

Children, Baptism, Church Membership, & the Lord's Supper at SPBC

What is baptism?

Baptism is a physical sign that publicly identifies a person with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. *See* Rom. 6:1-4; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 3:21-22. Baptism expresses the idea of union with Christ by being “baptized into” Christ and his death. *See* Gal. 3:27. Because baptism reflects our unity with Christ, it also reflects that we are united with other believers in his body, the church. *See* Eph. 4:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:13. We believe that “the regular mode of baptism is by immersion in water.” *See* SPBC Statement of Faith, Article XIV.

Conclusion: Baptism is a visible sign of Christ's death and resurrection and of our union with him by faith.

Who are the proper subjects of baptism?

The Bible teaches that baptism is for believers in Christ. Baptism is always connected with faith in the New Testament. *See, e.g.*, Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38-41; 8:12; 18:8. And the New Testament authors assume that those who are baptized have been truly saved. *See, e.g.*, Rom. 6:4; Gal. 3:25-27; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 3:21-22. Accordingly, we will only baptize someone who makes a credible profession of faith in Christ.

We require a *credible* profession for at least two reasons. First, because Scripture teaches that baptism is for Christians, it seems most faithful to Scripture to determine, as far as reasonably possible, that the person being baptized is actually a Christian. It would make no sense, and would likely be harmful, to baptize a person we were not convinced was actually a Christian. Second, we will nearly always be taking the newly baptized person into membership in our church, meaning the elders will immediately become responsible for that person's spiritual welfare. *See* Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2. It is therefore important to discern a person's spiritual state before baptizing him and bringing him into membership.

One way to gauge the credibility of someone's profession of faith is to ask the person to articulate the gospel and explain their conversion to the elders or the church as a whole. Saving faith results in a person publicly confessing Christ. *See* Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9-10; 1 John 4:15. And a Christian should be always ready to explain the gospel and its effect on his life. *See* 1 Pet. 3:15. We will ordinarily try to gauge the credibility of a person's confession through an interview with an elder, and we will later ask that person to give his testimony to the church before being baptized.

Other ways to gauge the credibility of a person's profession include looking for spiritual fruit in their lives, such as humility, hatred of sin, and love for others. We do not, however, require professing believers to prove their faith by a long period of spiritual growth. The examples of baptism in the New Testament appear to follow immediately upon conversion. *See* Acts 2:41; 8:12, 35-38; 10:44-48; 16:13-15; 16:33; 18:8. And the New Testament does not seem to teach that a person must attain a certain level of Christian maturity or endure for any period or through any trials in order to be baptized. Thus, although some delay may be necessary to evaluate whether a person has truly

understood the gospel, repented, and trusted in Christ, it ordinarily makes sense for the outward sign of baptism to follow soon after the inward change that it represents.

Conclusion: The proper subjects of baptism are those who make a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

How does baptism relate to the local church?

Baptism symbolizes our unity not only with Christ, but also with his body, the church. *See* 1 Cor. 12:12-13. The church is made up of all true believers in Christ throughout the world. But the universal church comprises and works through local churches, which are bodies of believers united by geographical proximity, partaking in the Lord's Supper, and submission to the discipline of the specific body.

Because baptism signifies a person's entrance into fellowship in the church, it is appropriate for baptism to be administered by the local church. A person is not baptized *into* the local church, but "into Christ," Gal. 3:27, and, by extension, the universal church, 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27. Therefore, a person need not be baptized whenever he joins a new church, and we will accept into membership those who were baptized as believers by other local churches.

The Bible teaches that believers should unite themselves to a local church. *See* Heb. 10:25. It is only in the context of a local church that a Christian can fulfill certain biblical commands, such as teaching the word of God, (Col. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:1-2), corporate worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), submission to elders (1 Pet. 5:5), church discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:11), and Christian edification and accountability (1 Thess. 5:14; Heb. 10:24-25). Our church seeks to obey these commands relating to church membership in which by formally covenanting with each other to fulfill these and other Christian obligations. *See* SPBC Church Covenant. Because a new believer should commit himself to a local church, we will not, except in rare and unusual circumstances, baptize anyone without also taking him into membership in our congregation.

Conclusion: The local church has authority to affirm a believer's credible profession through baptism, and baptized believers should unite themselves to a local church.

How does baptism relate to the Lord's Supper?

As baptism signifies the believer's initiation into the church, so the Lord's Supper is the ordinance by which the believer expresses ongoing connection to the body. In the Lord's Supper we both proclaim the Lord's death until he comes and celebrate our ongoing fellowship with the church. *See* 1 Cor. 10:17. To be admitted to the Lord's Supper is a sign of one's good standing in the local church, and to be barred from the Lord's table is a means of corrective church discipline. *See* 1 Cor. 5:11.

Because of what each symbolizes, baptism logically precedes participation in the Lord's Supper. Thus, our statement of faith says that baptism "is pre-requisite to the privileges of a church relation and to the Lord's Supper. SPBC Statement of Faith, Article XIV. And because churches should deny the Lord's Supper to those who are in unrepentant sin, no one should take the Lord's Supper unless he has committed himself to the accountability and potential discipline of a local

congregation. At SPBC, we welcome to the table both members in good standing of our church and baptized members in good standing of other gospel-believing churches.

Conclusion: No one should take the Lord's Supper without being committed to the accountability and potential discipline of a local church.

Should believing children be baptized?

Although the Bible does not directly address the baptism of believing children, it is clear that children can be truly converted. Jesus said that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Mark 10:15. And Paul's commands to children in the church seem to assume that the hearers are believers. *See* Col. 3:20 ("Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."); Eph. 6:1 ("Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."). Thus, there is no reason to believe that children are not proper subjects of baptism if they make a credible profession of faith in Christ. Indeed, believing children may have been included in the "household" baptisms recorded in the New Testament. *See* Acts 16:14-15, 30-33; 1 Cor. 1:16.

Gauging a child's profession of faith, however, can be more complicated than gauging an adult's. Children may feel pressure to make a profession of faith because their parents, pastors, and peers (quite rightly) desire them to be saved. Children may also fail to understand the cost of following Christ because they have not had to deal with a variety of trials and temptations that adults face. Children are often exposed to oversimplified gospel presentations that encourage them, for example, to "ask Jesus into their heart," without adequately explaining biblical concepts of sin, repentance, faith, obedience, and the cost of following Jesus. And children's immaturity or shyness may prevent them from clearly explain the gospel to church elders or the congregation, making it more difficult to discern whether they are truly saved.

We do not, however, believe these difficulties are insurmountable or justify categorically denying baptism to young believers. Many children, especially those in their teen years, can clearly articulate the gospel and give evidence of a changed heart. Accordingly, when older children profess faith and seek to be baptized, we will rejoice with them and enter into a process of assessing the credibility of their faith. This process may take longer than with an adult and will ordinarily include a series of meetings with an elder. (See paper, *Preparing Children for Baptism and Church Membership at SPBC*). The goal will not be simply to delay baptism or to see years of spiritual growth, but rather to gather enough evidence to see that the profession is genuine. Once the child's parents and the elders can collectively affirm the child's profession, we will move forward to baptize the child.

We will also welcome into covenant membership any believing children that we baptize. The New Testament does not have a category for baptized believers who are not also members of a local church and subject to potential church discipline. And we see no biblical reason why older children cannot take on the rights and responsibilities of church members.

Conclusion: We will baptize and bring into church membership older children who make a credible profession of faith and desire to be baptized.