

Of significant concern to Christian parents is the baptism of their children. Every child that is involved at church realizes from an early age that baptism is something in which everyone should participate. It's not unusual for a child as young as 5 or 6 to ask to be baptized. This often puts parents in a dilemma. They don't want to discourage the development of faith in their child, yet they want the child's baptism to be meaningful to them all through their adult lives. The fact that the majority of adult members of Churches of Christ who were baptized at a young age feel the need to be "re-baptized" shows that those concerns are not without warrant.

Infant Baptism

History can be a wonderful teacher and help us gain perspective on current situations. We understand the Scriptures to teach that infants and small children are innocent of the guilt of sin. Jesus used them as illustrations of humility and innocence saying, in essence, "You adults need what they possess!" (See Matthew 18:2-6; 19:13-15; Mark 9:36-37; 10:13-16; Luke 9:46-48; 18:15-17.) The baptism of infants and children was unknown during the New Testament period but began early in Christian history. It began due to a misunderstanding of the nature of God which led to unnecessary fear. There was fear that if an infant or child died he or she would not go to heaven. Baptism was thus seen as the method of providing assurance of salvation while giving the child the opportunity to develop faith.

Although we have, thankfully, never practiced infant baptism in Churches of Christ, we have sometimes fallen victim to the same false view of God and fear for the salvation of our children. If Jesus is to be taken at his word in the above scriptures, God is more interested in the salvation of your children than you are! For this reason, we must trust him enough to believe that His mercy and grace will extend to our children during their formative years and that His grace will cover your children during the time they need to develop their faith.

If I could wave a magic wand and change one concern in parent's hearts in regard to this matter, it would be to give them the peace and assurance they need that God really is merciful and gracious. This way we can give our attention to how we can best develop the faith of our children without fear that they've got to get baptized quickly or God will not admit them to heaven.

Purpose of Baptism

Baptism was given by God so that an individual could express his or her faith in Christ in a visible, tangible manner. After hearing the good news of salvation found in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are told to join him in his death and resurrection by being immersed in water. Baptism takes place after one is convicted of sin and freely chooses to no longer live in sin (this is called repentance). Before baptism, one should understand the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection and freely choose to make Jesus Lord of their life by accepting him as Savior. (For examples, see Acts 2:22-41 and 8:26-39.)

In the New Testament, the writers would often refer to the reader's baptism to remind them of the significance of that life changing event. Far from simply being an action that needed to be done so that they could be saved from hell in eternity, the authors saw baptism as the beginning of a new life to be lived on earth. (See Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27; Colossians 2:11-12 and 1 Peter 3:18-22.) Baptism is a gift from God given to bless the lives of His followers. How important it is that baptism be understood as the surrender of one's whole life to the control of God. It is an act of obedient submission that will be a motivating force for the rest of one's life on earth.

Baptism is an Adult Decision

It comes as no surprise that children are immature. Children are not little adults: They are children and need to be given the time and discipline necessary to grow and develop into maturity. Our legal system recognizes that children cannot be expected to be mature. One cannot drive until they are sixteen years old, for example. One cannot vote or serve in the military until they are eighteen years old. It's easy to recognize that not all sixteen year olds are at the same level of maturity. However, generally speaking, a sixteen year old is more mature than a nine year old. Before one is baptized, they need to have reached some level of adult maturity. They do not necessarily need to be a full grown adult in every respect. However, they need to have more adult maturity than childish immaturity.

For the early years of life adults make every decision for their child. As the child grows the parents are to provide guidance, direction, training, instruction and discipline. All of this is to help the child grow to be a mature, responsible adult. As a child matures they should gradually receive increased freedom and increased responsibilities. It appears to me that the proper place for baptism would be when the child has moved from primarily being trained to primarily being responsible.

There is not a specific age at which we can point and say, "Every child should be baptized before age ____." The development of maturity is dependent upon too many variables. One scientific study of children and baptism in Churches of Christ might be of some benefit. In his book, *Why Churches Grow*, Flavil Yeakley surveyed 720 people who were baptized in Churches of Christ as children between the ages of eight and fifteen. Yeakley discovered that children baptized before the age of twelve are "much more likely to drop out of the church or to be dissatisfied with their original baptism. Subjects who are baptized at the age of twelve or older are much less likely to drop out of the church or to be re-baptized." He theorizes as to why this phenomenon occurs:

An explanation of these survey results may be found in what typically happens in the development of children at about the age of twelve or thirteen. The ability to do abstract thinking typically develops at about this time. This is the major reason for the distinction in our modern educational system between elementary and secondary education. The ability to do abstract thinking typically begins about the time a child enters the sixth or seventh grade and thus enters a middle school or junior high school.

Jesus dying for one's sins 2000 years ago is certainly an abstract concept as is being baptized into the death, burial, and resurrection. By encouraging our children to wait for baptism until they develop enough mentally to truly appreciate the gift of Jesus' sacrifice is in reality encouraging them to use baptism in the way God intended.

Helping Your Child Prepare for Baptism

I have often used the analogy of a wedding ceremony to help children understand baptism. A wedding is a turning point in the life of two people. In that wedding they commit themselves to each other for life. The wedding is a celebration of their love and seals their commitment to one another. The wedding is not the goal, however. The goal is to have a successful marriage. In the same way, baptism is not a goal to be achieved but a celebration. The goal is to have a life long relationship with Jesus Christ.

Before two people get married they spend a lot of time together getting to know one another. When they get really serious about marriage they get engaged. During this time they often obtain pre-marital counseling to help them prepare in a very serious way for marriage so that their marriage can be as good as possible. When the wedding day arrives they are ready to begin their life together.

Sometimes I will encourage children to consider themselves engaged to Jesus. This is a time for them to spend time with Jesus and really get to know him. I will lead them in a prayer and have them tell God that they want to follow him and learn from his word. During this "engagement" period I recommend studying the scriptures with your child. With my own children, I gave them assignments that we would talk about together when they completed them. Some children find that their initial excitement wears off quickly and they don't want to do the assignments. This is an indication that they are not ready for baptism. Let them be children a while longer. After they mature some they will begin talking about baptism again and asking questions.

This, then, is my suggested outline for helping children know when to be baptized:

1. When they bring the subject up to you, let them know how happy it makes you that they want to follow Jesus. Always be positive about your child's desire to be obedient to God!
2. Ask them questions about why they want to be baptized. They may not be able to articulate an answer. It could be because other children their age are getting baptized, or perhaps they just want attention and want to be noticed and praised.
3. If you have concerns, let the child know about them. You might simply say, "I know that baptism will be much more special to you if you wait until you are older." Sometimes that's all they need to hear. After all, they trust you—you're their parent!

4. With older children, offer to study the Bible with them. I recommend a study of the entire Gospel of John. I have developed a workbook that I use with non-Christians. I also used it with each of my children. I have a companion workbook to help them understand what the Bible teaches about sin, Jesus' death, baptism, the church and other elementary subjects one needs to understand before baptism. I strongly recommend having the child do the work on their own and go over it with you. After all, the goal is for them to have a personal relationship with Jesus. If they're not interested enough in Jesus to study the Bible on their own, they probably need more time to grow up and mature before baptism.
5. Explain to your child the concept of being engaged to Jesus. I remember one boy came forward on a Sunday morning and made an announcement to the congregation. He told us that he was now officially engaged to Jesus and was going to be studying the Bible with his father. The church gave him a great deal of encouragement, and he was baptized several months later.

Conclusion

I know a couple who were married when they were 16 and 17 years old. They have a wonderful marriage today, but it has not come without some tremendously difficult struggles. Needless to say, they do not recommend marriage for people so young. I know a great many people who were baptized at very early ages who are still faithful to Jesus and have never felt the need to be re-baptized. However, many of them now recognize that waiting until they were older might have made their baptism more meaningful.

Scripture has not put a specific age on baptism. However, when one considers the purpose of baptism, the nature of God, and the development of maturity in children, it is easy to see why only adults are baptized in the New Testament. It is my belief that the teen years are when children need to seriously consider baptism. But, whatever age they are, let's make sure they are serious about what they are doing. The goal is to help children develop a life-long, growing, dynamic relationship with Jesus—not just to get them baptized.