

Baptism, Church Membership, and Children

February 24, 2022

At ITC, it is our joy to come alongside and shepherd parents and their children as parents “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Parenting is an awesome responsibility from the Lord. As parents instruct their children and witness to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ and as they do this in the context of a church body that joins them in these efforts, we hope and pray that their children will turn from their sin and believe in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. But how do parents know when their child is truly converted? And when is it time for a child to be baptized and brought into church membership at ITC?

Baptism and church membership should be offered to any person who is truly converted. In the case of younger children, however, special care should be exercised. Although children might be able to understand and articulate some of the main tenets of the gospel, they can have a deficient understanding as to the nature of repentance and belief and/or lack sufficient evidence thereof. Repentance and faith are seen when one truly forsakes sin and self and places complete trust in the Savior and commits to a life in Christ of obedience to Him. Genuine repentance and faith evidence the effectual call of God (John 6:37, 44; Acts 16:14) and are necessary for one to be truly saved (Acts 16:31; Rom 3:25; Eph 2:8-9). We must do all we can, therefore, to uphold the qualification of sincere repentance and faith from candidates for baptism/church membership. How do we do this? We look for a sufficient understanding the gospel and for sufficient evidence of conversion. By doing so, elders alongside of the parents, can determine, to the best of our ability, if the child has a credible profession and is therefore ready for baptism and church membership.

Determining a Credible Profession in Children

An Essential Understanding of the Gospel

Faith comes from hearing and understanding the Word of Christ, which is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ (Rom 10:17; 2 Cor 4:6; Col 1:5-6; Tit 1:1; 1 John 5:20). While the genuinely converted might not have a comprehensive understanding of the gospel, they must know and believe certain essential truths to be saved. And the genuinely converted should be able to articulate these truths at least at a rudimentary level. They are as follows:

The Bad News of Sin against God

Genuine believers understand that they have sinned against the one, true, holy and sovereign God who created them to know, worship and obey him. They know that they deserve God’s just wrath for their sin (Rev 4:11; Rom 2:15; 3:9-23; 5:12; 6:23). Without this accurate understanding of our sinful state, we will not grasp our need for salvation in Jesus Christ and will misunderstand the purpose for which Jesus Christ came.

The Good News of Jesus Christ

Genuine believers understand that God, in a beautiful demonstration of his love, sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to be born as a man, live a perfect life of obedience, die on the cross and rise again, thus paying the penalty for our sin, giving us the gift of His righteousness and eternal life in Him (John 3:16-17; 10:10; Rom 3:24-25; 4:25; 5:6-9; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24).

The Necessity of Repentance and Belief

Genuine believers understand that to receive the gift of salvation, we must repent of our sinful lives and believe in Jesus Christ as our only source of salvation from sin and the only way to be brought into a new life that is reconciled to God (John 1:12; 3:16; Rom 10:10, 13). Belief in Jesus Christ is not simply praying a prayer or asking Jesus into one’s hearts. True belief turns away from a life of sinful rebellion

and independence from God and turns to Jesus Christ, our only Mediator, to bring us back into a right relationship with God where we can now please Him.

The Call to Be a Disciple of Jesus Christ

Genuine believers understand that salvation is not just a call to be forgiven and positionally right with God (i.e., justified). Salvation is also new life in Christ, having been delivered from a life of sin and selfishness and brought into a new life of walking with Christ in active, obedient discipleship as his follower. New life in Christ means having an ongoing dependence upon Christ and profession of Christ that will result in observable fruit (John 15:1-8; 2 Cor 5:15; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:1-10; 2 Cor 5:17; Tit 2:11-14).

While a child might not be able to articulate these truths to the degree expressed above, an interviewing elder, along with the parent(s), will need to discern if the child has enough understanding in these categories in order to be truly saved.

Evidences of an Authentic Conversion

Along with a sufficient knowledge of the gospel, there must be affirmation from the believing parent(s) and/or other church members of an authentic conversion. When a child is showing the initial signs of the fruit, these adults can attest to them as evidence of an authentic conversion. These signs of conversion are instantaneous works of God that all believers will exhibit to some degree upon receiving the Holy Spirit at conversion. They are the following:

- Fellowship with the Son (1 Cor 1:9; John 15:1-8) by walking in dependence on and obedience to Him, being led and empowered by the Spirit (Rom 8:14-17). This will show itself in a life of actively loving God and seeking God through His Word and prayer and in fellowship with the saints in the church (John 15:7-8; Gal 2:20; 1 Pet 2:2; Acts 2:42ff.).
- Good works (Eph 2:8-10; 4:24; Tit 2:11-14; James 2:14-17).
- Battling sin (Rom 6; 8:7-8, 13; 1 John 1:5-10; 1 John 2:15; 3:4-10).
- Walking in love towards other believers (1 John 2:9-11; 4:20-21; John 13:35).

While we don't expect perfection in these areas, the interviewing elder along with the parent(s), will seek to discern where these evidences manifest themselves in the child's life as validation of the credibility of their profession of faith in Christ as both Savior and Lord.

An Age Consideration for Children Pursuing Baptism

We generally recommend that a child waits until their mid-teen years to seek baptism (i.e. ages 14-16). While we acknowledge that the New Testament pattern for baptism is immediate upon conversion, the Scriptures give no examples or instruction for baptizing children. We know that God can save someone at a young age, yet it can be difficult to determine if that profession of faith is credible in a young child. Some young children, although able to articulate the Gospel, might not sufficiently understand the call to being a disciple of Christ. They could also desire to please their parents and fit in with the church rather than deciding to trust Christ and follow Him sincerely as an individual. The call to Christianity is a radical call that requires not just mental assent, but a faith that counts the cost of following Christ (Matt 10:34-39; Luke 9:24-27). Young children, under the protection of their parents, can have a hard time understanding this call.

The Process for a Child Pursuing Baptism

- 1) An elder will interview the child and parent(s) and, over a period of several meetings, do the following:

- Discuss the purpose of Christian baptism¹
 - Understand the child's motive for pursuing baptism
 - Determine if the child has *an essential understanding of the Gospel* and *evidences of an authentic conversion*
- 2) The interviewing elder will share his thoughts with the other elders who will determine if the child should proceed with baptism or wait.
 - 3) Reasons for waiting will be given to the child and the parent(s), along with an encouragement for the child to continue to grow in understanding of the Gospel and faithfulness to Christ.
 - 4) If the child proceeds to baptism, he or she will write out a personal testimony to be shared with the church at the baptism.

What About Church Membership?

Those children proceeding with baptism will also be encouraged towards church membership (1 Cor 12:13). As with all church members, we will require the child to go through our membership process before being recognized as a church member. This preparation process aims to equip the child to practice the biblical privileges and responsibilities of membership within our local church.

Because of their age, when children move toward membership, we ask that:

1. Believing parent(s) or a discipling member go through the membership process with the child to ensure adequate understanding of the truths being taught and adequate understanding of the commitment the child is making to the church body.
2. A believing parent(s) or a discipling member continue to mentor the child through practicing the biblical privileges and responsibilities of a church member.
3. The parent(s) understand the full implication of their child becoming a member. The child will be given both the full responsibility and accountability of membership, including the church discipline process (Matt 18:18ff). While we recognize that some parts of the discipline process may be handled differently with children in their parents' home, we hope that the loving admonition of the body of Christ will be effective for our younger members.

¹ Baptism is commanded by Christ (Matt 28:18-20) and is an identification with the Triune God, Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and His church (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38; 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:4). Baptism is also an outward symbol of forgiveness of sin, a cleansed conscience (1 Peter 3:21; Heb 10:22), and the inward reality of regeneration (Rom 6:1ff.)