

Child baptism

The act of baptism is symbolic of salvation by faith; that is, **dying** to the old self and **rising** to the newness of the life we have in Christ (Colossians 2:12-14).

Baptism—as taught and practised in the New Testament—is therefore an act of obedience by an individual, and is in response to the Holy Spirit's renewing work in his/her life.

Does this mean that children who believe in God and follow His ways should be baptized without due consideration of their age and maturity?

Young children who have been taught from the Bible find it easy to believe in Jesus, in miracles and in the supernatural. However, a consciousness of the sinful nature, and consequently their need to be saved, develops only as children become older.

Once children understand their sinful nature and sense their need for a Saviour, and once they have asked Jesus to forgive them and make them new, they will more easily understand the significance of Baptism.

The Scriptural basis for baptizing a believing child

- *Age does not limit the Spirit's divine work.*

Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" Matthew 18:3.

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" Matthew 11:25.

But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" Luke 18:1.

- *Baptism follows conversion.*

Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" Matthew 28:19 – 20.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call" Acts 2:38.

Possible pressures arising from early baptism

- Well-meaning parents may expect too much of the child who is baptized, wanting him to live up to their expectations. They may have forgotten what it was like to be a child—forgetful, irresponsible, mischievous and immature. Parents should guard against using the issue of baptism to try to change the child's behaviour after baptism.

The child's reaction:

The child feels that he cannot live up to expectations resulting from his decision to be baptized even though he has a genuine desire to follow the Lord. This may lead to despair. He may give up trying to live a Christ-like life, believing that following Christ may be easier when he is older.

- Parents who are sceptical of the child's decision to be baptized may later have a 'told-you-so' attitude when the child's faith is tried during the difficult teenage years.

The child's reaction:

He believes he made a false start and becomes confused about his salvation.

Possible issues arising when a request for baptism is declined

- When baptism is turned down on the basis of age i.e. too young.

The child's reaction:

The child feels that he cannot be trusted to make this important decision for himself. He gets the message that he is too young and may put off making the decision (to be baptized) indefinitely.

If the responsibility for making the decision is shifted away from the child, who will decide when the time is right for the child to be baptized.

- When baptism is turned down on the basis of "spiritual immaturity."

The child's reaction:

The child feels that he is not good enough to be baptized. He gets the message that baptism is only for those who have "made the grade."

On what basis do we judge maturity? Baptism is not a sign of having attained a certain spiritual standard; it is a symbolic act of someone who through faith has died with Christ and has risen to eternal life.

Baptism – a turning point

Children who come to faith in Christ at an early age and have not had a definite conversion experience may become "fence sitters" as they grow older. For those who have grown in their faith from an early age, baptism may help to define a turning point in their lives—a stake in the ground to follow the Lord. Having made a public profession of their faith, they are no longer secret followers but true disciples of the Lord.

Recommendation

- That an informal interview be held to determine the child's readiness for baptism. A simple questionnaire could assist to guide the conversation (see below).
- That parents give their consent. Should the parents decline for whatever reason, their decision should be respected. In this case, the child should be informed tactfully and encouraged in the faith.
- That the child does a simplified discipleship course before being baptized.
- That a child who loves Jesus and believes in Him, and who understands the purpose of baptism, be baptized at his request even though he may not remember a specific day when he came to faith in Christ.
- That the child be assigned a mentor to encourage, guide and pray for him.
- That parents be led to understand that baptism does not save their child nor will it change their character.

Questions that could provide insight:

1. Why would you like to be baptized?

Question asked to determine the motive or conviction to be baptized - e.g. to please their parents or to obey God.

2. Who should be baptized?

Question asked to clarify in the child's mind that baptism is a special act linked to salvation.

3. What is baptism for?

Question asked to determine the level of understanding about the symbolism of baptism.

4. Do you think that being baptized will make it easier for you to follow the Lord?

Question asked to ensure that the child is not disillusioned about the Christian walk after baptism.