



A resource by King's Community Church



Exploring baptism with your children

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How can I help my child explore baptism?

What if my child asks to be baptised?

Baptism is a central part of proclaiming the gospel and our response to it. Jesus' instructions for making disciples begin with baptism (Matthew 28:19) and when the gospel was first preached it was with the exhortation to "repent and be baptised" (Acts 2:38). That said, what should we do if our children (particularly around Frantik, The Spark and Generate age) express a desire to be baptised? Do we go ahead and baptise them or should we delay for some reason?

We always want to take care in the decision to baptise anyone, but with children we rightly feel an even greater responsibility. This booklet aims to help us think through some of the issues involved in making good decisions that will be a blessing to all and bring glory to God. Is it biblical to baptise children?

What does the bible say about baptising children?

First, you might be wondering whether it is biblical to baptise children. Since there is nothing in the bible specifically for or against it, our conclusions will be drawn from what the bible says about baptism and children.

What does the bible say about baptism?

When speaking about baptism, the clear requirements, along with a personal decision to be baptised (Acts 8:36), are repentance from sin and faith in Jesus (Acts 2:38, Ephesians 2:8, Acts 22:16). If a child is turning from their sin and trusting in Jesus as their Lord and saviour (Romans 10:9, John 3:16), then they would certainly seem to meet the main criteria for baptism. We should be wary therefore of adding an age requirement, or any other criteria, to the good news that we are saved simply and only by faith in Jesus.

What does the bible say about children?

When we look at what Jesus says about children, rather than say that they need to grow up and become more like adults in the way they enter the kingdom of God, he says quite the opposite: that, in some respects at least (see also 1 Corinthians 14:20), we need to become more like them (Matthew 18:3)! The fact that children are often more trusting, less sceptical and more concrete in their thinking, could actually be a good thing! It all depends on what they are being influenced to do and who they are trusting.

Since Jesus is not speaking specifically about baptism, our conclusions from this need to be a little tentative. However, while there is no record of Jesus instructing his followers to baptise children, they simply come to him, it should caution us about delaying baptism until someone becomes less childlike in their enthusiastic and straightforward response to the gospel.

In conclusion

Given the clear instruction to baptise repentant believers, the absence of any biblical restrictions on baptising children, along with Jesus' acceptance and example of children, it would certainly seem biblical to consider baptising them.

Three things to consider when anyone wants to be baptised

The key factors that should govern our help and council when anyone wants to be baptised are:

1. Have they made a personal decision to follow Jesus and be baptised?
2. Have they repented of their sin?
3. Are they trusting in Jesus for their salvation?

When it comes to children however, we need to consider how they might be experienced and expressed differently due to their age and maturity. The aim of the following three sections is to help you get started in that process.

1. A personal decision

Child development

As a child grows up they become more independent, make more decisions for themselves, and take increased responsibility for their choices. This dynamic is recognised in the Jewish Talmud, UK law (the age of criminal responsibility is 10) and by psychologists who study child development.

Children's discernment of reality and cognitive ability also increases with age. For example, around the age of 7 or 8 they may begin to question whether Father Christmas really exists and how he fits down the chimney! Up to around the age of 10 their thinking has been largely in concrete terms, but now they begin to handle more abstract concepts and ideas.

All this should encourage us to consider a child's sense of reality and their understanding of the gospel as we help them think through the issue of baptism.

On the one hand, a child will need to have some idea of what sin and forgiveness are, but on the other hand adults can sometimes overcomplicate things a bit. It's possible to have a real saving relationship with Jesus by the Spirit without necessarily being able to articulate all the concepts involved.

As with a newly "born again" adult, a child's understanding will be limited and developing - it's just that it is happening at a deeper and

more rapid pace. Discernment is therefore needed in judging the best time for baptism. While it may sometimes be helpful to delay baptism, in order for a child's sense of reality and understanding to develop, we don't want to teach them to disregard or disobey Jesus' clear instructions. If a child is expressing a desire to trust and obey Jesus in getting baptised we should take their request seriously.

Owning their decision

One of the concerns we may have in baptising a child is that when they grow up they look back on it and don't own it. They may not remember it that well or may not remember making the decision themselves. Worse, they might feel that they were too strongly influenced into it when perhaps they should have been encouraged to take more time over it. While these things need to be born in mind, adults can also look back on their baptism and feel that they made the decision at an emotional, unstable or vulnerable time.

It's obviously helpful if someone can remember their baptism clearly and, looking back at it, can own their decision. This is especially true for a child growing up in a Christian home who may never remember not believing in Jesus. While this is not a central consideration in the timing of baptism, it is certainly worth bearing in mind. Hopefully, things such as taking time over the decision, speaking with the child a number of times, and recording their testimony will help them remember and take responsibly for their decision.

Too easily led?

As we have said, children are sometimes more easily influenced than adults (except when it comes to eating broccoli!) While this can often be a positive thing where God works through good parents and role models to shape a child's character and thinking, it should make us consider closely the factors that are in play in a child's decision to be baptised.

It's not necessarily a bad thing if part of a child's reasons for getting baptised are to please their parents, or because a friend has recently been baptised - we hope adults are encouraged in this way by godly leaders and friends. The issue is, are these the only reasons? If there is a clear personal decision to trust and follow Jesus for His sake then other motivating factors become incidental.

A good witness to others

There is one final, if minor, point we might want to have in the back of our mind as we think things through, and that is the powerful effect baptism can have on those witnessing it. This will encourage us to ensure that a child's decision and understanding is communicated in a clear and credible way to those watching. As with adults, it can be helpful, if they are able, in their own words, to explain why they are being baptised. This may also help them take ownership of the process, especially if they keep a record of what they have said.

In conclusion

In the case of children, perhaps more than adults due to the developing nature of their mind and will, there is a careful balance to be made between encouraging them to follow Jesus in getting baptised, and making sure that it's their decision, based on a clear understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for them. With that in mind let's move on to consider the next key requirement for someone being baptised.

2. Repentance: turning away from sin

What is repentance?

Peter says “repent and be baptised” (Acts 2:38) so clearly anyone wanting to be baptised should be repentant. Repentance is a recognition that we have not lived God’s way and an inward turning of the will away from sin. Since it is a change of heart it will inevitably become visible in a person’s actions. A repentant person has had a fundamental change of mind about the right way to live and who to live for and it will show.

Not sinless perfection but a real change

It is important to realise however, that for a child as well as for an adult, repentance does not mean that we never sin again. We are still subject to wrong thinking, temptation, old habits and so on but rather than habitually giving into them we are now turning away from them. Adults get very good at hiding their faults and presenting a good front, but with children what they are really like is more on the surface.

As parents, not only do we see them at their worst when they are tired or hungry or angry, we are also in a good position to see the wonderful first fruits of God’s grace in their lives and any change of heart regarding disobedience and sin.

Perhaps they start coming to you and own up to something you have not caught them in. Or maybe they begin expressing sorrow over something they have done and seek to make amends. Of course we can’t remove our guilt by such actions, but if we are genuinely repentant there will be a desire to put things right and restore relationship were possible (Luke 19:8).

Repentance is to God

Repentance is not simply a sorrow over the painful consequences of our actions. If that is the case the heart will just look to minimise these while still going its own way. Repentance is not even just feeling bad because we have done something that parents or leaders disapprove of. It is first and foremost a heartfelt sorrow that our actions are wrong before God (Psalm 51:4). It will obviously be helpful therefore to speak to your child about why they think what they have done is wrong. Another indicator of Godly repentance is in a child's prayers as they spontaneously ask God's forgiveness for specific things they have done.

In conclusion

Repentance is obviously a necessary condition for being baptised but it is only one side of the coin as we turn from sin to faith in Jesus. Repentance itself does not have the power on its own to set us free and change our behaviour, that comes through faith so we will look at that in the next section.

3. Faith: trusting in Jesus

The meaning of baptism

Baptism is an expression of faith in Jesus (Acts 22:16). Through faith we are united to Jesus in his death for our sin and in his resurrection to eternal life. In the bible water is both a symbol of judgment and of spiritual life. The waters of baptism can be seen as a grave for our old self that was crucified with Christ. Then, as we rise up again, it expresses our new birth by the Spirit. Our sin has been washed away and we can now live a wonderful new life in Christ (Romans 6:4).

A core understanding

These truths are at the heart of baptism and anyone being baptised surely needs some appreciation of them. However, it's good to keep in mind that even an adult wanting to be baptised may not fully comprehend them.

A young child's understanding may simply be that God exists and is good, or that "Jesus is my friend and he loves me". In approaching baptism however, we will want to ensure that there is a more developed understanding of our need for Jesus' saving work and the sufficiency of it for us. If a child is repentant then the Holy Spirit will have already given them an awareness of their sin but they need to have a clear, if simple, understanding of the means of their salvation. The key truths might be summarised as follows:

- Our sin, the bad things we do, deserves God's wrath and punishment because he is good and hates evil.
- We cannot make up for our sin or get right with God by our own efforts. Doing good things can never erase our guilt for doing bad things.
- Jesus' life, death and resurrection is all we need to be forgiven and accepted by God and know him as our loving heavenly father.

Jesus' death pays for our sin and his life of obedience is credited to us.

- By simple trust in Jesus, and what he has done, these things are applied to our lives.

A swap

One way to talk about the gospel simply is to explain it as a swap. We give Jesus all our sin and he gives us all his goodness. God sees us as innocent of the things we have done wrong, and shining with Jesus' goodness. This swap happens through trusting Jesus and what he has done for us. That is something we do with our heart but it is often expressed through talking to God. Asking for his forgiveness and thanking him for Jesus.

It may also be expressed in our thinking. We might think that God doesn't love us because of something wrong we have done, but then remember that Jesus died for us so that we can be forgiven. Choosing to believe the truth that God does love you, even when you don't feel it, is an expression of faith.

Faith and knowledge

Faith is not the same as knowledge. We need to know the truth but if it's just in an intellectual sense, like memorising the times tables, then it will do us no good. Discerning genuine faith in an adult or child is about looking for a living outworking of these truths, applied in different situations.

Signs of life

A child who is born again may exhibit some of the following signs of spiritual new life:

- Hearing God for themselves
"Jesus said to me..."
- Asking to pray with you "hey, we haven't prayed tonight!"

- Responding more positively to, or taking initiative in, going to church, giving money, hearing God's word etc. "I've decided to give more money each week"
- Asking questions about the bible "What does Jesus mean when he says...?"
- Talking with some enthusiasm about what they learned in children's work "It was really fun, we learned about..."
- Asking about being baptised
"I would like to be baptised..."
- Enjoyment of and expressiveness in worship "I love singing that song..."

In conclusion

Of course, as we keep saying, these things are not necessarily all clearly present all the time in an adult's life (we may not always feel like reading our bible for example!) and these things in themselves are not guarantees that someone is a Christian. They are however, biblically based indicators of works that accompany faith and will be present to one degree or another in a child who has come to faith.

Practical next steps

What next?

Having read the above you might now be wondering what the next steps are in exploring baptism. It is a process that will involve you, your child, King's Kids team and church leaders in talking together and seeking God in order to find the best way forward. Here are a few suggestions:

Take time to talk

Talk with your child about their desire to be baptised over a period of time. Perhaps a few months or so (there are some suggested questions at the end of this booklet to help you). Don't feel under pressure to seize the moment quickly before they change their mind, rather be diligent and discerning in applying the above principles. When Jesus says we should baptise and teach people, there is a sense in which baptism comes first, but not in a restrictive way. Take the opportunity to encourage your child and help them know and enjoy a relationship with Jesus.

Talk to a King's Kids leader

Speak to the King's Kids team and ask them if they have had any conversations with your child about baptism. It's good to encourage your child to speak to a children's worker about their desire to be baptised as this will give them a context outside of their immediate family in which to express their faith. If your child has already indicated to the King's Kids team that they wish to be baptised, a conversation with you there too, may well feel like a natural next step.

Baptism is a public act done in the context of church family, under the governance of eldership, and an adult wanting to be baptised will be making that decision in consultation with church leaders. It is

good to honour a child's desire to be baptised in the same way, and a children's leader will want to draw their team leader in as things move forward.

Give time for others to be involved

It's likely that as a church we will want to take a bit of time over this decision as we take seriously our responsibility to administer baptism correctly. We will be considering all the above just as you have, wanting to move forward in it together. Any time taken in this is not a reflection on the genuineness of Jesus' saving work in a child's life, but rather a desire to serve them and you well in this key decision.

Look for the next opportunity to be baptised

Finally, when you and the leader involved are happy to proceed, we can look for the next appropriate opportunity for your child to be baptised. At that point it's helpful to talk a bit about the practicalities of it, answer any more questions they may have, and help them prepare a short testimony to share.

Conclusion

Since baptism is not just an empty symbol but has power, as an expression of faith in Jesus, to propel us in to a life of following Jesus, it's good to get baptised as soon as possible. While that is true of both children and adults, there are some particular things to consider when a child is wanting to get baptised and we hope that this booklet has helped you in that.

On the one hand the rapidly developing nature of a child's mind causes us to take extra care that there has been a genuine heart change and the beginnings of new spiritual life. On the other, it is also a good reason not to step back and let the world disciple them in its counterfeit set of identities, and initiations.

If your child asks about being baptised, then rejoice! It's a great opportunity to talk more about Jesus and the gospel. Take time to talk

with them and others about it as we explore together whether the time is approaching for them to publically identify themselves as a forgiven follower of Jesus.

Appendix A

Resources to use in talking to your child about baptism.

A helpful resource considering some of the pros and cons with a simple activity sheet at the end can be found here: www.truthforkids.com/child-baptism

Some pointers that may help you discern a living faith in your child can be found here: www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-your-child-a-christian

Finally, here are some concrete questions that may help you talk more about baptism with your child:

1. People being baptised often give some reasons why they want to be baptised. What do you think you would say before you were baptised?
2. They also tell a bit of their story about how they got to know and trust Jesus. What would you say?
3. If you get baptised, someone will ask you if you have trusted in Jesus as your Lord and saviour. What does it mean to you for Jesus to be your "Lord" and "saviour"?
4. When you are baptised you will go under the water and then come back up again. Why is water used in baptism? Why do you go under it and come back up again?



Making disciples of Jesus who

Gather in friendship and family

Grow in character and gifting

Go in mission and service

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