

Childhood Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Church Membership

Introduction

The issue of childhood baptism, church membership, and participation of children in the Lord's Supper (communion) is important on at least two levels. First, it has to do with our children, whom we deeply love and care for, and for whom we earnestly desire salvation. Second, because it involves the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, it has to do with the visible witness of the church in and to the world.

Two Positions: Withholding and Immediate Participation

There are two primary positions in the Baptist tradition regarding the questions of childhood baptism and church membership. While Sojourn is not technically a "Baptist" church, we are "Baptistic" in much of our doctrine and practice.

These two positions are:

1. Withholding baptism, church membership, and the Lord's Supper from children until they reach a level of maturity that is independent of their parents.
2. Immediate participation in baptism and the Lord's Supper for believing children who are then recognized as church members with limited responsibilities.

Withholding baptism, church membership, and the Lord's Supper

In our present culture and society the age of eighteen is generally understood as a significant milestone on the path to maturity, with accompanying independence, privileges, and responsibilities. Having children wait to be baptized until they reach the age of eighteen helps to prevent giving false assurance of salvation to children who may not be truly converted. Accordingly, some of our elders and their wives have elected to withhold these ordinances and church membership from their children until they have reached the age of eighteen, at which point the decision to be baptized is up to the child.

At its worst, this position can lead children to an excessively introspective view of their spiritual lives, doubt their salvation, and lead both children and parents to discouragement in these matters.

At its best, children have been faithfully disciplined by their parents in the gospel in the context of the local church. When they do decide to pursue baptism, they have a deep understanding of and appreciation for baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the privileges and responsibilities of church membership.

Immediate participation in baptism, church membership, and the Lord's Supper

The New Testament expects and commands believers to be baptized, participate regularly in the Lord's Supper, and be involved members of a local church. As sinners in need of salvation, children can be saved, and therefore, if saved, they should be welcomed into the church through baptism.

At its worst, this position can pressure church elders to confirm salvation in a young child who is not truly saved, giving false assurance of salvation to the child and their parents. Even if the child is truly saved when baptized, as adults they may not remember their baptism because it took place at a young age.

At its best, children understand that salvation is a work of God and not merely a decision. They give credible evidence of their salvation, are baptized, and welcomed into the church's membership with full participation in worship gatherings, including the Lord's Supper.

Childhood Baptism, Church Membership, and Participation in the Lord's Supper at Sojourn

The Christian family is one of God's ordained means of advancing his kingdom. He accomplishes this through parents who instruct their children in the gospel and oversee their spiritual growth and development. It is our joy as elders to meet and speak with parents of children who are pursuing baptism.

Like you, we long to see our children come to saving faith and not be discouraged. We also long to do this in such a way that does not give a child (or his or her parents) a false assurance of salvation or compromise our church's witness to the culture. Hopefully you understand the tension in our hearts and what is at stake with childhood baptism, the Lord's Supper and church membership.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Throughout the history of the church, participation in the Lord's Supper has been traditionally viewed as a privilege that follows baptism.

More than tradition, Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 that the Lord's Supper is essential to maintaining our membership in and fellowship with a local church. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

In one sense, this "one body" that Paul refers to is the universal Church, but in a more specific sense, the "one body" is experienced as the local church, which is where the Lord's Supper happens and with whom it is eaten.

What is implied in this passage is that the Lord's Supper is for members of a local church, and one becomes a member of a local church by conversion and baptism.

Therefore, Sojourn's elders advise parents to not allow their children to participate in the Lord's Supper until after they have been baptized.

At what age should a child be baptized?

Sojourn's elders strongly recommend that parents wait until their child is at least fourteen years old before presenting the child to the elders for a baptism interview. Please understand that this is a recommendation and not a mandate. Each child's readiness for baptism will be considered on an individual basis.

Evidences of conversion

Conversion is a work of God in the heart of a believer, and not simply a decision made by a person. The following questions can help you as a parent in determining if your child's conversion is genuine before presenting him or her for baptism:

- Does your child demonstrate sorrow and remorse about his or her sin?
- Does your child understand that he has sinned against God and not merely against others?
- Does your child confess her sins to God and ask him for mercy without your prompting?
- Does your child demonstrate commitment to Christ in the midst of strong temptation to disobey?
- Does your child understand that he is a sinner and cannot save himself?
- Does your child understand that she deserves death and eternal punishment in hell because of her sin?
- Does your child understand that Jesus died as a substitute for her?
- Does your child understand that he is only saved by God's grace and not because of anything good in himself?

- Does your child demonstrate an understanding of the Scriptures when they are taught, or is your child confused by the Scriptures?
- Does your child demonstrate a genuine interest in spiritual things?
- Does your child read the Scriptures or pray on his own initiative?
- How does your child demonstrate that she trusts Jesus?
- Does your child demonstrate a genuine desire to tell others about Jesus?

Childhood Baptism and the Church Membership Process

1. Parents are primarily responsible for instructing their children in the gospel and overseeing their spiritual growth and development. Parents of children seeking baptism will meet with an elder to discuss the matters outlined in this paper. Parents may also be paired with mentors (parents who have been through this process) who will counsel and advise them as they seek to lead their children in spiritual matters.
2. Over a period of time, the child seeking baptism will be led by his or her parents through a study that clarifies the gospel such as *Big Truths for Young Hearts* by Bruce Ware.
3. At the conclusion of this study, the child will meet for an interview or series of interviews with his or her parents, the parents' mentors, and an elder. The purpose of these interviews is to determine if the child understands and has embraced the gospel.
4. Mentors and parents will jointly present the child to the elders for baptism, church membership, and participation in the Lord's Supper.
5. If the elders are convinced that the child demonstrates a genuine conversion, the child will be baptized and recommended to the church by the elders for admission as a non-voting member. Upon acceptance by a majority vote of all members present at a regular or special meeting of the members, the child will be welcomed into the fellowship and discipline of the church. The child, still under the final authority of his or her parents, will be without voting privileges until the age of eighteen as described in the following step.
6. At the age of eighteen, the child will attend Sojourn's membership classes followed by an interview with one or more elders. Voting privileges of adult members will only be permitted after the completion of the classes and this interview.

Endnotes

1. This paper and policy has been adapted from “Childhood Baptism and Church Membership: A Position and Policy for Sojourn Community Church” by Scott Holman and Jared Kennedy, Louisville, KY.