

Childhood Baptism

A Position Paper of the Elders/Pastors of CrossPointe Church, March 2012

The Christian family is one of God's ordained means for advancing his kingdom. It is a joy to speak with parents that desire to preach the gospel to their kids and encourage their faith. Along with the other parents of CrossPointe, we long to see our children saved and not discouraged.

There are differences among those who embrace believer's baptism concerning the timing of baptism for children who profess faith in Christ. Broadly speaking, there are two positions on this matter:

1. **Withholding** baptism and communion from children until they are significantly independent of their parents in matters relating to God and the church. This position delays baptism until the late teen years (often 18 years old) or into adulthood.
2. **Immediate participation** in baptism and communion for believing children, who are recognized as church members with limited responsibilities. This position allows for and encourages young children, often as young as 5 years old, to be baptized.

We, the elders/pastors of CrossPointe Church, take a mediating stance on this issue. We believe there is much wisdom in waiting to baptize children until there is credible evidence of regeneration and the ability to reason independently in spiritual matters. However, we believe that this often happens prior to the late teen years or early adulthood.

Why should CrossPointe's elders/pastors agree to a position on this issue?

1. **Professing believers are being baptized at younger and younger ages in American evangelical churches.** We are concerned about this trend. Historically, those who practiced believer's baptism were baptized no sooner than the mid- to late-teen years. In a 1994 study by the Southern Baptist Convention, they discovered that 60% of baptisms within their denomination were actually re-baptisms of adults and older teens that were prematurely baptized when they were pre-adolescents. This is happening in many denominational as well as non-denominational churches.

Why has this happened? Perhaps our parental desire to see our children saved has trumped our responsibility as both parents and church members to protect our children and the church from error. We want to see our children embrace Christ and experience authentic salvation. This is right and good, but it can nevertheless be dangerous if we are not equally wary of deceiving our children by giving false assurances.

2. **Parents often put pressure on pastors to baptize children.** And so pastors often give in to the pressure of parents who have nothing but good intentions and want to encourage their child's faith. Some pastors use an "age of accountability" to argue that children should be baptized as soon as they are accountable before God, but no such thing is taught in Scripture. The Bible doesn't give a numerical answer to the question of what age believers should be baptized. We wish it were that easy, but it isn't.

In our day, there is a tremendous amount of social pressure on the church's pastoral leadership to confirm the conversion of a young child. Pastors and Children's Ministry leaders must take care not to pressure children for a quick decision without waiting for understanding about what it means to turn away from sin and truly trust in Jesus. Parents also should consider how dangerous it is for the church to allow nominal Christians—those who are believers in name only—into its membership. Nominal Christians weaken the church by giving a false witness to the watching world, and pose even greater dangers if given positions as teachers and leaders.

In summary, the issue of childhood baptism is important on at least two levels. First, it has to do with our children, for whom we desire salvation. Second, because it involves an ordinance of the church, it has to do with the visible witness of the church in the world.

Given these reasons, the elders/pastors of CrossPointe believe that it is necessary to weigh in on the issue. While the age at which a person is baptized is an open-handed issue at CrossPointe, it is necessary that we have some standard practice as a church as well as guidelines and suggestions for helping parents work through this issue. That being said, we recommend that parents wait until a child enters high school before considering him for baptism. More importantly, it is our practice to wait until there is evidence of regeneration and enough maturity to articulate the gospel and give a credible profession of faith. However, if parents feel like their child is ready to be baptized prior to entering high school, the elders/pastors will address each situation on a case-by-case basis. Parents should keep in mind that our predisposition as elders/pastors is to encourage the child's faith while also encouraging him to wait to be baptized.

Our position is not intended to make you question the validity of your (or your child's) baptism if you (or they) were baptized as a young child. If you or your children were baptized as a young child and are now walking in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, praise God! In most cases you should not be re-baptized unless, as you've matured, it has become clear to you that you were probably not a Christian when you were baptized. If this describes your situation, you should consider being baptized now as a believer.

Why do we hold this position?

1. **A child's faith is primarily nurtured by his or her parents.** This is especially true of fathers, who are to provide pastoral direction to their children (Ephesians 6:4). God created children in such a way that they naturally want to respond to the instruction and example of their parents. The danger of baptizing children is that it may falsely affirm that they are a follower of Christ when they are not. It can even present an obstacle to genuine faith later in life because the child may be trusting in their childhood baptism to save them.
2. **Children are easily deceived.** They require the constant supervision and care of parental authority. They have trouble making meaningful decisions for themselves, especially decisions so profound and life-altering as following Christ. While we wholeheartedly affirm that children can be saved at an early age, we believe that baptism should only be given immediately when one's confession of faith is publicly credible. Authentic trust in Christ should be demonstrated—something more evident in the high school years and beyond.
3. **Due to immaturity, children have had little chance to express their trust in Christ independent of their parents.** For example, they have had few opportunities to choose between Christ and their peers in a deep way. Because of this, it is difficult to discern if a child's public profession of faith is credible. Therefore, baptism should be withheld from children until they reach a level of maturity that demonstrates some independent thought from their parents. We believe this begins to happen around the time a child enters high school.
4. **God's saving grace is not given through baptism.** There is no danger to the child in waiting. In fact, waiting can increase the honor associated with this event as well as allow time for the child's discipline and faith to grow.

What evidences or signs of conversion should a parent look for in their child before presenting him or her for baptism? Here are a few:

- Does your child demonstrate sorrow and remorse for his or her sin?
- Does your child recognize that he has sinned against God and not just against others?
- Does your child confess her sins to God and ask for his mercy without your prompting?
- Does your child understand that she is saved only by God's grace and not because of any good within herself?
- Does your child demonstrate an understanding of the storyline of the Bible when they are taught or is your child generally confused?
- Does your child demonstrate a genuine interest in spiritual things apart from your prompting?
- Does your child pray or read the Scriptures on their own initiative?
- What sins have your children repented of? Are these sins of the heart or merely a recognition that they have failed to comply outwardly with the laws of God?
- Does your child desire to talk with you about the Scriptures?
- How does your child demonstrate that he trusts Jesus?
- Does your child demonstrate a genuine desire to tell others about Jesus?

What if my child has trusted Christ, but they have not been baptized? Should he or she take the Lord's Supper?

Throughout the history of the church—for the past 2,000 years—people have traditionally been baptized before celebrating the Lord's Supper. Baptism has been considered an initiation rite, that is, baptism celebrates one's full entrance into the believing community. The Lord's Supper, on the other hand, is a continuing rite, the community meal open to all who have declared their unity with the believing body through baptism. Thus, throughout the history of the church, baptism has preceded one's participation in the Lord's Supper. We see a similar pattern in the book of Acts. People were converted and then baptized (signifying their inclusion into the church). Once they were baptized they celebrated the Lord's Supper. In Acts 2:41, those who received the preached word of the gospel "were baptized." These baptized believers then "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread [a way of referring to the Lord's Supper] and the prayers" (verse 42).

In light of this, the elders/pastors recommend parents discourage their children from participating in the Lord's Supper until they have been baptized. However, we consider this an open-handed issue that in the end should be decided primarily by the child's parents.