working through the contents of these booklets. The contents of both must be thoroughly discussed between the parents and child, bringing in the elders if needed, before a baptism is scheduled.

4. Attend the Foundations Membership Class. Like any person pursuing baptism and church membership, children must attend the Foundation class we offer. We encourage parents to attend the class with their child so they can have conversations about it afterwards.

5. Schedule a Membership Conversation. After the Foundations class is completed, the child will meet with an elder (parents may attend, but will refrain from any input) to explain the gospel in their own words and share how they have seen Jesus save them and how the Spirit is at work in their life.

6. Presentation for a Congregational Vote. Like any person pursuing baptism and membership, the elders will discuss the candidate, their profession and its credibility, discerning whether it is prudent in moving forward. If the elders believe it is wise, they will present the child for membership at a Members' Meeting, pending baptism.

7. Written Testimony. If the congregation affirms the child's profession of faith as credible and votes them into the membership, pending baptism, they will begin working with their parents and a pastor in writing their testimony of how God saved them and they came to faith.

8. Schedule Baptism. The final step is for the child to be baptized in front of the congregation on a Sunday morning (normally), where they will read their written testimony before the church, be baptized, and officially enter into church membership.

9. Participation in the Life of the Church. Once the child is baptized and becomes a member, it is expected that they will participate in the life of the church like anyone else. They are expected, by God's grace, to uphold the obligations of Scripture as outlined in the church covenant. We do not have "junior membership" for children.

Common Questions & Answers

As with any practice, questions naturally arise. We've attempted to anticipate some of the most natural questions you might have, and provided answers below.

1. What if my child is expressing faith in Christ? How can I encourage this faith?

There are many ways, and we would encourage you to rejoice in what you see God doing in your child's life and be diligent in encouraging it! First, praise God and pray that he would continue to work in the heart of your child. Continue to teach your children God's law and commands, which the Holy Spirit uses to bring conviction of sin (Deut. 6). Teach them God's promises and speak plainly about their need to repent from sin and trust Christ (Acts 2:38-39). At the same time, model and teach honesty and openness with the Lord in prayer in the midst of all situations (Lam. 2:19ff), and encourage your children to exercise disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, and Bible memorization (Ps. 119:9-11; 144:12). Also, be sure to include your children in both family and corporate worship gatherings, through singing, listening to the prayers of older saints and listening to the preached Word (Ex. 12:26; 13:9, 14-16). A person's presence and participation in church services will be a catalyst in helping them grow to understand the gospel (Ps. 8:2; 102:18; 1 Cor. 14:24-25).

2. If my child is not immediately baptized, does this mean my child is not a Christian? Certainly not! We believe that God converts people sometimes even at very early ages. Your child may very well be a Christian, God knows. Any delay in baptism does not at all imply a judgment that they are not saved; it is simply a judgment that at this point in their lives it seems wise to wait for more discernible, credible evidence of their regeneration before giving them the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of church membership.

3. If my child has made a profession of faith, but has not been baptized, can he or she participate in the Lord's Supper? Our Statement of Faith affirms what Christians throughout history have always affirmed, that baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the initiatory sign of the New Covenant, and the Lord's Supper is the continuing sign. For that reason, your child should not participate in the Lord's Supper until he or she is baptized. (See question 12 if your child was baptized in another church.)

That said, use the Lord's Supper to encourage active, God-glorifying anticipation in your child's heart. Instead of only focusing on why your child shouldn't partake, encourage them to reflect on what the Supper signifies - Christ's body broken for sinners. If you can do so truthfully, let your child know how you have seen the Lord's work in their lives, and how you look for them to grow. Encourage them to continue trusting Christ. Children in whom the Spirit is at work will be aware of their sins. Do not encourage children to be introspective and worried about their faults. Point them to Christ and assure them of your confidence that since he has begun a good work in them, he will finish it (Phil. 1:6).

While you wait, prepare. If your children are with you during the Lord's Supper, allow them to quietly observe you as you take each element. Share with them how much the Lord loved us to give His life for us. Pray with them thanking the Lord for His death and life. And set an example of worthy partaking. If bitterness or anger or any sin troubles you, do not partake. This will show your child that you are serious about Paul's admonition that we should not partake of the Table in an unworthy way. And remember that God's saving grace is not given through the Lord's Supper, so there's no spiritual danger in having a child wait. In fact, waiting until a more mature age can increase the honor and solemnity the child associates with the ordinance.

4. Is church membership a right for every Christian? No, church membership is a right for every Christian who gives a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ. But just because one doesn't provide a credible profession, doesn't mean they aren't a true Christian. Conversely, membership doesn't guarantee one is in fact a Christian. In other words, your child may be a true Christian even if he or she is not yet a member of a local church (see question 2 above).

Theologically speaking: Christians have always recognized that the membership of the invisible church (all those who are saved by Jesus) and the membership of the visible church (local churches) will not be precisely the same. As those who baptize believers only, though, we want to be as sure as we can that those who are members of the church are actually and truly Christians. In other words, we want to aim to have a “regenerate membership.” In fact, that’s precisely what leads us to look for credible professions of faith among those who apply for membership in the church, no matter their age.

5. Can my unbaptized child still be disciplined by the church? Of course! Waverly Place Baptist Church is deeply committed to discipling children of all ages, teaching them the Bible, and seeking to point them to Jesus Christ. There is a wealth of help available to you as a parent in teaching your child, however young, to be a follower and lover of Jesus. We will be more than happy to help you do that in any way we can, whether your child is a member of the church or not. In fact, we promise in our very church covenant “to raise our children in the way they should go.”

6. If I believe my child is a Christian, shouldn’t that be enough? Of course a parent’s testimony carries considerable weight. A parent will know their child in ways no other member does. However, membership in the church is never a matter of just one or two people (even family members) vouching for a person. In the NT, membership in the local church is a matter of the entire church, guided by her elders. Ultimately, it’s the entire church that’s given the keys to the kingdom. Christ gives us as a church the responsibility to use those keys to bind and loose on earth (Mt. 16:18-19).

7. Is it necessary to look for evidence of a child’s love for Jesus independent of his/her love for his parents? Shouldn’t we rather look for evidence that is credible for the person’s stage of life? In other words, isn’t the presence of “the bud” itself credible evidence of God’s regenerating work in a young child’s life? That’s a really good question. But consider this. As we saw earlier, statistics show that a large percentage of childhood baptisms to Christian parents are in fact rejected by those children as they mature. That is, these children, now in the late teen or adult years, look back and decide that they weren’t actually Christians when they were baptized young.⁶ That’s why we look for evidence of a love for Jesus that is personal, considered, and independent of their parents. That kind of profession of faith is a much better predictor of a strong, life-long commitment to Jesus.

⁶ Keep in mind these statistics cover only those who return to the faith and ultimately apply for “rebaptism.” They don’t even include those individuals baptized as children who leave the faith and never return.

8. Does delaying baptism and membership cause children to misunderstand their place in the church and commitment to Christ? We don't believe so. If your child is not yet a teen, then he or she is probably not well-equipped to understand the considerable importance and texture of what it means to be a member of the church, with all its rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Even secular society recognizes that it's best to withhold some rights and privileges (think of voting or holding office) until people are mature enough to understand them and exercise them responsibly. The best way you can teach your child, at this stage, the importance of the church and what it means to be a member of it is by attending regularly; teaching, and explaining to your child what is happening and why; and modeling for them what godly submission to authority should look like. When your child has begun to mature, there will be plenty of time for him/her to learn at an experiential level what it means and looks like to be a church member.

9. Are the risks really that great of baptizing too young? We believe so. First, early baptism has the potential of offering a child false assurance, leading them to rely on the concrete experience of their baptism and the concrete reality of their church membership for a sense of well-being with God, instead of relying on Christ, who is not seen. Of course that's a danger for anyone of any age, but it would seem to be a particular danger for children whose thinking tends toward the concrete, and whose sense of well-being is naturally so tightly woven together with a sense of others'— especially their parents'— approval. As they age, however, children are better able to know for themselves (and we are better able to see) that their faith is truly and solely in Jesus.

Also, as discussed earlier, a large number who are baptized early are troubled by confusion later in life about whether their baptism was genuine. Memories of the first decade of our lives are often fuzzy at best. Even if we do remember a decision or an event like baptism, we usually struggle to recall any reasoning behind the decision or event. Once a young person has the capacity for reasoning and for more independent thinking, they are far more likely to embrace the decisions and commitments they make as their own. Our hope is that as a child waits, there will be a growing sense of anticipation as they look forward to following the Lord in obedience.

By encouraging parents to wait awhile before presenting their children for membership, we hope to help people lessen the dangers of both false assurance and confusion.

10. Does this necessarily mean my baptism as a young child was illegitimate? Certainly not! Numerous members of WPBC were baptized early in life. We don't mean at all to call those early baptisms into question. We have adopted this posture, however, because for every member who was baptized early and proved that baptism to be genuine over the years, there are others who were baptized early but who ultimately decided that baptism wasn't a true one; in other words, that member eventually decided that they weren't really a Christian at the time of their early baptism. And in the meantime, many of those people will testify that they were lulled to sleep for a time by false assurance, plagued by doubts about their faith, or simply sunk in confusion. Through this policy, we want to try to avoid those troubles as much as possible.

11. If we withhold baptism from a child who is professing faith in Christ, aren't we stunting their growth and maturity as a Christian? If we had God's eyes and knew definitively that the child was a genuine believer, then, yes, in some sense withholding baptism could stunt their maturity. Yet, as it becomes clearer and clearer to the church that the child is showing evidence of genuine faith in Christ, obedience in baptism becomes the natural next step. Further, just because we withhold baptism from someone for a season, doesn't mean they cannot flourish under other means of grace. They can still read and study the Word, sit under its preaching, pray, sing, and grow in the company of other Christians.

12. What if my child was baptized at another church before our family came to WPBC? Though we encourage parents to wait to the pre-teen and teen years, we are not saying that a genuine baptism cannot occur before that time. If a child was baptized as a believer in another gospel-preaching church before coming to WPBC, we will not ask the child to be baptized again. The Bible doesn't call anybody to be baptized "again," under any circumstances.

If your child would like to come before WPBC for membership, and is therefore prepared to carry out all the duties and privileges contained therein, they ought to go through the membership process like anybody else. But just because the child was a member of a previous church doesn't necessarily mean he or she will be brought into the membership of WPBC. As we've seen, the membership of a local church is determined by that local church, through the help of her elders.

If you have any additional questions, please be sure to talk with an elder. As much as possible we want to ensure your child is encouraged in his or her faith in Jesus, regardless of whether or not they seek membership as a child.