

Is My Child Ready to be Baptized?

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Many Christian parents of young children wrestle with how to answer this question. A child—perhaps somewhere between 5 and 15 years of age—says to you, “I want to be baptized!” How are we supposed to respond?

No matter what, the first reaction should not be one of surprise. If a child is expressing a desire to be baptized then this is a sign that we have been doing our job to create an environment whereby our child is encouraged to obey the Lord. We should be profoundly grateful that our children have been paying attention and desire to respond to what they have been learning in a positive manner. We express to our children our happiness and pleasure in their desire.

Yet, before we go any further, we should note that our primary concern is not about *baptism per se*; our concern is about *conversion* (which is a deeper and more meaningful concept). Baptism is only the commencement of a converted life - it is only a step in the process of conversion. If we are not careful, we can betray a lack of understanding when we announce that “[Insert Name] was baptized.” Perhaps we should

instead say that “[Insert Name] was converted.” Baptism is meaningless by itself - apart from faith, repentance, and the renewed life that is to follow. **The fundamental point is not whether a child is ready to be baptized, but is she/he ready to begin a new life?**

After we have established a proper understanding of baptism, we can see that **there are two extremes to be avoided**. On the one hand, it would be a mistake to go ahead and baptize the child without asking some serious questions. Some parents may think the only important follow-up question is, “Do you love Jesus?” But is this *all* a child needs to be able to answer? Was this the only qualification on the Day of Pentecost? One main problem with this extreme is that we risk producing an adult that can never be sure whether he/she underwent a true biblical baptism, and thus may struggle later with having a “pure conscience” (1 Pet. 3:21).

On the other hand, the situation is made worse by overreacting to the first extreme. The parent or church leader is so careful *not* to baptize a child who isn’t ready that little attention is given to the child’s tender, sensitive heart. What must it do to a child when—upon working up the courage to do what he/she thinks is right—an adult brushes the question aside and quickly downplays what the child believes is important? How many children have been crushed by a seemingly dismissive attitude by a parent or other adult toward this question?

Perhaps there is some middle ground to this sensitive question. I know a cookie-cutter answer will not satisfy every situation, but I still want to provide as clear of an answer as I can.

Perhaps we can never know perfectly when a child is ready. Only God knows the heart (1 Sam. 16:7; John 2:24; Acts 1:24). Yet, I find comfort in the fact that God is a loving Father, and is longsuffering towards His children (Jas. 3:17). It is undoubtedly His prerogative to extend a window of opportunity for a child to obey the gospel.

Six Signs A Child is Ready to Obey the Gospel

1. A solid grasp of the seriousness of sin.

To sin is to offend God (Gen. 39:9; Lev. 6:2; Psa. 51:4). When I sin, I am deciding to do something that I know is contrary to God’s will (1 John 5:17; Jas. 4:17). Does your child understand how serious it is to sin against an infinitely holy and just God? Can your child fathom not only the joy of heaven but also the fearful expectation of hell (Matt. 25:41-46;

Heb. 10:31)? To be charged with sin by God (cf. Rom. 4:8), there is first a certain level of maturity or accountability one must reach. In my experience, most children who come to me asking to be baptized still do not have an adequate understanding of sin. If one is not old enough to appreciate (on at least a basic level) the gravity of sin, then he/she is not old enough to obey the gospel (the remedy of sin).

Consider a toddler who does something wrong (e.g., take a toy from a sibling, disobey the will of a parent, etc.). Did that toddler sin? In my judgment, I do not believe so. A child is still trying to figure out the parameters of behavior, and the consequences that come with choices that are made. Now, consider an accountable adult who commits acts that are known to be wrong (as God defines sin in the Scriptures; as wrong is determined by conscience; Rom. 2:12-16). Did this adult sin? Yes, most definitely. So, what is the difference? The adult is *culpable*; the toddler is not.

For someone to be guilty of sin, it must be committed by someone who is culpable. The ability to account for one's actions necessitates a degree of mental capacity to understand what one is doing. This implication is found throughout Scripture. For example, Jesus said, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). In other words, Jesus expects all people who have the ability to grasp what He says to obey His words. God takes one's knowledge and capacity to understand into account (Luke 12:47-48). There is no getting around the fact that some people do not have this ability yet, and thus are not accountable to these words.

2. A heightened desire to know the truth of Scripture.

Even if culpability is determined, no one is ready to obey the gospel if he or she doesn't first have a love for the truth (cf. 2 Thess. 2:10). Is it apparent to you as a parent that your child's interest has piqued about spiritual matters? Does your child share the attitude of David, who wrote, "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways; I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (Psa. 119:15-16)?

It is essential to teach your child Bible stories while they are still young. The children of Christian parents should grow up being acquainted with Bible stories and teachings (2 Tim. 3:15). But eventually, you should notice your child trying to understand the truth of the Bible *apart* from your own prodding. Is your child reading Scripture on his/her own? Is your child asking Bible questions, indicating that he/she has been thinking seriously about spiritual truths? These kinds of behaviors demonstrate a sincere desire—independent of any parental influence—to know the truth of God's word better.

3. A growing love for Jesus and a working understanding of His blood & atoning sacrifice.

Children, by their innocent nature, want to please you. They often do what they are told, believe what they are taught, and say what they are told to say. Thus, every child in a Christian home knows they are supposed to love Jesus.

But has that love grown into something *meaningful*? Does your child know what it *means* to love Jesus? Does your child now feel genuine affection for Jesus because of what He has done for us because of our sin? Does your child understand why the blood of Jesus was necessary (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:23)? Does your child understand why Jesus needed to make propitiation for our sins (Heb. 2:17)? Does your child understand that only the substitutionary death of a sinless God-man could permanently atone for sin (Heb. 9:25-26)? Your child doesn't need to know these big words, but it is essential to have a basic grasp on these concepts before obeying the gospel.

4. A noticeable increase in determination to obey parents.

The Lord says to children, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise)” (Eph. 6:1-2). Of course, this is just as much directed to parents as it is to children. Parents are to instill this virtue into their children long before their children become old enough to understand this divine imperative.

But is your child now old enough to understand the significance of this Biblical command? The reason why this question is important is because, as a Christian, God requires faithfulness in the legitimate roles and stations of life in which we all find ourselves (1 Cor.4:2; 7:17ff). If a teenage child is old enough to obey the gospel, then the teenage years should be characterized by submission—not rebellion—to his/her parents. How does your child respond when he/she disagrees with your decision? How does your child react to discipline? Some children find it easier to submit to their parents than other children just by virtue of their personality. If it is not natural for your child to submit to you, do you notice a change in your child's determination to override his/her feelings?

5. A basic, rudimentary concept of the kingdom of Christ.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter's sermon was an invitation to the kingdom of God. In fact, when inspired preachers taught the gospel to lost people, they preached the “kingdom” to

people (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Evidently, it was important to early preachers that the audience knew *something* about the kingdom—the domain and rule of Christ—before administering baptism.

In fact, this is the main difference between John’s baptism and the baptism of the New Covenant. John’s baptism was preparatory to the coming kingdom (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). In contrast, Christianity is about a present kingdom (cf. 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13; Acts 28:23, 31). Someone must understand at least *something* about that kingdom before being baptized.

Does your child understand that the kingdom is the realm of the saved (Col. 1:13)? Does your child know that the kingdom manifests itself as the one and only church that Jesus built (Matt. 16:18-19)? Does your child know that Christ is the Lord and King of His kingdom (1 Cor. 15:27-28; Heb. 1:8), and therefore must submit entirely to the authority of Jesus (Col. 3:17)?

Baptism is a commitment. Is your child ready to assume citizenship of the kingdom, submitting to King Jesus in everything? Have you helped your child “count the cost” of becoming a disciple of Jesus (Luke 14:25-33)? What will repentance look like?

6. A deep feeling of sorrow for sin.

Aside from corrective punishment in the home, does your child feel genuine regret and sadness for sin? A child can feel “convicted” of wrongdoing without being ashamed and heartbroken over sin. The role of the Holy Spirit, however, is to convict the human heart of sin (John 16:7-15). To ensure your child is experiencing a true conversion, he/she should feel the weight of sin and come to terms with God’s wrath toward sin.

If your child says something hurtful to a sibling or friend, does he/she apologize without being told to do so? Does your child confess a lie—before being caught—for no other reason than a hurting conscience before God? Those on the day of Pentecost were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). Does this describe your child?

Conclusion

Baptism is a burial (Rom. 6:3-4). Is your child ready to die? Is your child dead enough to be buried? Is your child ready to be crucified with Christ, taking on His identity (Gal. 2:20)?

Ask your child questions related to what we have discussed. It is likely that you will convince your child that there is no need to be baptized yet. However, when you can no longer talk your child out of obeying the gospel—when your child is beginning to lose sleep—this may be a sign that your child is ready.