



An Approach to the Baptism and Membership of Children

A Theological Position Paper

Introduction

One of the greatest privileges in life is raising children. When God entrusts parents with precious little ones, they rightly yearn to concern themselves with the comprehensive good of their children. From tending to a 2:00 a.m. cry for milk, to the admonition not to blow a college scholarship by skipping classes, parents ache for their children to mature into productive members of society.

Christian parents, however, have a deeper aim than simply instructing children to provide a firm handshake when meeting an adult, to refrain from burping at the dinner table, and to position oneself for a successful career. Godly parents' highest objective is for their children to grow up to know, love, and obey God. That goal stands head and shoulders above the rest: no other parental aspiration is even in the same galaxy!

As your pastors, we pray regularly for you and your children by name. Among our requests to God, we pray most often that a lifestyle of faith and repentance would come to define both parent and child. As Jesus himself said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Faith and repentance are not single-use; rather, they are daily habits for the people of God. Of

course they mark the earliest moments of the Christian life, but they continue throughout the entire process of spiritual maturation.

In addition to praying for you, Church on Mill aims to approach preschool, children, and youth ministries in a manner that equips and supports you as lead disciplers. Churches should supplement, never replace, the unparalleled influence of parents in the spiritual development of their children. Although this approach to family ministries is neither new nor innovative, it may be less common than alternatives which assume parents will not do the work of discipling their little ones. We believe you can and, in fact, must! We are here to support, not supersede or supplant. Therefore, it is imperative for parents to have vibrant faith and clear theological convictions.

As parents model the Christian life and teach the Scriptures to their children in the home, the home can become a precious greenhouse of gospel fluency. One is fluent in a language when she no longer thinks in her first language and then translates into a second. Parents want to immerse their homes in the Scriptures such that, by God's grace, children would learn to trust God's character, that all Scripture is true, and that the power of

the gospel is immensely practical to daily life.¹ As (ideally) both mother and father teach the Bible and model lives of faith and repentance, kids learn what the Christian life looks like. Be it over spilt milk, straight A's, challenges with peers, or speeding tickets, parents reinforce or deny the gospel by how they respond to the stuff of a typical day. Parents, your children will learn their functional definition of Christianity mainly from you, so aim to be faithful to Scripture and fluent in the gospel.

As children hear God's Word in the ministries of the church, develop relationships with Christians, and live in homes with gospel fluent parents, many of them will eventually initiate conversations about spiritual truths: they may be especially interested in how to become Christians, get baptized, and be named among the members of the church. If this happens, praise God!

What is Church on Mill's approach to these matters? The remainder of this paper will seek to present our approach as your pastors to the salvation, baptism, and membership of children. We hope it will equip you to walk humbly and confidently with your children in these most important spiritual developments. This topic is sensitive and a paper will not exhaust the questions that may arise on the subject, so please reach out to talk through it with us at any point.

The Question: When to Baptize and Open the Responsibilities of Membership to Children?

Spend any time at all around Church on Mill and you will notice how richly God has blessed us with children! Children are a gift from God, primarily to parents but also to the church as a whole. The elders are passionate

about caring both for you as a parent, and for your children. In addition, the whole church yearns to see every child grow into a settled, rich, solid, saving faith in Jesus Christ, and wants to help them mature in their discipleship as they grow up. As our "Membership Statement of Fellowship" states:

We will aim to bring up all who are in our care and through example, word, and deed seek the salvation of our friends, family, community, and all the nations.

We are convinced that God works wonderfully in the lives of children. Over the years, we have seen children at Church on Mill—sometimes very young ones—display a wonderful sensitivity to spiritual realities, a heartfelt love for Jesus, and even a desire to tell others about him. In fact, God sometimes brings young children to a saving faith in Jesus. You may be seeing signs of conversion in your own child's life. Praise God!

We have also seen children at Church on Mill profess Christ only to walk away from the Lord as older children, teenagers, or young adults. This is, of course, heartbreaking. The frequency of such walking away is by no means a Church on Mill anomaly, yet the elders have been troubled by it for years. We have, therefore, sought Scripture, wisdom from church history among those who hold to believer's baptism, and counsel from like-minded scholars and churches. This paper is a product of these endeavors.²

When parents see potential signs of conversion in their child's life, the question will naturally arise: When should

Church for their counsel and usage of documents. With permission, portions of this paper are adapted from one or more of these churches' work. Additional resources of note are available as the last section in this document.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:18-19, Ephesians 6:1-4,

² Timothy 3:14

² Special thanks to 3rd Avenue Baptist Church, Cheverly Baptist Church, Sojourn Community Church, University Baptist Church, and Whitton Avenue Bible

my child be baptized and added as a member of the church? That is a good question, and it is right for that question to press on parents' hearts. It is not, however, as easy to answer as it might seem on the surface; in fact, Christians have come to thoughtful, principled, careful—and yet different—conclusions on it. Among adherents to believer's baptism, two broad approaches exist in present-day churches:

Baptize quickly
or
Wait awhile

In other words, is it best for the church to act more-or-less immediately upon a child's profession of faith, baptizing her and recognizing her as a member of the church *quickly*, even at a young age?

Or, is it best to *wait awhile*, encouraging the child to continue growing in his understanding of the gospel and love for Jesus, until it is more clear that his profession of faith is considered, deep, and genuinely personal—that is, until his profession becomes discernibly credible to the church and a readiness for the privileges of membership is present?

Sometimes people approach this difficult question as if there is a clear, open-and-shut biblical command, and that to take one position or another is to disobey God. As your pastors, we want you to know that the important question of when to baptize children who profess Christ is not a matter of simple

obedience to a doctrine clearly settled by Scripture, but instead is one of Christian wisdom and prudence on an issue not directly addressed by Scripture.³ In fact, both sides may make prudential arguments for their respective positions.

Our Policy and Process

- 1) Baptism is to be observed when the credibility of one's conversion becomes naturally evident to the church and the person is reasonably prepared for the responsibilities of church membership. These are, of course, crucial expectations for anyone seeking baptism irrespective of one's age.

Based on these principles, the elders of Church on Mill believe it best for parents to wait until their believing child is at least 13 years old before encouraging him or her to seek baptism. We advise waiting until then. We are also happy to wait until after age 13 if you feel that is wise.

- 2) Determining the credibility of a child's profession of faith, independent desire for the Lord, and a readiness for membership are often challenging prior to at least the early stages of adolescence.⁴ This does not imply any resistance to the notion that God saves some children younger than that: at issue is primarily both the elders' and congregation's ability to affirm one's profession and readiness for membership. Patience seems prudent.
- 3) It is important that parents remember conversion is God's work in a person's life,⁵ not simply a decision an individual

³ Consider, for example, the fact that there is no air-tight example of childhood Christian baptism in Scripture. Every named baptism is that of an adult.

⁴ An especially significant factor to consider is the relationship between parent and child, and parent and God. As one author states, "True conversion manifests itself over time. Children are childlike and trusting for a reason. To ask a pastor to try to separate out the tightly

knit strands of affection for parents and for God, and to discern which is primary in a child is to ask more than may be best for the child. Time allows the child's faith to mature and evidence itself consistently," see Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright eds., *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*. Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2006; 349-350.

⁵ John 3:1-15, 6:44

makes. Therefore, parents should be vigilant in looking for many of the following signs of God's converting work in their child, over a period of time, before presenting him or her to the elders to discuss salvation and baptism:

Conviction of sin. Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit, who uses God's laws and commands to bring sin and the necessity of trusting Christ home to the child's conscience.⁶

Does your child demonstrate sorrow and remorse about her sin? Does he recognize that he has sinned against God and not just against others? Does she confess her sins to God and ask for his mercy without your prompting? Does he demonstrate commitment to Christ in the midst of strong temptation to disobey? Is she able to discern particular sins that she is often tempted by?

Understanding and Faith. Illumination is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he reveals the thoughts of God to people so that a person may obtain a true understanding of Christ and his Word.⁷

Does your child understand that she is a sinner and cannot save herself? Does he grasp that his sins deserve death and punishment in hell? Does he understand that Jesus died as a substitute for his sins? Does she 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 Scriptures when they are taught or is your child often confused or

disinterested? Does he show a desire to gather with and love God's people? Does he display an ability to learn from his teachers and in sermons? Does she actually participate in the corporate gatherings of the church?

New Life in Christ. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives life to a dead soul and produces an evident and credible profession of repentance and faith⁸ as well as a new valuing of the Scriptures.⁹ Neither sorrow over sin nor interest in spiritual things alone is sufficient evidence of a regenerate heart or the work of the Spirit.¹⁰

Does your child demonstrate a sustained interest in spiritual things? Does she pray, read, or sing the Scriptures on her own initiative? What sins has your child repented of? Does he desire to talk with you about God? How does your child demonstrate that he trusts the Lord? Does she demonstrate a genuine desire to tell others about Jesus?

We do not mean to imply that parents (or the church) should treat children with skepticism about their stated desire to follow Christ; instead, may we all rejoice over early evidences of grace and look for confirming fruit over time. If genuine conversion has occurred, it will become more and more clear. We believe this clarity best for the child, parents, and church. The above questions seek to guide parents as you teach the Scriptures, relate the gospel to all of life, talk with members who know your child, and pray for glorious evidences of the fruit of salvation.

- 4) Since a believer's baptism is inseparably connected to the believer's commitment to and inclusion in the visible people of God,

⁶ 2 Kings 22, Romans 7:7-9

⁷ John 10:26-27, 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

⁸ John 3, Romans 6, 10:9-10

⁹ John 6:45

¹⁰ Acts 8:9-25, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Hebrews 12:17

baptism and church membership are to be addressed concurrently.¹¹ All branches of Christianity and every major denomination has historically understood this to be biblical and vital. Church on Mill's "Membership Statement of Faith" states the doctrine and connection this way:

We believe that Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper are visible and communal actions which serve as signs of the immense goodness of God toward his people in that they place before our eyes the invisible actions God accomplished in salvation.¹² Baptism is a one-time, symbolic act of obedience for every individual who has received the saving benefits of Christ's atoning work and become his disciple.¹³ The Lord's Supper is a regular, symbolic act of obedience for all genuine followers of Christ.¹⁴ It symbolizes the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of his blood on our behalf and is to be observed repeatedly together throughout the Christian life as both a sign of continued participation in the atoning benefits of Christ's death and demonstration of our unity with other members of Christ's body.¹⁵

Anyone who desires baptism must ordinarily¹⁶ be willing to join Church on Mill and reasonably prepared for church membership. A child is not ready for baptism until he is mature enough to enjoy, for example, the Lord's Supper, vote in Members Meetings, and be subject to church discipline, should an unwillingness to repent over significant sin become present in the future. While the age at which each child is ready to take on these serious responsibilities would vary, we

believe it prudent to wait until adolescence, when a child is learning to exercise more independent decision making, and take on more responsibility in many areas of life. He or she may then be ready to come under the accountability of Church on Mill members as a whole.

Perhaps an analogy would help at this point: A seven-year-old may express a sincere romantic love for a classmate and even a desire to marry. Perhaps those feelings are also shared by the other person. Parents wisely use this as an occasion to affirm the beauty of God's gendered design in creating men and women, how the gospel is put on display through marriage, and the goodness of longing for marriage, but parents do not also call a wedding coordinator to begin wedding planning. The child is simply too young. We believe it wise to think of baptism and membership in a similar way.

- 5) When a child begins to profess faith in Christ and inquire about baptism and church membership, the elders will joyfully join with that child's parents in considering God's work in their child's life. An elder will meet with the parents to discuss our policy and how we might support parents/children throughout this thrilling journey. If parents believe a meeting with the child, a parent, and an elder would encourage spiritual steps, we are happy to do that as well. Our Pastor of Family Ministries will also seek to stay in close contact to counsel parents as they pursue their children in spiritual things.

¹¹ The only biblical exceptions to this are in frontier mission contexts where no visible church yet exists.

¹² Matthew 3:11, 28:19, John 1:33, 4:14, 6:51, 7:37–38, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 11:23–26, Ephesians 2:4–6, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 2:9–15, Titus 3:4–7, 1 Peter. 3:21–22

¹³ Matthew 28:18–20, Acts 2:37–41, 8:36–38, 10:44–48, 16:30–33, Romans 6:3–4

¹⁴ Acts 2:42, 20:7, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, 10:14–21

¹⁵ Matthew 26:26–28, Mark 14:22–24, Luke 22:17–20, John 6:32–58, 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, 11:17–34, 12:13

¹⁶ We have, on rare occasions, made exceptions when a candidate for baptism is in a situation similar to a frontier missions context, such as an international student headed back overseas where no known church yet exists.

- 6) Over a period of time, the child will be led by his or her parents through a study that clarifies the gospel, baptism, the basic practices of a Christian's life, and the core doctrines of Christianity. Parents will be asked to use *Just for Starters* by Matthias Media¹⁷ and the Membership Statement of Faith to do so. A separate booklet "Preparing for Baptism and Church Membership," will be provided to parents to help guide them through this important discipleship process.¹⁸
- 7) At the conclusion of this study, if the child and parents still believe it is appropriate to proceed and the child is at least 13 years of age, the child will meet for an interview (or a series of interviews) with an elder. Although the parents may be a part of the initial interviews, a young person needs to be mature enough to be able to meet with an elder independently of his or her parents. The purpose of these meetings is to discern, as well as we can, if the child understands and has personally and genuinely embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior, and is ready to consider the responsibilities of membership.
- 8) If the parents and elders are in agreement that a child has given credible evidence of conversion and is ready to begin considering the privileges of membership, the child will be invited to attend an upcoming Membership Class and pursue membership independently. Parents are, of course, welcome to attend, but the child should be the one actively engaged.
- 9) Upon conclusion of the Membership Class, if the child, parents, and elders

jointly believe it is fitting for the child to proceed, the child will then be asked to do a Membership Interview with an elder independent of the parents, and, as every prospective member is asked, to give affirmation of Church on Mill's Membership Commitment, to write out her testimony and share it before the gathered church, to be baptized, and to subsequently be welcomed into the joys and privileges of membership by the members during the next regularly scheduled Members Meeting.

The elders are excited to engage with parents and children in these matters of spiritual significance! Regardless of the age of your child, we would love to provide support and encouragement along the way. If at any point parents or children have questions about this approach to baptism and membership, we would happily do all that we can to provide care. Please simply reach out.

For More Information

On the pages that follow, you will find a selection of *Questions and Answers* (pgs. 7-16), as well as a *For Additional Study* list for further reading (pg. 16).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to your discipling of your children, please see the discipling companion to this paper entitled *Preparing for Baptism and Church Membership*.

¹⁷ If a parent has a similar but preferred book, we would request you touch base with an elder about potentially using that book instead.

¹⁸ Should a child not have parents who are Christians and members of Church on Mill, the process outlined

would be adjusted and, with the consent of his or her parents, a mentor would be assigned to help disciple the young person.

Questions and Answers

The following questions and answers are intended to provide additional information on the policy and procedures stated above. As your pastors, however, we desire to walk side by side with you through this process, so please initiate conversation any time. Perhaps you'll ask questions that should be added to future versions of this position paper!

- 1) *If my child is expressing faith in Christ, how can I best encourage this faith?*

First, this is an occasion to rejoice! Thank God for early signs of spiritual life. Second, there are many ways to encourage what you see God doing. These include, but certainly are not limited to, at least the following: Continue to teach your children God's law and commands, which the Holy Spirit uses to bring conviction of sin.¹⁹ Teach him God's promises, and speak plainly about the need to repent from sin and trust Christ.²⁰ At the same time, model and teach honesty and openness with the Lord in prayer in the midst of all situations,²¹ and encourage your child to exercise disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, and Bible memorization.²² Also, be sure to include your child in both family and corporate worship. A person's presence and participation in the gathered church can be a catalyst for helping her grow to understand the gospel.²³

- 2) *If my child is not immediately baptized, does this imply my child is not a Christian?*

Certainly not! God converts people, sometimes quite young. The challenge lies with the church's ability to discern

that conversion with reasonable confidence. Your child may be a Christian—God knows. Yet he or she may simply be at present too young for the church to discern it clearly. Imagine a pastor or family ministries volunteer lovingly wondering, "Wait, is that the sound of a child's common-grace love and obedience I'm hearing, or the sound of saving-grace regeneration?" It is often not apparent in young children.

Our policy of not baptizing young children or recommending them for membership does not at all imply a decision that they are not saved: it is simply a judgment that at this point in their lives, we believe it prudent to wait for more discernible, credible evidence of regeneration before giving them the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of church membership. If your child is already secure in God's saving love, delaying baptism will not change that glorious reality, and more time may make it more publicly evident.

- 3) *Does delaying baptism encourage professing children to disobey biblical commands?*

Not necessarily. It is worth noticing the difference between negative prohibitions (like: "you shall not murder"²⁴ and "you shall not steal"²⁵) and positive injunctions (like: "remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities"²⁶ and "if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat"²⁷). You fulfill a negative prohibition by not doing the thing which is prohibited. It is very straightforward and easy to discern. Yet fulfilling a positive injunction depends

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 6, Romans 3

²⁰ Acts 2:38-39

²¹ Lamentations 2

²² Psalm 119:9-11

²³ Psalm 8:2, 102:18, 1 Cor 14:24-25

²⁴ Exodus 20:13

²⁵ Exodus 20:15

²⁶ Titus 3:1

²⁷ 2 Thessalonians 3:10b

upon certain circumstances and conditions. For example, no one is expected to submit to the government if doing so would cause disobedience to God, nor are parents causing their child to sin by feeding him when he has no job to work for such food. The circumstances for obedience are simply not present.

The command to “be baptized” is a positive injunction. God expects Christians to fulfill it wisely, at the right time, and in the right way. For instance, God expects us to ensure that baptismal candidates clearly understand the gospel and have begun to bear the fruit of repentance. We can infer he would have us slow down when we are unsure. Likewise, we believe there is wisdom in saying “not yet” to children before their teenage years, just as there is wisdom in saying “not yet” to the instruction to work for food.

4) *Why use the age of 13 as a guide for beginning to practice baptism and membership?*

We do not claim that the Scriptures denote a certain age at which baptism and membership become prudent: God left this question to the category of wisdom. The fact that the Bible does not give an age suggests we must assess every profession of faith according to principles of God-dependent wisdom.

To be clear, all should be grateful anytime a child says, “I believe Jesus is my Lord and Savior.” Indeed, God saves children! That question is not up for grabs. The tougher question we are dealing with is, how capable are churches of discerning the credibility of a child’s profession of faith? After all, a child

might say “Jesus is Lord” by the power of the Holy Spirit and a born-again heart, or a child might say this to please mom and dad or to get the applause baptism receives. Frankly, it is difficult to discern the difference in young children. It does, however, become clearer as they age. Below are two reasons why.

First, Jesus admonishes people to count the cost of following him.²⁸ It “costs” most young children little, if anything, to follow Christ; however, an adolescent will undoubtedly encounter a measure of cost. A willingness to choose Christ when costs begin to emerge can provide great confidence in the presence of credible, saving faith. This does not merit salvation, but it may reveal its presence.

Second, God has provided the home as the primary context of authority in a child’s life. As a child gets older, however, that authority is slowly supplemented by others. To be baptized and join the membership of a church includes coming under the church’s authority, insofar as that church obeys Christ. We believe it wise for this entrustment to happen as children are naturally experiencing it in other spheres of adolescence.

Finally, we have tried for years to avoid denoting a specific age. We taught this approach to baptism yet refrained from suggesting an age threshold, and it sometimes appeared to sow confusion in what is already a complex matter. We are sorry! We hope designating a specific age provides more clarity on what seems prudent to us.

²⁸ See Luke 14:26-33 for one example of many such passages

- 5) *Would it be better to wait until children have moved out of their parents' house or are at least into their late teens?*

While some churches take this approach and society wisely reserves certain responsibilities for ages beyond 13, we think many believing children are ready by their early teenage years. As parents, you may, of course, wait if you feel that is best.

A credible profession includes discernible evidence. Another word the Bible uses for "evidence" is "fruit." You can tell a tree by its fruit.²⁹ There is nothing magical about children moving out of their parents' houses. The light is not suddenly switched on for members of a local church to see the fruit (or lack thereof) of a candidate for membership. Rather, over time, including the time before an individual leaves home, a parent's authority over aspects of a child's life gradually decreases. For example, a 2-year-old cannot put on his own clothes, but a 5-year-old can. On all levels, physically, mentally, and emotionally, a 13-year-old is more independent from his parents than a 5-year-old. If dependency decreases gradually over time, it makes sense to us that once fruit is present, independent decision-making is emerging, and the responsibilities of membership are appropriate, it is time to be baptized. Although baptism is a personal and corporate decision, not a familial one, we believe this is appropriate for a teenager still under his or her parent's roof.

It would be mistaken, nonetheless, to view 13 as the age we expect most children in the church to reach and then suddenly pursue baptism, like many teenagers do when they reach the legal age for driving. There is nothing automatic about the age of 13. Instead, we offer that age as a threshold for when we, as elders, will generally be more inclined to have these conversations in earnest. Maybe a conversation with a particular youth will last for a few months. Perhaps it will last for a few years. Possibly it will resolve inconclusively about membership, for a time, while we continue in our commitment to disciple youth. Maybe it will go very quickly. Our collective sense is that people in their early to mid-teens begin to establish a kind of mental, emotional, and intellectual independence from their parents, making it easier to discern a credible profession of faith and readiness for membership.

- 6) *How are baptism and church membership related?*

This is a crucial and sometimes misunderstood element of discussions regarding baptism. Central to the connection between baptism and membership is the recognition that baptism is not solely an individual's public proclamation of their own personal faith in Jesus. It is never less, but it is certainly more. Individuals do not baptize themselves based on their confidence in their profession. No, baptism is also a church's public proclamation that, as far as God's people can presently tell, the individual truly is a regenerated follower of Christ.³⁰

²⁹ Matthew 7:15-20

³⁰ Theologically speaking, Christians have long recognized that the membership of the invisible church

Baptism formally affirms an individual's union with Christ and Christ's body, the Church. It distinguishes people as citizens of Christ's kingdom. Jesus means this when he commissions the disciples to baptize people "into the name" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³¹ What is crucial to recognize is that both church membership and the Lord's Supper do the same thing. They formally affirm someone's union with Christ and his body. They distinguish Christ's people from the world.

Think of it this way – if baptism is the public entry into the life of the church, the Lord's Supper is the ongoing family meal for a church's members. As the Apostle Paul states, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."³² Enjoying the one bread, in other words, reveals who belongs to the one body. The Supper is a church revealer. Baptism begins church life, and the Lord's Supper marks off this life in an ongoing way. These ordinances are the signs of church membership. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership belong together; they are a package deal.³³ These, along

with the preaching of God's Word, make a church *a church*.

Exceptions exist, as with the Ethiopian eunuch, since Christianity pushes into new frontier missionary territory where local churches do not yet exist.³⁴ Yet ordinarily, churches baptize people into membership,³⁵ and the Lord's Supper is a privilege of church members, whether one's own church or when visiting another.

7) *Will my child's faith be put in danger by the congregation not immediately affirming it?*

From beginning to end, salvation is a gift from God. As the Scriptures say, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."³⁶ Remember, God does not retract this precious gift! If God has saved your child, you need not fear a delay of baptism will put his or her faith in peril. Foster a God-centered view of salvation and encourage the same in your child. You might even consider memorizing the last two verses of Jude, which state, "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority,

[cont.] (all those who are saved by Jesus) and the membership of the visible church (local churches) will unfortunately not be identical. Nevertheless, Church on Mill strives to do her best in only receiving true Christians as members. That is, we aim for a regenerate membership by (a) carefully looking for credible professions of faith from everyone seeking to join, no matter their age, and (b) lovingly practicing church discipline.

³¹ Matthew 28:19

³² 1 Corinthians 10:17

³³ Church discipline comes into play here as well. In Scripture, church membership and discipline are the two sides of one coin (See 1 Corinthians 5:2, 12,

2 Corinthians 2:6). If membership involves affirming a person's profession of faith, discipline involves removing that affirmation. The one should not be practiced without the possibility of the other. This is not a punitive matter, but the administration of God's love for the life and growth of the people of God (Hebrews 12:3-6).

³⁴ Acts 8:26-40

³⁵ As Luke plainly says, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

³⁶ Ephesians 2:8

before all time and now and forever.
Amen.”³⁷

It is hypothetically possible that delaying baptism from a genuine Christian child could sometimes be discouraging. Yet keep three things in mind:

First, the child can flourish under other means of grace. He or she can still read and study the Word, sit under its preaching, pray, sing, and grow in the company of other Christians.

Second, the Bible—Old and New Testaments—focuses on children’s obedience to their parents. The home is a crucial, perhaps even the most critical, means of grace in young children’s lives. See your spiritual labors in the home as primary. Seek gospel fluency in nurturing and growing your child’s faith. This will go a long way in protecting your child from discouragement and fostering spiritual habits that may last for a lifetime!

Third, we believe it would be more discouraging to a child to seek baptism and find he is not yet ready for it than to simply wait until a believing child is a bit older. Let the flower of faith bloom a bit before you encourage your child to request baptism. She will remember it as her own and be better equipped to give a credible profession as she begins and continues in adolescence.

8) *Can my unbaptized child still be disciplined by the church?*

Absolutely. Church on Mill is deeply committed to discipling children of all ages, teaching them God’s Word, and seeking to point them to Jesus Christ. A wealth of help is available to you as a parent in teaching your child, however young, to be a follower of Jesus. In fact,

we make this very pledge in our church “Membership Statement of Fellowship:”

We will aim to bring up all who are in our care and through example, word, and deed seek the salvation of our friends, family, community, and all the nations.

9) *If my child has made a profession of faith but has not been baptized, should he or she participate in the Lord’s Supper?*

Baptism is the entry sign of the New Covenant, and the Lord’s Supper is the continuing sign. Therefore, please do not allow your child to participate in the Lord’s Supper until he or she is baptized and becomes a church member.

Use the church’s practice of the Lord’s Supper to encourage active, God-glorifying anticipation in your child’s heart. Instead of only focusing on why your child should not partake, encourage him or her to reflect on what the Supper signifies—Christ’s body broken for sinners and his uniting of them together. If you can do so truthfully, let your child know how you have seen the Lord’s work in her life. Encourage them to continue trusting Christ. Point them to Christ and assure them of your confidence that since he has begun a good work in them, he will finish it.

Explain its significance if your children are with you during the Lord’s Supper. Share with them how much the Lord loved us to give his life for us. Pray with them, thanking the Lord for his death and resurrection, and set an example of worthy partaking.

³⁷ Jude 24–25

10) *Why not create tiers of membership? In other words, why not baptize believing children, affirm them into “junior membership,” and withhold doctrinal expectations, the possibility of church discipline, voting, and the like?*

Biblically speaking, the functions of membership cannot be separated from its form. In other words, God designates what church membership entails – churches do not have the freedom to adjust it into something else. Although some well-meaning churches do so by lowering expectations, establishing voting and serving ages, and so on, we believe the best way to train young people to see themselves as whole parts of the membership of the body is to treat them as such when they are emerging into readiness for both the form (membership) and its functions (responsibilities). Through careful discipleship, teaching, and example setting, young people will gain an appreciation for what full engagement in the life of the church family entails. This will, Lord willing, prepare them well to leave home with a readiness to be healthy church members for the rest of their lives wherever God takes them.

11) *If I believe my child is a Christian, shouldn’t that be enough?*

Of course, a parent’s testimony carries considerable weight, for a parent will know their child in ways no other member does. However, Christ gives the congregation particular responsibility here. As we teach in the Membership Class, because the Bible itself teaches it,

God has given the keys of the kingdom to the church.³⁸ Baptism and membership are, therefore, never a matter of just one or two people (even family members) vouching for a person. They are a matter of the entire church, through its elders first and members second, determining that a person has made a credible profession of faith and has indeed expressed readiness for the responsibilities of membership.

12) *Are the risks really that great in baptizing young children?*

There are at least two potential and significant dangers in baptizing children before they have reached an appropriate degree of readiness.

First, early baptism has the potential of offering a child false assurance, leading him to rely on the experience of baptism and the reality of church membership for a sense of salvation. Of course, false assurance is a danger for anyone of any age, but it would seem to be a particular danger for children whose thinking tends toward the concrete and whose sense of well-being is naturally and tightly woven together with a sense of others’—especially parental—approval. As they emerge into adolescence, however, children can better know for themselves (and the church is far better able to see) that their faith is truly and solely in Jesus as Savior and Lord. This is of enormous benefit to the child, parent, and church.

Second, as most of us can attest, a large percentage of people who are baptized relatively young are troubled by spiritual confusion and doubts later in life

³⁸ See Matthew 16:19, 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:4-11, 2 Corinthians 2:6; if this is a new theological concept, you may also benefit from reading the excellent booklet

Understanding Baptism by Bobby Jamieson, Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016.

about the genuineness of their baptism. Many come to believe they were not, in fact, genuinely saved when they were baptized.³⁹ Memories of the first decade of our lives are often fuzzy at best. Even if we remember a decision or an event like baptism, we usually cannot recall any reasoning behind it. Once a child has the capacity for more reasoning and independent thinking, she is far more likely to embrace the decisions and commitments she makes as her own.⁴⁰ We hope that as a child waits, there will be a growing sense of anticipation as she looks forward to following the Lord in obedience. By encouraging parents to wait a while before presenting their young children for baptism and membership, we hope to help people lessen the dangers of both false assurance and confusion.

Baptists and others have always believed that churches should only baptize people when they profess evident faith. We should not baptize infants or those whose professions are not yet reasonably credible. That distinctive is a core tenant of what makes us Baptists.⁴¹ In recent decades, however, it is true that

Baptists have disagreed over the appropriate age to begin baptizing, yet that has not always been the case. Historically, most Baptists have believed that a credible profession of faith requires a degree of maturity. Delaying baptism until a person reaches his or her late teens or early twenties has been common throughout Baptist history. Yes, exceptions occurred, but the norm is without question. The modern practice of many Southern Baptist churches baptizing young children is an anomaly – despite it being the only practice some of the members of Church on Mill know.⁴² We are humbly convinced that the recovery of this general approach is essential.

13) Does the elders' practice imply my baptism as a young child was illegitimate?

Absolutely not! Numerous members of Church on Mill were baptized early in life. We do not mean to call those early baptisms into question. In fact, in those cases, the intervening years of spiritual growth and faithfulness have shown those early baptisms to be legitimate. Praise God for saving and keeping you!

³⁹ As your pastors, some of us have this as our personal testimony, and all of us have done multiple membership interviews for Church on Mill in which this was the case with the interviewee. Sadly, this is far from unusual; in fact, one study found that "...60 percent of all baptisms were, in fact, rebaptism. Of these, one in three had previously experienced believer's baptism in a Southern Baptist church," see Tony Hemphill, "The Practice of Infantile Baptism in Southern Baptist Churches and Subsequent Impact on Regenerate Church Membership," *Faith & Mission*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Summer 2001); 84.

⁴⁰ Consider how King Solomon indicates folly is in the heart of a child (Proverbs 22:15a) and the Apostle Paul spoke of himself in this way, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like

a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13:11) and compares people unduly tossed about doctrinally to children (Ephesians 4:14).

⁴¹ That is – baptistic in our theological convictions

⁴² One historian notes helpfully, "Historically, Baptists were slow to see childhood decisions as credible professions warranting baptism. Things began to change in the twentieth century. By 1966, baptisms of those eight years of age and younger amounted to ten percent of all baptisms in Southern Baptist churches, and baptisms of those six and younger increased by 250 percent in the years between 1977 and 1997. I have both theological and pastoral concerns over these trends," John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019; 312.

We have adopted our approach to baptism, nevertheless, because for every member who was baptized early and proved that baptism to be genuine over the years, there are more who were baptized early but who eventually decided their baptism was not a true one — that they were not really a Christian at the time of their early baptism. Still, others testify they were lulled to sleep for a time by false assurance extended through baptism and membership. And that is to say nothing of the droves baptized as children in churches across the United States who show no evidence of conversion as adults. Through this policy, we want to avoid these troubles as much as possible.

14) What if my child was baptized at another church before coming to Church on Mill?

By asking parents to wait until their professing children enter adolescence before encouraging them to pursue baptism, we do not mean to claim that a genuine baptism cannot occur before that time. If a child was baptized as a believer at another church before coming to Church on Mill, we will, of course, not ask the child to be baptized again. A genuine baptism is a one-time event.

All that we have said about trying to discern a credible profession of faith with regard to baptism is also true concerning church membership. Therefore, we strongly recommend that parents not present their baptized children for membership at Church on Mill until age 13. We are willing to do a membership interview for your younger child if you and the child insist and believe a readiness for the responsibilities therein is present, but please know that we would not ordinarily expect such a

conversation to be fruitful in determining the credibility of a child's profession until at least age 13.

This aspect of the topic, to be sure, is difficult, especially for those who have been members of churches with different perspectives on baptism, membership, and young children. On the one side, the consciences of the child, the parents, and the former congregation say one thing. On the other side, the consciences of us as your new elders and the need for unity in the new congregation say another thing. If you have questions, please be sure to talk with an elder. As much as is possible, we want to ensure your child is encouraged in her faith in Jesus, regardless of whether she seeks membership as a young child.

15) What if I do not agree with this approach?

When all is said and done, we do not assume every member will entirely agree with every other member (or elder) on the best time to begin baptizing believing children or if we should baptize children at all. Indeed, your pastors have spent considerable time working through our own differing instincts and learning from each other's experiences. By God's grace, we have labored to defer to and honor one another to find common ground and best practices. That ground is articulated in this document. We likewise invite every member to join us on that common ground for the sake of unity and love, even if it involves some measure of deference and patience on your part.

At this point, we are convinced this approach to baptism and membership is likely, by God's grace, to foster the

greatest good for the greatest number of people. We understand this is a sensitive topic, so if you struggle with our assessment, please reach out. We do not want to discourage your children if they are genuine believers, but we do not want the church to give them false assurance if they are not. We are concerned about the risks of baptizing too quickly as well as the risks of waiting too long. We hope, in the end, this approach takes the prudent middle road.

16) I serve in Family Ministries and/or actively aim to encourage other church members' children. How should I support a child who expresses faith in Christ without overstepping or pressuring the child?

Church on Mill is filled with these kinds of people. We praise God for this! Here are several suggestions:

- (a) Stress the character of God and the facts of the gospel. Teach children God's laws and commands, which the Holy Spirit uses to bring conviction of sin (Deuteronomy 6). Then, teach them God's promises and plainly speak about their need to repent from sin and trust Christ. When children express an affirmation of these truths, tell them how glad you are.
- (b) Do not be skeptical about a child's sincerity. Although we want to be careful not to give a child a false sense of security, neither do we wish to unwittingly discourage children from believing that God can grant them saving faith as a child. When a child says he or she loves Jesus or

believes in Jesus, responses such as, "That's wonderful! I'm so glad to hear it! I hope and pray you'll love and follow him your whole life!" can be incredibly encouraging. If you have such a conversation, be sure to pass along the good news to the child's parents, as this will help them shepherd their child's heart well.

- (c) Refrain from offering assurances or pressuring young children for commitments. It is important not to assure children that a prayer for mercy ("sinner's prayer") guarantees their eternal destiny. It does not. Salvation is the work of God. Majoring on the prayer prayed rather than the God who saves is the wrong point of emphasis; instead, encourage children to take on a lifestyle of faith and repentance.
- (d) Trust God to work in the hearts of his children to bring them to himself through faith, in his time, and in his ways. Your responsibility is to faithfully tell the gospel to them and leave the results to the Lord. God will complete what he begins!⁴³ We can trust that the Holy Spirit will assure those who are truly changed.⁴⁴

17) Given this policy related to children, should we hold adults to a "higher standard" too?

While the sentiment expressed in this question is admirable, we aspire to hold every individual seeking baptism and membership to the same biblical criteria. Such expectations have been applied to adults seeking baptism for many years of

⁴³ Philippians 1:6

⁴⁴ Romans 8:16

Church on Mill's history. We long to see the same applied uniformly to young people as well.

18) *What should I say to my child if he or she wants to be baptized but is too young?*

The short answer is, encourage your child for his or her desire and explain that sometimes God has us wait for the right season for fulfilling his purposes, including joining a church. Perhaps you can say something like this: "Sweetheart, I'm so encouraged you want to be baptized, and when the right time comes, I hope you will be. Sometimes the Lord has us wait to do the very things he commands—such as his command in 2 Thessalonians 3 about not eating if you do not work—so that we can be prepared for everything such a command requires. Right now, I want you to continue learning and growing in the knowledge of the Lord so that when the time comes, you'll be ready to help other church members follow Jesus, even as they help you follow him. In the meantime, our own family will help you do that, and other friends of ours and yours in the church can help, too."

Instead of focusing primarily on "no" or "not yet," especially if your child raises the issue repeatedly, outline a plan of next steps in discipleship that you would like to take with him or her. Show her that she is not simply waiting: she is being taught and growing up in the faith. The elders would be delighted to help any parent, regardless of their child's age, develop a robust, personalized plan for moving forward with intentionality. These can be among the most precious memories you will ever build with your children.

For Additional Study

In addition to the Bible itself, the following resources may aid those who wish to devote themselves to more intensive study on this topic.

Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016.

Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015.

Dennis Gundersen, *Your Child's Profession of Faith*. Sand Springs: Grace and Truth Books, 2010.

John S. Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord's Supper*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2015.

John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology, 2nd Edition*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2019.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright eds., *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006.