

Baptist baptism as a confirmation of faith

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Where do children belong in the family of God? That is to say, what is their actual status before God? The task of parents is to represent that to their children and the task of the church is to welcome them according to their actual status before God.

Jesus modelled that when children desired to be with him, or, when mothers desired the blessing of Christ on their children. Jesus welcomed them and said 'of such is the kingdom of heaven'.

If children already belong to the family of God, and they are taught as much in word and deed by parents and church, what then of baptism in our Baptist Church?

Many denominations bear witness concerning their children that they belong to God by baptising them when they are infants. The infants do not know about this at the time but their parents do, and the church does, and in time, the children will see other children being baptised and be taught that this is what happened to them, and so, the witness will be borne to them that they belong to God. This decision to baptise infants is a pastoral decision taken by the ancient church and carried on in many churches to the present day.

But Baptist churches, together with a number of other denominations, have seen the connection between confession of faith and baptism in the experience of the early church and preferred to baptise only those able to make their own profession of faith. Some have fought and died for this and, of course, new denominations have been formed to practise it. (Other things were in mind as well in forming these new denominations but baptism was a significant part in the decisions made.)

The confusion for Christian families in baptising confessors is that the children may be left in some doubt as to where they belong before God. Then, the children, in their eagerness to have all that their parents enjoy (which extends to a lot more things than their faith!) may be eager to be baptised at an early age. Parents also, may see early and delightful signs of faith in their children and be eager for them to be baptised.

Bearing witness to a child that they belong to God happens in many more ways than in baptism of course. Parents have not been told to baptise their children (or told not to), but they have been told to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This is where our emphasis must lie. That means surrounding them with the words and deeds of God himself as he cares for his creation. It means living in the forgiveness and renewing power of the gospel and conveying this to the children as

they are able to receive it. It means telling the children the family history as in Scripture so that they know the whole story of which they are a part. They need to know that they too are in Christ, that their sins are forgiven, that God is their Father, that God hears their prayers, that their angels behold the face of God, that they will see God in the life to come, and that they are to join with their parents in living gratefully before God—eager to hear all that he has to say to them as they grow up. In particular, because this is the only command ever addressed directly to children, they are to honour or obey their parents—as their parents are to teach them the way of God.

But what, then, of children wanting to be baptised, or parents wanting their children to be baptised? What age is appropriate, and, which children understand what they are about? When are they mature enough, and will they remain committed to what they have done?

It is interesting that the churches who baptise children choose to have a confirmation ceremony at a later age. This is usually related to a course of instruction to ensure that children understand what Christians believe, and perhaps, to ensure that they do in fact believe it.

Looking wider afield, Judaism, which circumcised its males in infancy, had a time when a child was acknowledged as an adult. What they meant by adult was that the child was now regarded as being able to understand and keep the whole law. This is now called their Bar Mitzvah, occurring around 12 years of age. It is helpful to realise also that many ancient cultures have initiation ceremonies where the adulthood of young men and women is acknowledged, or rather, given.

The significance of a culture acknowledging the time of adulthood must be clear. Children know they are growing up and love it. They know they have responsibilities and can rise to them in a remarkable way. But it is manifestly better to give them their adulthood—albeit in a graduated way—rather than have them drag it from us by revolt.

If we understand adulthood as starting at the beginning of the ‘teen’ years rather than at their end, and define it as being able to understand and keep the whole revelation of God—rather than being able to choose for themselves—we will represent to them more accurately the way they are regarded by God, the way things actually are.

I recommend that we teach our children, as members of God’s family and heirs of all his promises, that they confirm their own faith in baptism at around this age. They must continue to confirm their faith all their lives of course, but it allows their becoming adult to be defined by God rather than by the world or by their restlessness.

There is another advantage in this practice. Baptism is an act of the church before it is an act of the confessor. Jesus told his church to make learners of all nations and to baptise them. He would be with them as they did this. In other words, the chief actor at a baptism is Christ, through his obedient church. If a person has heard and believed the word of God, they are commanded to be baptised—meaning, they must confess their faith; but the church has a solemn duty to receive this believer and

baptise them into the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so, bringing them into God's name in their fleshly existence. Who can forbid water to one whom the Spirit has already acknowledged? Commending baptism to children at a certain age rather than waiting for them to 'volunteer' may assist in preserving the givenness of their faith and of the baptism which Christ wants them to have. It may remove a fear of being unbaptised that they may have.

I commend these thoughts to our parents and to us all, as a basis for further consideration. I do not think it is helpful to be dogmatic—now, or in the future. My concern is to have a pastoral practice which assists parents in teaching their children, and, if possible, some commonality in procedure which will help the children as they grow up together in our congregation.

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