

How Do I Know When My Child Is Ready To Be Baptized?

In bringing up children there are many spiritual challenges that we face. As parents we want our children to grow up strongly committed to a growing relationship with Jesus. Parents who have made a covenant before God to rear their children to know and love Him will have concerns that have no easy or simple answers. One of these is the baptism of children. The question is: "How do I, as a parent, know when it is right for my child to be baptized?"

There are several aspects of the issue that can make the baptism of children somewhat confusing. On the one hand there may be a desire to have them baptized at a very young age. The biblical example often shows that individuals were baptized immediately after they were converted (Acts 2:38, 41, 8:12, 13, 35-38, 18:8). Since many children make spiritual decisions at a very young age it would seem that baptism should happen soon after that time. As a result there may arise a number of concerns for the parent. The child may later not even remember the experience. Also, children are often clear one day then later are unclear about a decision they made. Parents may find themselves asking, "Was this a decision that my child made on his or her own or did I push them too hard when they were not ready to take this step?"

On the other hand a parent might take the position that since baptism is not required for salvation it is best to wait until they are completely ready to make the decision on their own. This could perhaps delay the decision until much later, into the teen years and perhaps even beyond. The disadvantage to taking this approach is that a child may never make the decision. Certainly, one danger is that a child may pick up from mom or dad that baptism is just not that important. As a result a child may grow up missing out on the blessing that can come from taking this step of making a public profession of their faith.

Even though a child's ability to reason comes later on, it may be possible to trust Christ even as young as two or three. Many significant spiritual decisions are made at a very young age. I have even heard of many missionaries tell of having made a decision to be a missionary as young as three years old. While a child of two or three may in fact be a believer, it may not be possible to be relatively sure about it until later on.

What is Baptism all about?

Baptism is an important step for every believer.

It is a beautiful ordinance given to us by Christ himself (Matthew 28:19-20). It is to be an outward symbol of what God has done in one's heart. Baptism holds three distinct and symbolic pictures of the Christian faith. First, it is a picture of the gospel itself. The act of putting a person under the water serves as a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This picture is brought out in Romans 6:1-8 and Col. 2:12.

Baptism is an act of identifying with Jesus Christ in the most central act of His ministry and life. The very term Christian means, "of Christ." When a child makes the decision to trust Christ they are entering a relationship and a union with Him, which carries with it many implications. Baptism serves as a picture of what has taken place in the life of the person who has trusted Christ. That is to say that when we become Christians we die to ourselves, our sins have been buried with Christ and we are raised to a new life in Christ.

Baptism is secondly a picture of the cleansing that has taken place in the life of the believer. A number of times in scripture the experience of salvation is spoken of as a cleansing (I Cor. 6:11, Acts 22:16). Baptism serves as a picture of the inward cleansing from sins that has taken place when a person placed their trust in Christ.

Finally, baptism serves as identification with the body of believers. This is one reason why baptism is such an important step. It publicly states that a person desires to identify with others who believe. A person who has trusted Christ has already become a member of the universal body of Christ and baptism serves as a picture of that identification (I Cor. 12:13, Rom. 12:4,5).

There are some special considerations when dealing with children on the issue of baptism. Children are in a state of emotional and spiritual development. They are in the process of developing their ability to reason and understand more abstract concepts. According to I Cor. 15:1-5 the gospel is very simple. Basically, the gospel is the truth that Jesus died for our sins, that He was buried and that He rose again. The Bible tells us that anyone who wants to become a Christian simply needs to place their belief and trust in this, that Jesus paid the penalty of our sins (Rom. 4:4,5, John 3:16). While this is a fairly simple concept for an adult to comprehend it may not be so simple for a child.

What does my child need to know?

Certainly we would not want to require a child to have the same depth of understanding as an adult prior to being baptized, however there are some basic concepts that would be important for a child to understand before they take the step of baptism.

Sin and its Penalty.

Every child coming to Christ should understand that the basic problem of everyone is sin. Sin is what separates us from God (Rom 3:23). It is because of this sin that all of us deserve the penalty of eternal separation from God (Rom. 6:23).

Substitution.

Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin (Rom. 5:8, II Cor. 5:21, I Peter 1:18,19). We must all come to realize that there is nothing we can do of our own effort to earn what He did for us. Titus 3:5 tells us that it is not about what we can do to earn salvation but what He already did for us that allows us to receive forgiveness of our sins.

Faith.

It is our faith in Jesus Christ that gives us entrance to His kingdom (Ephesians 2:8,9, John 5:24). This is not a general faith in the existence of God. There are many people even those who practice non-Christian religions who would say they believe in God. Our trust is in what Jesus Christ did on the cross as payment for our sins. We need to mention a word about the language we use when explaining to children how to become Christians. Because children are very concrete in their thinking it can be difficult to explain to them how to be saved. Certain phrases we might use may not explain accurately how they can become a Christian. For instance, we might tell children that they need to ask Jesus into their heart. While it is true that we want them to have Jesus in their heart, this does not explain the biblical concept of salvation by grace through faith. Ultimately we want our children to place their complete trust in Christ's work on the cross for salvation.

That brings up a great parenting question, "Can I really know for certain that my child is a believer?" The harsh reality is that we really can't know, with complete certainty, whether anybody else is truly saved. Only God knows what is in each person's heart and what they are trusting in for salvation. The goal in leading children to Christ should be to push for biblical understanding, and ask thoughtful questions to see when the child is ready to acknowledge their need to place their trust in Christ for salvation.

Every child seeking to be baptized should be able to give evidence of their faith in Christ and have a basic understanding of what it is that makes them a Christian. These are the two things that a pastor will want to discuss with anyone seeking to be baptized. Often children are able to recite certain facts of the gospel without a connection to their own salvation. Perhaps they have heard from mom or dad, "Remember Johnny,

you became a Christian when we prayed together that time.” The important thing is not so much the memory of an event but what the child is trusting in right now.

One way to find out if a child has a good understanding of salvation is to ask them questions that seek for comprehension as opposed to the recitation of facts. Try asking a question that they might not have been asked previously, “Johnny, who are the people that get to go to Heaven?” Or try, “Johnny, if you had a friend who wanted to know how to become a Christian, what would you tell them?” Your active role as spiritual leaders of your children is important for their spiritual development. Your careful guidance of your child will also prevent the possibility of discouragement because he or she thought they were going to be baptized and the pastor recommended that they wait.

Helping children develop their spiritual understanding.

Individual attention because of individual development.

Each parent must decide how to proceed with their children regarding spiritual issues. Children’s spiritual personalities vary greatly from child to child and often in the same family there are children that are very different in how they respond spiritually. Children who are more independent and self-willed may tend to grow spiritually at a different pace than a more sensitive child. It is in the best interest of good parenting to not treat each child the same. Each child is a unique creation of God and needs individual development, attention and expectations. This is certainly true in the area of children’s spiritual development.

When considering the spiritual needs of our children there is a temptation for parents to expect all of their children to take spiritual steps in the same way and at the same age. It might be helpful to consider how God has worked in our own life in relation to the way He has worked in others. Each of us has been lead by our heavenly Father in a caring way that has been tailor-made for our personality. With this in mind we should guide our children in a way that is fluid and conversational.

The power of timely questions.

A great way to grease the wheels is to ask questions without pushing. “Johnny, why do you think God let his Son die?” Children will begin to put pieces together as they mature and questions help children to put together the facts, as they are able. Sometimes the best thing we can do to help children develop is to create thoughtful questions.

Seize the moment.

Often there are fertile times when children ask spiritual questions. “Mommy, when is God’s birthday?” There are times when the wheels are turning in the mind of a child and there are times of spiritual silence when it seems there is nothing happening. When a child asks questions it can be a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in the child. Often just before children place their trust in Christ they will begin to ask questions. Teachers and children’s workers have noted that a child will often seek the attention of a trusted Sunday School teacher or other children’s worker around the time they make a decision to trust Christ. When a parent senses that a child is thinking about spiritual matters he or she should capitalize on that moment.

Make it a point to attend a baptism with your child.

One of the greatest motivators for children is seeing their peers getting baptized. After a baptism I will inevitably have a number of conversations with both children and adults who have children interested in being baptized. One word of caution for parents in this matter is to make this a no-pressure kind of arrangement. After the service ask the child what they thought of what they saw and if they know why these people decided to be baptized. Attending a baptism can be a great discussion starter and it also takes away

the fear factor. After all, baptism should be a natural expression of faith in Christ for children and adults as well.

Never underestimate the value of the building blocks.

There is a temptation as a parent or even among Christian educators to rush past the building blocks and encourage children to make a decision to trust Christ. When children are young there are great spiritual lessons that can be learned. God is love, God cares for me, God wants me to forgive, God wants me to share with others, these are the building blocks that create the framework for deeper understanding that comes when the child is older. As a parent of young children we should place the bulk of our energy on the building blocks. In doing this we will enable our children to more readily accept deeper spiritual matters later on.

Pray faithfully.

Without question, one of the most important things a parent can do regarding a child's spiritual development is pray and the most important prayer a parent can pray for themselves is prayer for wisdom. In James 1:5 we are told that if we pray for wisdom God gives it generously. Certainly there is no other responsibility than to be trusted with the spiritual care and development of our children. Today, the job of rearing children provides challenges and hurdles not known to previous generations. There are traps and pitfalls that aim at destroying the spiritual development of your children. A parent who wants their child to grow needs to be in constant prayer through each stage of their development.

If you have questions or are unsure of how to proceed with your child we would be more than willing to help as you handle this important issue with your children. Please contact:

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