

The Sacraments

Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Children

1. What is a sacrament?

A sacrament is a blessing from Christ which is a sign (a picture) and a seal (a mark of being set apart) given to believers in order to teach and assure us of our salvation. The Lord ordained two sacraments: baptism (Matt. 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23), also known as communion. Participation in the sacraments does not bring salvation; this comes only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 2:16).

2. What is baptism?

Baptism is the sacrament which uniquely depicts initiation into the Christian life, portraying the believer's union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). It points to the beginning of the Christian life (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38) and displays one's commitment to Christ, a commitment which will be lived out in the local church.

"Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church."

— John Calvin

3. When should a child be baptized?

Only when he or she can provide a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41; Gal. 3:27).

4. What is a believable profession of faith?

Anyone professing Jesus Christ as Lord should be able to:

- Communicate the content of the gospel as well as an expression of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.
- Evidence godly sorrow over sin, followed by repentance which leads to the fruit of the Spirit.
- Examine himself and the condition of his soul (1 Cor. 11:27-32).
- Demonstrate a willingness to turn away from the world and instead live a life keeping God's commands and loving God's church (1 John 2:15-17; 5:1-5).
- Exhibit fruit in his life which proceeds from regeneration (Gal. 5:22-23).

5. Does God save young children?

Yes! God can and does convert young children (Rom. 10:9-13, Act 2:21). However, we also recognize that the nature of children, their intellectual immaturity, the frequency with which they change their opinions, the ease with which they can be influenced, and for many, their limited exposure to worldly things, makes it exceedingly difficult to discern with certainty whether a child is truly converted. The younger a child is, the more difficult this becomes.

6. At what age should children be baptized? Is there a minimum?

The Bible prescribes no minimum age for baptism; it is silent on this subject. Because it is difficult to discern when a child's profession of faith is truly believable, we believe it is generally wise to wait until a child who professes faith in Christ is in his or her mid to late teens before baptism.

7. What is the role of the parent in evaluating a child’s readiness to be baptized?

Parents bear primary responsibility for the condition of their children’s souls. They are to:

- Teach their children God’s commands (Deut. 6:7).
- Train their children up in the way they should go (Pro. 22:6).
- Bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

At the same time, elders bear primary responsibility for administering the sacraments within the local church and for caring for the souls of those who receive them. For these reasons, parents should evaluate the readiness of their children for baptism and should actively seek to involve their elders in this process. Parents know their children best and are ideally situated to discern the fruit of repentance in their children. (Note: the observations of others—in community group, trusted friends, and others in the church—will also be extremely helpful in this process.)

A parent who believes his child is ready to be baptized should then meet with an elder so that elder can verify the parent’s evaluation. Elder, parent, and child should all be confident in the readiness of the child to move forward with baptism.

8. If my child said a prayer and invited Jesus into his heart, isn’t that enough to be baptized?

No. The language of “inviting Jesus into your heart” is not biblical, ignores critical features of the gospel such as justification by faith, and fails to call forth repentance. Experience reveals that it is relatively easy to persuade young children to invite Jesus into their hearts, but many who have made such a commitment or prayed such a prayer later show no evidence of regeneration.

9. What is the Lord’s Supper?

The Lord’s Supper is the sacrament which uniquely depicts continuing fellowship with Christ, a repeated act whereby the believer remembers the Lord’s death and renews his commitment to participation in the Lord and his church (1 Cor. 11:27-34). In eating and drinking the believer is nourished and strengthened to grow in grace (1 Cor. 10:16).

10. How do baptism and the Lord’s Supper differ?

“Baptism [is] an ordinance that is only observed once by each person, as a sign of the beginning of his or her Christian life...The Lord’s Supper [is] an ordinance that is to be observed repeatedly throughout our Christian lives, as a sign of continuing fellowship with Christ.”

— Wayne Grudem

“Baptism is our initial symbolic act of obedience that identifies us as disciples, protecting the regeneracy of church membership as we enter the front door of the church. Participation in the Lord’s Supper is a continuing symbolic act of unity and fellowship in Christ that identifies us as those who are continuing members of the church in good standing.”

— Mark Dever

11. When should a child receive the Lord's Supper?

Only after he or she has made a believable profession of faith in Christ and has been baptized. See following question.

12. Should unbaptized children take the Lord's Supper?

We do not endorse this practice because it obscures the meaning of the sacraments. First, it confuses the order of the sacraments, placing the rite of initiation after the rite of ongoing participation. Second, it obscures the purpose of the sacraments (to teach and assure believers of their salvation) by admitting a child to one while withholding the other. Third, leading an unregenerate child into receiving the Lord's Supper offers false assurance to the child, potentially creating a dangerous stumbling block to the repentance and faith they must demonstrate in order to be saved.

13. What do I say to a child who thinks he or she is converted if I don't think he is ready for baptism or the Lord's Supper?

Any child professing Christ should be the object of enthusiastic encouragement. Expressions of faith and evidences of repentance are gracious moments which parents would be wise to seize upon with positive words. At the same time, many are the children who have at some moment expressed faith in Christ but who now show no evidence of that faith. Thus we recommend responding with something like this: "I'm thrilled that you are repenting and trusting in Christ. More than anything we want to know that God has really changed your life. The way we will know is if you continue repenting and trusting and if you act like a true Christian—that is, you have a new heart that loves to obey God. Sometimes we do not know that until we are in a place where it really costs us to be a Christian. Maybe you will not know it until you face the choice between your friends and Christ. Let's see what God does. We'll watch and pray about it. As questions come up, we'll talk."

14. Are there any problems with waiting too long to baptize a truly converted child?

We believe the sacraments, when administered rightly and received by faith, are not only symbols but actual means by which God meets with and confirms his work in his people through the Spirit. Through them the Holy Spirit instructs and assures the believer of his union with Christ. For this reason it is unwise to withhold them from a true believer. However, this concern will have to be balanced with the dangers of prematurely allowing participation in the sacraments and potentially giving false assurance to a child who is not regenerate. This calls for parental leadership. The process of discussing these issues provides many opportunities to study Scripture together, trust God together and pray together. The following advice is helpful, "Your child will not be any less saved by your judicious waiting for more substantial evidences, if God has indeed performed a work of grace in the first place" (Gundersen p. 23). Your elders stand ready to provide counsel and support in discussing these issues and caring for your children in the process of arriving at these wise decisions.

15. If I have a child who is unbaptized but receiving the Lord's Supper, how do I go about removing this privilege?

This situation provides wonderful opportunities for humble parental leadership. A parent who has an unbaptized child who is receiving the Lord's Supper must first develop biblical convictions about why this practice is wrong. We encourage parents in this situation to be humble and take responsibility for any confusion or difficulties this has caused the child. Parents should then seek to lead their child through a process of understanding the nature of conversion and the sacraments which will result in appropriate practices concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper. Situations like this are ideal opportunities for parents to draw support, encouragement, and counsel not just from elders but also from others in the church community.

16. Why not baptize infants?

Nowhere does Scripture instruct us to baptize infants, nor does it describe infants being baptized. Baptism in the New Testament is exclusive to believers, to those who have repented from their sins and placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Because infants are not able to do this, they are not believers and should not be baptized.

17. What do I do if my child was baptized as an infant?

The biblical pattern is for those who have come to faith in Christ to then be baptized. Thus we urge anyone who has turned to Christ to be baptized by immersion, regardless of whether they were baptized as infants. We say this with deep respect for our brothers and sisters who practice infant baptism.

18. What if my child was baptized at an early age, and now I don't think he was really converted until later; should he be baptized again?

If a child was baptized as an unbeliever, this is not a biblical baptism, and he or she should now be baptized as a believer.

19. What is the role of the church in evaluating a child's readiness to be baptized and receive the Lord's Supper?

We believe the administration of the sacraments belongs to local churches and that God places elders over churches to lead and care for the people as a shepherd would a flock (Heb. 13:17, Acts 20:28). Elders have a unique charge from God to preserve the purity of the church and maintain the integrity of membership. On the last day they will give an account to God for those given into their charge, whether children or adults. For this reason elders must actively and carefully oversee the administration of the sacraments and should be involved in evaluating a child's readiness to be baptized and subsequently receive the Lord's Supper.1
"Childhood Conversion" by Jim Elliff, page 7.

For further study:

- Gundersen, Dennis. *Your Child's Profession of Faith*. Amityville, NY, Calvary Press, 1994.
- "Childhood Conversion" by Jim Elliff, <http://www.ccwtoday.org/article/childhood-conversion/>
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Leicester, England, InterVarsity Press, 1994. On baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- "Why Can't I Have a Snack Like Everyone Else?" by David Michael, <http://www.hopeingod.org/document/thoughts-children-and-lords-supper>
- Whitney, Donald. *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian?* Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1994.
- McNeill, John T. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4 chapters 14, 15 & 17. Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, MCMLX.