

Helping
PARENTS
Think Through
BAPTISM
With Their
CHILDREN



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Introduction

There are a handful of nagging practical questions that have come up over and over again throughout my life as a parent and pastor. Knowing how to honor God in these areas has proven frustratingly elusive. One such area concerns baptism and kids. In simplest terms, I've wrestled (five times myself and dozens of times with other families) with the question of how to know when it is good for kids to be baptized. As a happy baptist, on one hand the answer is simple—as soon as they place their faith in Jesus. On the other hand, the answer is a bit more complicated—for a variety of reasons it's often difficult to tell when our kids have truly placed their faith in Jesus.

Let me be crystal clear on something from the outset: I make no claim to have the final answer on whether or not you should encourage little Timmy or Suzy to be baptized. This booklet does not contain a definitive age or test. It does not contain a foolproof method of discerning the perfect time for kids to be baptized. It doesn't contain those things because (like it or not) by God's design, they don't exist. Not that the Bible is silent on the matter (truly, it has a good deal to say), only that applying what it does say takes prayer and wisdom and help.

If not 100% certainty, then what do we offer in this booklet? Our aim is to provide simple, clear, biblical, and practical answers to the following small handful of questions.

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Parents should read our church's larger booklet on baptism alongside this one for a fuller picture of baptism at Grace. The point of this booklet is to provide a basic summary of the Bible's teaching on the nature of baptism and the unique challenges of applying it to children. Our hope is that it will help you to think (with the help of the rest of Grace Church) through the most important issues surrounding baptism and children.

For His glory and your good,
The Elders of Grace Church



What is baptism?

The first question that we need to settle on is this: *What is baptism?* There's no way to be clear on whether or not your child should be baptized if we're not first clear on the nature of baptism.

There are two important ways to answer this question.

First, baptism is the practice, commanded by Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20) and the apostles (Acts 2:36-39), of publicly identifying as a follower of Jesus, by being immersed in water. Under ordinary circumstances this is done in the context of a local church by one of the leaders of the church. God's people are meant to continue this practice until Jesus returns. That it is commanded, public, an act of identifying as a follower of Jesus, by immersion, and within the local church are all important parts of the Bible's teaching on baptism.

But there's another way to answer the question. This second way is important because it gets more to the heart of the matter. We find it in passages like Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12.

Romans 6:3-4 *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

Colossians 2:12 *...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

In this sense, baptism is a visual representation of our participation in the saving work of Jesus. In other words, baptism was designed by God to highlight the central elements of the gospel. By voluntarily choosing to be baptized we demonstrate that we have placed our faith in Jesus. By going down under the water we show that we've been united with Jesus in His death—which was required as payment for sin. By going into water we provide a visible picture of the spiritual washing away of our sin that happens by the grace of God. And by coming back up out of the water we show the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and our participation in it.

In summary, baptism is the public act of being immersed in water in obedience to Jesus, and is a visible picture of several key elements of the invisible gospel.

The "Going Deeper" sections contain questions to ask your children to assess their hearts and minds as you work through this book.

- *Are you able to explain what baptism is?*
- *See if you can come up with a way to connect the act of baptism with a public identification with Jesus (maybe like a uniform for a team).*
- *Try to help your kids understand how the different physical aspects of baptism correspond to the different spiritual aspects of baptism (Romans 6:3-4).*
- *Why do you want to publicly identify with Jesus through baptism?*

GOING DEEPER

Who should be baptized?

The second question flows directly and naturally from the first. If that's what baptism is, who should be baptized? The answer is: Those who have decided to follow Jesus (which is another way of saying Jesus' disciples, which is another way of saying Christians). Jesus Himself said as much in His final charge to His first followers.

***Matthew 28:18-19** And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ..."*

From Jesus' Great Commission we see two things. First, we see that baptism is only for Christians (disciples). And second, we see that baptism is for all Christians.

Baptism, then, is simultaneously completely exclusive and inclusive. *No one* but a true follower/disciple of Jesus should be baptized in Jesus' name. That is, it is exclusively for true Christians. At the same time *every* true follower/disciple of Jesus should be baptized in His

name. It is in that way entirely inclusive for Christians—regardless of gender, race, family line, or age.

Again, baptism is for all Christians, but it is only for Christians.

- *Did you realize that Jesus commanded all Christians to be baptized? Does that make you want to be baptized more or less?*
- *In your own words, given what baptism is, can you explain why it's important that only Christians be baptized?*

GOING DEEPER

What does it mean to be a Christian?

Since only Christians should be baptized *and* since all Christians should be baptized, there's a third pressing question that godly parents should ask as they seek to know the will of God for their kids regarding baptism. The third question is: What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be a disciple/follower of Jesus? Below are three ways the bible answers this question.

Jesus cut to the heart of the matter in Matthew 16:24 when He told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

To be a Christian is to follow Jesus.

The apostle Peter answered this question a little differently in his Pentecost sermon. In order to explain all of the miraculous things those present were seeing and experiencing, Peter began to explain to them who Jesus was and what His death accomplished. He finished His explanation with this awesome truth, "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord [Jesus] shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

To be a Christian is to call upon the name of the Lord.

Later in Acts the apostle Paul worded it a bit differently still. When the Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul declared, "Believe in the Lord Jesus..." (Acts 16:30-31).

To be a Christian is to believe in the Lord Jesus.

If being a Christian means following Jesus, calling upon the name of the Lord, and believing in Jesus, we're right to ask what exactly these things mean. Where are we following Him to? What are we calling on Him for? What must we believe about Him?

At Grace Church we summarize the answer to these things in the following six truths.

1. God Is Greater Than You Could Ever Imagine

God's greatness is called His glory and God's glory never ends! No matter how hard you try you can't even imagine how great God is. God is always good and fair and kind and loving and holy and strong and with us. There is no one and nothing else like God in the entire universe.

Psalm 145:7-9 Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise! His greatness is beyond discovery!⁸ The LORD is kind and merciful, slow to get angry, full of unfailing love.⁹ The LORD is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation.

- *Do you believe that God is greater than everything else in the entire world?*
- *Do you find yourself becoming more and more impressed with who God is and what He's done?*
- *How would you describe the greatness of God to a friend?*

GOING DEEPER

2. God Created You to Love and Enjoy Him Forever

God planned you and made you to love and enjoy His glory and greatness. You were not made for parents or toys or vacations or presents or candy. You were made for God. God created you to know how great He is and to love and enjoy Him forever.

***Romans 11:36** For everything comes from [God]; everything exists by his power and is intended for his glory. To him be glory evermore. Amen.*

- *What does it mean to love God? Do you love God? Why?*
- *What does it mean to enjoy God? Do you enjoy God?*
- *What does that look like? How is your enjoyment in God the same as your enjoyment in your toys/hobbies/friends? How is it different?*

GOING DEEPER

3. No One Loves and Enjoys God Rightly

We do not love and enjoy God the way that we should. Instead, you and I love other things more than God and we enjoy things that God has told us not to. When we love and enjoy bad things or things more than God, the Bible calls it sin. We have all sinned.

***Romans 3:10-12; 23** "No one is good—not even one."¹¹ No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God.¹² All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one."²³ For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

- *What is sin?*
- *Do you believe that you have sinned against God?*
- *What are some of the ways you have failed to love and enjoy God rightly?*
- *What do you do when someone catches you in sin? How do you feel?*
- *What happens when you sin and no one finds out?*

GOING DEEPER

4. Because We Do Not Love and Enjoy God Rightly We Deserve to Be Punished

When we sin and do not do what is right we deserve to be punished. We have not loved and enjoyed God rightly. Therefore, we deserve to be punished. The Bible says that the punishment that we deserve is death. The place where we are punished for our sins is called hell.

Romans 6:23 *The wages of sin is death*

- *Why does sin deserve to be punished?*
- *Do you believe that you deserve death for your sin?*
- *Does that seem fair of God? Why or why not?*

GOING DEEPER

5. Because God Is Loving and Fair and Great He Punished His Own Son, Jesus, for Our Sins

Because God loves you, He wants to forgive you of your sins. Because God is fair, though, your sins must be punished. But because God is great He is able to be both fair and forgiving. God punished His own Son, Jesus, on the cross for our sins so that we do not have to die.

***1 John 4:9-10** God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*

- *Did you know that Jesus was punished for you?*
- *Why did Jesus die on the cross?*
- *What would happen if Jesus didn't die on the cross?*

GOING DEEPER

6. You Can Be Forgiven of Your Sins and Brought Into God's Family by Trusting in Jesus

You can be forgiven of your sins and made able to love and enjoy God—as His sons and daughters!—forever by trusting in Jesus. Trusting in Jesus means believing that He died for your sins, turning away from your sins, obeying His commands, and loving Him more than anything. Being able to trust in Jesus is a gift from God.

***Romans 3:22** We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done.*

- *What does it mean to trust in Jesus?*
- *Are you trusting in Jesus? If so, what does that look like?*
- *What does it mean to repent?*
- *Do you think you are good enough to go to heaven? How good do you have to be?*

GOING DEEPER

Believing these six things is to believe in the Lord Jesus. To cry out to Jesus in light of them is to call on the name of the Lord. To commit to living in light of them is to follow Jesus.

The idea is to work through each of these points with your kids. The goal is to make sure (in an age-appropriate way) they understand and believe them and truly desire to live in light of them. Parent, this means we're not merely looking for our kids to be able to restate these things (even though that's important too—if they can't share the gospel, it's likely they can't believe the gospel) or even merely to express some measure of belief in them. Before gladly encouraging our kids to be baptized we're looking for evidence that God has truly begun to transform their hearts through these truths.

- *Are you able to restate the six truths from this section in your own words? Are you confident that you believe in each of them?*
- *Are you able to describe when you first believed in Jesus, called upon His name, and decided to follow Jesus in light of these six truths?*

GOING DEEPER



How do I know if my child truly is a Christian?

If baptism is a visible picture of the gospel wherein Christians are immersed in water within the context of a local church, if it is only for Christians but for all Christians, and if a Christian is someone who (by the grace of God) knows the gospel, believes the gospel, and is being transformed by the gospel, how do I know if these things are true of my child? That is, how do I know if my child is truly a Christian? Let me offer three answers to this question.

First, Acts 2:37-39. Having just heard the gospel as proclaimed by Peter on the day of Pentecost, a group of Jews "were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' ³⁸ And Peter said to them, '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. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.'"

The first thing you're looking for is a genuine heart change. Being "cut to the heart" looks different in different people. It will almost certainly look different in a kid who was raised in a Christian home from a kid who had been addicted to drugs. Sometimes it's dramatic and other times it's more subtle. Nevertheless, no one is born a Christian and therefore everyone who is saved has experienced conversion—a God-given change in heart.

As this passage points out, the conversion/heart-change includes conviction of sin, repentance (turning from the sin), receiving the Holy Spirit, and the desire to be baptized. Look carefully for these things in your kids (and yourself and anyone else who professes faith in Jesus). We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but we know we've been saved by the transformation that God works in us (Eph. 2:8). And that leads to the second way to know if your child is truly a Christian.

Second, 1 John. The main point of 1 John is to help people know for certain whether or not they are truly following Jesus (5:13). One of the most repeated phrases in 1 John is some variation of "by this we know." If it seems like your child is truly hoping in Jesus spend some time reading 1 John with them. Highlight every occurrence of "by this

we know” (for example 2:3; 2:11; 2:29; 3:14; 3:19-20; 3:24; 4:2; 4:6; 4:7; 4:16; 5:2; 5:18). Pray over each passage and ask God to help you and your child recognize the seeds and flowers of it in their life.

Third, the Church. These last two questions are not best answered in isolation (family or otherwise). They are best answered by the Church. While parents have the clearest view of their children’s hearts, their vision isn’t perfect. For that reason, God gave the Church to help you think through these things. Find an older, godly couple who knows you and your child fairly well and ask them what kind of fruit they see. Talk to one of the elders at church and ask them what they’re seeing in your child. Check in with Christian grandparents and friends. The point is that God uses His people to recognize and affirm genuine belief in kids and adults alike. God does not mean you to work through these important questions alone.

In the end, what we're looking for is a credible profession of faith in Jesus. Biblical marks of such a profession are being "cut to the heart" by the gospel, bearing Spiritual fruit (of the Spirit), and the affirmation of godly individuals who know your child.

- *What does it mean to be "cut to the heart" by the gospel?*
- *Have you ever been cut to the heart by the gospel? If so, what was it like?*
- *As we read through 1 John did it seem like John was describing things God is doing in you?*
- *Who at Grace Church or in our family might be able to help us see Spiritual fruit in your life?*

GOING DEEPER



What are the main concerns in baptizing children?

With all of that having been said, what's the big deal? What are the main concerns in baptizing young children?

The problem with kids—especially younger kids who grow up in godly homes and churches (where trusting in Jesus is celebrated)—is that it can be really difficult to discern whether or not they are trusting their parents (which kids in any healthy home will do) or trusting in Jesus. It can be hard to know what it looks like to be "cut to the heart" in a 6-year-old or a 10-year-old. It can be hard to know what is genuine fruit of the Spirit and what is the fruit of a well-trained child.

Some might wonder, why not just baptize them and let the Lord sort it out. Others might wonder, why not wait until they're older and things become more clear. While there is something to be said for either approach there is also a danger in each.

The Dangers of Baptizing Too Soon¹

In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 the Apostle Paul expressed grave concern over the state of the Corinthian church. It seems that many who claimed to be followers of Jesus were not acting like it. They were divided and fighting among themselves. For that reason, Paul wrote, "I thank God that I baptized none of you..." (1:14). The "fruit" of those in Corinth suggested that they were not truly saved. And if they were not truly saved, they should not have been baptized. Their baptism was a mistake. It told a lie.

The main danger in baptizing too soon is that it paints a false picture of the gospel and gives assurance of salvation to someone who should not have it.

A second danger in baptizing too soon is that it will inevitably lead to frustration. Baptism marks our entrance into the Church. It also marks our privilege and responsibility of actively participating in it. Therefore, to allow your child to be baptized as a part of the Church but not be expected to function as a part of the Church (in an age-appropriate way of course), teaches a bad lesson and sets a bad precedent. But to expect this from a child (or anyone) who does not have the Holy Spirit inside of them, empowering them for obedience, will quickly lead to deep frustration.

In other words, there is no biblical category for baptized Christians who are not confessing sin, using their gifts to strengthen the Church, sharing their faith, contributing financially, praying for the church, and making disciples. Once again, this will look different in an 8-year-old than in a 38-year-old, but some growing version of those things must be present in every believer. Since the desire to participate in these things is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, anyone who does not truly possess the Spirit will certainly be frustrated by the expectation.

The Dangers of Baptizing Too Late²

And yet, as I mentioned earlier, there's danger in waiting too long as well. Just as expecting our kids to act as Christians when they aren't Christians will frustrate them (and us), so too will constantly expressing doubt when they are truly saved.

A second danger of baptizing too late is that by doing so we risk stunting our kids' spiritual growth. There are many ways for kids to participate in church life even before they are saved. Likewise, there are many ways in the home and church that we can (and must) invest in the spiritual lives of our kids before they come to faith in Christ. And yet there are also a number of ways that we will (rightly) restrict our kids if we are not confident enough in their salvation to encourage them to be baptized.

For instance, participation in the Lord's Supper—a significant means of God's grace for Christians—is for baptized believers only. If we do not believe that it is right for our kids to be baptized, we also must withhold communion from them. Depriving them of this means of grace will necessarily stunt their growth. Likewise (especially for kids in their teens) positions of Christian ministry and leadership are rightly reserved for baptized believers. Because using our Spiritual gifts is a means of grace for both the one using the gift and the one it's being used for, restricting kids from using their gifts (which we are right to do when we are not confident they have the Spirit and His gifts), will necessarily stunt their spiritual growth if they really are saved.

In short, the two main dangers in baptizing kids are that (1) we wait too long and so frustrate them and stunt their growth, and that (2) we baptize too soon and so lie about the gospel and frustrate our kids in the process.

- *Do you want to be baptized? Why?*
- *Do you have any doubts that you are a Christian? If so, what are they?*
- *Are you excited to be a greater part of the ministries and community of Grace Church? What are some ways you would like to serve?*
- *Are there any areas of following Jesus that make you nervous?*

GOING DEEPER

Conclusion

What, then, are we to do? Should our kids be baptized or not? As I said in the beginning, we cannot answer that for you. We can walk alongside you as you prayerfully seek to make that decision, but in the end, God typically does not give us that kind of clarity. So, what do you do?

In summary, we encourage you to work through the following things with your child:

1. Be in prayer. Be in earnest prayer. Ask God for spiritual eyes and ears. Ask God for spiritual discernment. Ask God for clear evidence of the seeds and fruit of the Spirit in your child. Ask God to give you the right questions to ask.
2. Be clear on what it means to be a Christian and help your child understand that as well. Talk carefully through the points of the gospel. Make sure they understand that becoming a Christian involves a miraculous work of God, not merely agreeing with a set of facts.
3. Be clear on how to have confidence in your salvation. Work through Acts 2:37-39 and 1 John with your kids. Help them look for seeds and fruit in their lives.

4. Consider carefully what's at stake by being baptized too soon or too late. Make sure your kids understand these things as much as possible. Again, pray for God's wisdom.
5. Do all of this with the church. Invite godly people into this discussion early on. Share this booklet with them and ask them to help you pray, think, and make decisions in light of it.
6. Trust that in Jesus, God will accept your genuine acts of faith as righteous. This is a serious matter, but not one that the cross isn't sufficient for if you make a mistake.



What are other common questions parents ask?

We imagine that a handful of other questions have already entered your mind. Of course, we invite you to come to us with any and all of them. No question is too small or silly. With that said, below are four additional questions that we get regularly.

Should I encourage baptism in my reluctant child?

The heart of this question concerns how much you should push a child who seems to be hoping in Jesus toward baptism. In other words, if you have good reason to believe that your kid is a Christian but he or she is reluctant to be baptized, how hard should you push them?

There are two main things to consider here.

First, there is a natural fear that comes with things like this in many kids and adults. There is a kind of reluctance, that is normal for all of us, to share your testimony on video, get up in front of a whole church in your bathing suit, and be dunked under water in a horse trough. When it seems like those are the kinds of things causing reluctance in your child, we'd encourage you to be sympathetic, patient, and prayerful. Gently remind them that you will be there with them and that obeying Jesus is more than worth it. Perhaps consider showing them the videos of other kids sharing their testimony and being baptized.

On the other hand, it may be that your child's fear of being baptized reveals something deeper. Perhaps it reveals a lack of true gospel clarity, assurance of salvation, or maybe salvation itself. When you

suspect (or even wonder if) this is the case, it's usually best to slow way down, start over with the gospel, and wait until there is greater clarity and eagerness in your child.

How spiritually mature should my child be before baptism?

In simplest terms, baptism is about spiritual life, not spiritual maturity. That is why we talk about looking for “seeds” of Spiritual fruit as well as the fruit itself. We should be baptized as soon as we truly come to faith in Jesus. The reasons to wait for baptism, then, are not ones of maturity, but of clarity.

What is the relationship between baptism and communion?

Communion ought always to follow baptism. In God’s Word as well as every Christian tradition from the beginning, baptism has marked the beginning of the Christian life while communion has marked the celebration of the Christian life. The order matters.

Who makes the final decision regarding baptism?

As elders we are charged by God and Grace Church to oversee the people of God at Grace. For that reason, we do need to have reasonable confidence in the credibility of every profession of faith (whether from a kid or an adult) before allowing someone to be baptized in our fellowship. With that having been said, assuming we do not have any glaring reasons to doubt your child’s profession of faith, and assuming you agree with the contents of this booklet, it is our general policy to leave the decision primarily up to the parent.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-strategy-for-delaying-the-baptism-of-young-children/>
- 2 <https://www.frame-poythress.org/indifferentism-and-rigorism/>



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