

## **NRBC Elder Position Paper Concerning Children, Baptism, and Church Membership**

*Adopted by the NRBC Elder Council on December 21, 2023*

All Christian parents long for the day that their children come to saving faith in Jesus. This desire should also be manifested in the prayers of our church and discipleship processes of the young within our midst. As Jesus proclaimed, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:14, 15 ESV). When any person, child, teenager, or adult, professes faith in Christ, we celebrate with the angels in heaven (Luke 15:10).

While we affirm that the Holy Spirit often regenerates the hearts of believers’ children at a young age, the church, and her elders who are tasked with guarding the flock, must proceed with caution both for the good of the body and of the child’s soul. For some believers’ children, it will seem as if the child “grew up Christian.” They will have known about Jesus and his Church for the entirety of their short lives. They will believe in God, His word, and the facts about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ because their parents and our church rightly instructed them in these matters from their earliest days. When one of these children then professes faith in Christ and requests baptism, particularly when the child is very young, testing the genuineness of their conversion can prove difficult. Therefore, moving too quickly towards baptism and church membership risks admitting an unregenerate person into membership which dilutes the church and provides false assurance to an unbeliever.

So then, how are we to proceed? The following criteria will be applied by our elders to ensure that we are, to the best of our ability, presenting regenerate children for baptism and church membership. All children who profess faith in Christ must complete the same steps of our membership process as adults. This means the child, whose parents are certainly welcome and even encouraged to join them, must complete Connect Class, a membership application, undergo a membership interview with an elder, and be submitted to the congregation for membership pending baptism. Additionally, the parents of children in elementary school who profess faith and request baptism will be provided an at-home resource to complete with their child prior to beginning this process.

Requiring children to complete the same membership process as adults accomplishes two primary objectives. First, it allows ample opportunity for the elders of our church to test the genuineness of their conversion and confidently recommend them to the congregation for baptism and membership. They must be able to articulate their faith in Christ, their understanding of the gospel, and demonstrate the fruit of conversion in an age appropriate way. Second, it communicates the seriousness of church membership to all involved. Baptism and church membership are not a rite of passage that children undergo at a certain age. For them to be baptized members of our congregation, in addition to understanding the gospel, they must, at a level befitting their maturity, share in our congregation's mission, vision, beliefs, values, ministries, and structures. They need to understand what they are joining in order to join it.

This process will inevitably take time, and parents should not seek to rush the elders to complete it. The elders of our church must guard the membership and

administer baptism as “those who will have to give an account” (Heb 13:17). Our doctrine of salvation informs our application of baptism and church membership and should be an encouragement to parents walking through this process with their children. Baptism does not save. Church membership does not save. “Salvation is by grace through faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ alone.”<sup>1</sup> If a child’s faith in Christ is real, then they are truly and fully saved from their sins. Baptism and church membership, while commanded in scripture and of significant importance, are not necessary for the salvation of the soul. Parents and children can rest at ease knowing that their eternal salvation is secure in Christ, if their faith is genuine, even if the church requires some time to pass in order to test its genuineness.

Ultimately, it must be our congregation that decides who is admitted for membership and is baptized, because it is the local church who holds the keys to the kingdom and receives new members into the covenant community (Matt 16:16–19). For children who grow up in the midst of our church, the congregation may face the temptation to quickly admit them into membership because we love them dearly and have often prayed for their salvation. Additionally, we love their parents and celebrate with them when their child professes faith in Christ. We must not let this joy and excitement deter us from the very important task of evaluating prospective members before admitting them into the church. The church should take the responsibility of admitting members seriously and should not admit anyone into membership that we would not be willing to subject to church discipline and even dismissal from membership later in life (Matt 18:15–20, 1 Cor 5:1–5).

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<sup>1</sup> Core Beliefs, Nansemond River Baptist Church, <https://www.nansemondriver.com/core-beliefs>.

While we anticipate that many children will be able to complete this process in late elementary school or during their middle school years, we are not setting a specific age for church membership and baptism for several reasons. First, we desire for this paper to serve as an opportunity for parents to know how to discuss baptism and church membership with their children and our church. Providing a specific age could shortcut those discussions. Second, the maturity level of children varies significantly from child to child, even into the teen years. Some may be able to complete this process after coming to faith in Christ earlier than others. Third, we do not want to be seen as communicating the unbiblical doctrine of an age of accountability. The Bible provides no specific age that a child becomes responsible for his or her sin. Conversely, it is clear in scripture that all are born into sin and will face judgment (Ps 51:5, Eph 2:1–3). While some passages seem to indicate that Christ’s payment for sin is applied to the youngest among us and those incapable of comprehending sin and the gospel, there is no specific age mentioned in those texts (2 Sam 12:21–23). Finally, we do not want to limit children or teenagers with clear and demonstrable testimonies of faith from participating in the life of the church as baptized members.

Some may ask, would it be possible for us to baptize their child without admitting them to church membership? We are emphatic that our congregation should admit all into membership whom we are willing to baptize. To baptize any believer without admitting them into covenant membership of the church, would leave them to languish alone without the accountability, encouragement, and fellowship of a local church. Church membership is assumed in the New Testament, and we believe all Christians

should seek membership in a local church. We then cannot in good conscience affirm a believer's testimony via baptism but not admit them into covenant membership.

Finally, the elders believe an additional warning concerning the Lord's Supper is necessary at this juncture. Our church has a long standing practice of opening communion to all who have publicly professed faith in Jesus Christ. In doing so, we have not placed believer's baptism as a restriction on guests in our services from coming to the Lord's Table.<sup>2</sup> We believe it would be wise for parents in our congregation of children who have professed faith in Christ but have yet to be baptized to not allow their children to participate in the Lord's Supper. For our congregation, baptism is the public declaration of faith and should proceed participation in communion for those who are in households within our church.

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<sup>2</sup> While our church has never officially adopted this position, it is the long standing practice of our elders when fencing the table. Depending upon one's reading of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, our church's official statement of faith, we practice a communion that is slightly more open than that document indicates.