

Children, the Sacraments, & Membership

We, the elders of the Grace Church, believe that more pastoral guidance related to children and the church might be helpful – particularly as it relates to the areas of the sacraments and local church membership. The following reflects our guidance and recommendations.

Children & Baptism

While our belief and practice is to baptize those who have already believed in Jesus Christ (e.g., Rom 6.3-4; Col 2.12), the age at which a believer is to be baptized is not directly addressed in Scripture. Thus, we believe the consideration of an appropriate age for a child to be baptized is a matter of Christian wisdom and prudence.

Though baptism in the New Testament seems to have occurred soon after initial conversion (Acts 2.38, 8.16, 8.38, 9.18, etc.), most of those individuals were adults coming from a non-Christian background. Both of those factors would lend credibility to an individual's conversion. For a child growing up in a Christian home, it is not as easy to discern the timing or credibility of their conversion. The malleable nature of children is a gift from God and is to be used to bring them to maturity. However, their malleable nature should call us to exercise caution in assuming the permanence of the desires, affections and decisions of children. There can be much wisdom in delaying baptism for a younger child. In fact, it is common to hear people express regret at being baptized too young. It is also important that parents not seek the baptism of their child out of the parent's own desire for assurance about the spiritual condition of their child.

Nevertheless, we believe that the point at which a child's conversion seems credible will most naturally be evident to the parents. The elders must lead the church in its practice of the sacraments, however the elders will rely to a significant degree on a parent's insight into their child's spiritual condition. When a young person desires to pursue baptism, we will wholeheartedly encourage that child's spiritual interest (we encourage parents to do the same) and we will examine them on a case-by-case basis, with the involvement of the parents. In terms of a credible profession, we believe a child should have:

- a clear understanding of the gospel
- a clear understanding of the significance of baptism
- a clear profession of repentance from sin and faith in Christ

As a general guideline, it seems that a child would typically need to be around the age of ten to meet those requirements, given the time it takes to develop more independent thinking. However, the stipulation of that age is meant to be a *guideline*, not a "rule". Children should be cared for and led in this regard on a case-by-case basis.

In the event of young persons from non-Christian families coming to the church for an extended period of time, professing faith and giving evidence of conversion, requests for baptism would be considered without the involvement of the parents. While all the previous comments regarding a child's malleable nature still apply, the fact that such a young person would be pursuing baptism despite the indifference, or even possible opposition, of their parents could be seen as evidence for the reality of their conversion.

Children & the Lord's Supper

Additionally, we believe that a child's participation in the Lord's Supper most logically *follows after* their baptism. This is another area in which we do not have clear Scriptural guidance, so we again offer this practice as a guideline and not a "rule". However, we believe this order follows logically given that baptism is a sign of *beginning* the Christian life through faith in Christ (Matt 28.19, Acts 2.38), while the Lord's Supper is a sign of *continuing* in fellowship with Christ (1 Cor 10.16-17). In fact, serious warnings are given to us that we would not take the Lord's Supper in an inappropriate manner (1 Cor 11.27-28). This is not to frighten us into withholding or avoiding the Lord's Supper, but it should help us see the high value and significance God ascribes to this sacrament.

Conversely, we don't want a fear of possibly "getting it wrong" in regards to a child's conversion keep us from providing the assurance to a young believer that the sacraments can convey. Both sacraments (Baptism & the Lord's Supper) are means of God's encouraging and sustaining grace to a believer in Jesus. It's helpful to remember that Jesus told his adult disciples to repent and become like children in their faith (Matt 18:3). He also told his disciples to not hinder children from coming to him since "*to such belongs the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt 19.14). It is not our desire to hinder any child who may have genuinely trusted in Christ for salvation, and the withholding of these means of grace could possibly discourage a sincere, young believer over time. Thus the need to weigh both the warnings of Scripture and the blessing of the sacraments calls for wisdom and discernment.

Children & Church Membership

The sacraments raise the related issue of a child's relationship to the local church, since the sacraments fall under the purview of the local church. We see in Scripture a continuum of authority in a child's life: a parent's authority is primary in a child's life (Eph 6.1-4), while the church is to have an increasingly important voice as that child grows up. For this reason, we believe it is prudent for us to not offer church membership to a child until they are 17 or older. Around that age, a young person is typically moving out of parental authority and is beginning to assume some adult responsibilities. Thus, around that age we encourage the young person to make his or her own volitional decision to identify with this local church or another Christian church.

Accordingly, we believe any disciplinary role in a child's life is to be undertaken by the parents while the child is a minor and living in that parent's home. Thus the church would not have a *formal* disciplinary role until that young person actually becomes a member of this local church. This would seem to be the most appropriate way to apply Matt 18.15-17, given the continuum of authority in a child's life between parents and the local church, as referenced above. However, the church's elders do reserve the right to withhold the Lord's Supper from any minor who is clearly unrepentant toward the appropriate exercise of a parent's authority or who is blatantly flaunting the Lord's clear commands.

Two notes should be made in conclusion. First, in no way are we seeking to lead anyone to disobey his or her conscience in these matters. Our desire is simply to inform our consciences from Scripture. Second, nothing in this statement should be construed as casting doubt on the legitimacy of any child's conversion. We understand that these issues can involve great emotion, given our love for our children. For all of us, the legitimacy of our conversion is borne out by the perseverance of our faith in Christ. This is true regardless of the age at which we were converted. Every believer in Jesus must take to heart this call to persevere: "*...you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.*" (Heb. 10:36)