

# WHEN SHOULD MY CHILD BE BAPTIZED?

## WRONG QUESTION

This is a good question but there is a better first question, a question that has probably never occurred to you. This better first question is: Why should my child not get baptized?

It seems a strange way to start the discussion, but it is very helpful to understand why your child should not be baptized. I recently had a discussion with a mother who told me she now regrets having her daughters baptized at such a young age. She said they are not walking with the Lord. She sees their baptism as a stumbling block to their adult faith. How can that be possible? There are a few reasons that can make an early baptism troublesome.

First is the possibility of being inoculated to the gospel. An inoculation in medical terms is the introduction of a small amount of a virus (usually non-living virus) to the immune system so that the body responds by building up anti-bodies that can then fight off any future infections of that virus.

By getting baptized prematurely, your child might not have “caught the real thing” and might instead be inoculated to the gospel in the future. This happens when a child who doesn’t fully understand the gospel goes through the motions of baptism but without true faith in the saving work of Jesus. This premature action can cause them to resist future appeals of the gospel because they are convinced they are secure.

To “catch the real thing” your child needs to understand sin, hell, confession, repentance, and faith in the work of Christ. That might sound like a theology course in itself, but that’s the basics as I will discuss below.

The second reason your child should not get baptized is what I will call “social promotion.” It is assumed that at a certain age every child should get baptized. But salvation and baptism are no respecters of age.

This could be likened to “keeping up with the Joneses.” The thought goes something like, “If their little Maggie got baptized when she was nine then my little Sammy should be baptized when she is nine.”

You can tell right away that this kind of thinking has more to do with you than with your child. And of course, it leads to the first problem already mentioned, the inoculation to the gospel.

It’s not about age, it’s about faith in the saving work of Jesus. Every child is unique. Some are quite perceptive at a very young age. Others are less self-aware. Some start reading when they are 3 or 4 years old. I know one very successful college graduate who could not read until she was 9.

It’s not age. Give your child time to understand and think and read the Bible and pray. When they are ready it will be clear to both of you.

These are two reasons your child should not get baptized. Before I discuss when your child should get baptized, I want to quickly cover some of the traditions of baptism. This is for your information. If it doesn’t seem interesting or helpful, skip ahead to the biblical teaching below.

## TRADITIONS

There are many traditions concerning baptism but the biggest divide is between pedo-baptism and believer’s baptism. Pedo-baptism or infant baptism is the act of baptizing an infant in order to include them in the covenant or family of faith.

The tradition of infant baptism is found in Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian church. (Catholicism also practices infant baptism and if you have come from a Catholic background there are other issues you should discuss with the pastor.) Within these protestant churches, infant baptism is similar to what many churches do in baby dedications.

This church and many other churches practice what has become known as believer's baptism. It necessitates the evidence of faith in the life of the one being baptized. This means that there must be an understanding of faith and the gospel and these cannot be understood by an infant or very young child.

There is no firm age at which a person is capable of understanding these things. However, because of the importance of avoiding the "inoculation" effect, it is best to be as certain as possible before proceeding with baptism.

## BIBLICAL TEACHING

Baptism does not save you. We understand baptism to be a symbol and a means of grace. It symbolizes our identification with Christ and it is one of many ways that God works in our lives.

In baptism, we identify with Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6). We are lowered into the waters of baptism as Jesus was lowered into the grave. In this act, we portray our death to sin. We are raised out of the water as Jesus was resurrected from the dead. In this act, we portray our new life in Christ (Galatians 2:20).

Baptism can be a way that God works specially in our lives. God can use our obedience to grow our trust in Him. The process of baptism so beautifully portrays salvation that God can use it to help us grow in our understanding of His mercy.

# READINESS QUESTIONS

We first discussed the reasons your child should not get baptized. Now we are ready to discuss why he or she should be baptized. The short answer is when your child has been saved. Once someone is a Christian they should be baptized. It's a first step of discipleship for a new believer. In fact, if someone claims to be a believer but doesn't want to be baptized, you have to wonder if their faith in the Savior is real.

How do you know your child is a believer and thereby ready for baptism? How do you know he or she has truly confessed and repented of sin and received Jesus? Some simple diagnostics will help. Here is what to look for.

First, why does your child want to be baptized? Ask them. If they tell you it's so they can go to heaven there is definitely a glitch. Anytime you are unsure about their salvation, share the gospel with them until they understand.

Second, does your child understand the gospel? They might give a good answer to the first question but stumble in their description of what's so good about the good news.

Third, when you are talking with your child, is there any hint that they believe that salvation is by works (e.g., good behavior, pleasing God, etc.)? There are too many lost people in our churches these days weighed down with their own failures in obedience to God. Good works are the result not the cause of salvation.

Fourth, do you see evidence of new life in them? Is there a hunger to worship, read the Bible, pray, and share their faith with friends? These things grow in us over time, but if there is no hint of it now there might be a good reason for it.

## NEXT STEPS

If you believe your child is ready, make an appointment with the pastor. During the appointment (to which parents are invited), many of these same questions will be asked. If the pastor is convinced your child has a good understanding of the gospel, has repented of sin, and genuinely loves the Lord, then baptism is warranted.

The interview with the pastor is not a test. It's an assessment. There is no grade. As the spiritual gatekeeper of the congregation the pastor needs to be certain.

Some say "strike while the iron is hot," a phrase from the days of the blacksmiths. It's thought that if the child shows any interest in baptism, they should be baptized immediately. But the rest of the story is also true. The smithy can tell when the iron is actually hot and when it can actually be shaped. But if the iron is not ready, a blow with the hammer might irrevocably damage the metal, rendering it useless. To the untrained eye, the iron might look ready but through years of training and experience the smithy knows just the right moment. So too the pastor knows when it is time for your child to be baptized. The interview will tell the pastor all he needs to know.

If the pastor determines your child is not ready, don't ever think of it as failure. This is an opportunity for them to hear and understand the gospel, so rejoice!

The pastor will likely send you home with a gospel tract you can read together that is specifically geared for a child's understanding. You can also get a free copy of *What Is the Gospel* by Greg Gilbert from the pastor or order it online.

And above all, don't push. It's God's work in the heart of your child, not yours. Just love them. Show them Christ. Share the gospel. And we pray that one day they will come to receive Christ as Savior.

If they are ready, read on.

# LOGISTICS

Assuming the pastor determines your child is ready for baptism, now what? From here on it is a matter of logistics.

1. Set a Sunday morning for the baptism
  - a. Do you need to invite out of town family?
  - b. Do you need to avoid vacations and holidays?
  
2. What to bring for the big day
  - a. A change of cloths
  - b. A few towels
  - c. A brief statement about why they want to be baptized (the pastor will read this to the congregation)
  - d. A few friends. This is a great time to bear witness to the gospel
  - e. Usually people wear a swim suit with a white shirt over the top (a plain white t-shirt is just fine)
  
3. What to expect: The pastor will ask three questions of any person getting baptized
  - a. Have you received Christ as your Savior?
  - b. Have you made Christ the Lord of your life?
  - c. Will you treasure Christ all the days of your life?
  
4. After the baptism, towel off, change clothes in the bathroom, and join us for the rest of the time of worship
  
5. In the days following the baptism, and for years to come, see that your child is disciplined
  - a. You can do this with family devotions
  - b. You can do this with a simple catechism course
  - c. You can ask a friend in the congregation to meet with your child and help them grow in grace
  - d. Ask the pastor for more ideas and assistance