



Overview (the general "baptist" position)

Believer's baptism (occasionally called credobaptism, from the Latin word *credo*) is the Christian practice of water baptism in obedience to Christ's command (Matthew 28:19). A person is baptized on the basis of his or her credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and baptism signifies admission into the local church.

It may be contrasted to infant baptism (paedobaptism, from the Greek *paido* meaning "child"), in which infants or young children of believing parents may be baptized. Because infants cannot hear or believe the gospel message, neither can they repent or profess Christ as the Son of God. Saving grace and church membership cannot be imparted or transferred from one person to another (such as from parent to child) by sacraments such as baptism.

Believer's baptism itself has no saving effect, but is rather a matter of first obedience to Christ, symbolically representative of the inner conversion that has already taken place in the person being baptized.

Particulars to a Biblical Understanding of Baptism

Baptism is a one-time physical act in which the church immerses one in water who gives genuine evidence of regeneration and conversion to Christ. This serves as an outward, public testimony of God's work of conversion in one's life, symbolizing to the individual, the church, and the world his entrance into the family of God and the fellowship of the church (Acts 2:41, 8:12, 10:47)

Baptism is directly connected with God's work of regeneration and the gospel ministry, yet baptism neither establishes nor guarantees salvation. But it is a command of Christ for every believer (Mt 28:18-20)

Since baptism is understood to be a first and initiatory act of discipleship in Jesus Christ (Acts 16:33), the New Testament examples suggest that baptism "was only administered to those who gave a believable profession of faith, ...and should be given only to those who *show evidence* of having begun the Christian life (Acts 2:41, 10:47-48)." (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 970)

Because baptism represents a visible entrance into the full fellowship of the church, it should be performed within the public gathering of the church wherever possible, so the whole church can be witnesses of this event, rejoice with the one being baptized, and give a visible welcome to him. Though not required by Scripture, the church has historically considered it wise for the administration of baptism to be by church leadership to ensure those being baptized have a right understanding of its meaning, and to safeguard baptism from abuse

Baptism itself conveys upon the individual and the church a special grace of encouraging all by:

- Being a visible demonstration of the real power of God in individual lives
- A reminder to all present of their own union with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection
- By allowing tangible experiencing of what is by nature a spiritual reality
- Allowing the church to experience a special joy and fellowship along with the one being baptized
- Providing the normal grace attending all instances of Christian obedience

Since baptism itself is not a "major" doctrine within Scripture (not dealing with nature of God, Christ, salvation, etc.), it should not be one over which believers separate from one another (excepting those who view baptism as part of the means of one's salvation). However, because it is a major part of how a particular local church functions together, there should be an agreed position and practice among each local congregation.

Particulars for The Bible Church of Owasso

- Necessary for membership
- Mode is immersion
- Administered by Elders of the church (usually in a Sunday service)
- Administered based upon recommendation by the board of elders after their discerning a credible profession of faith through a written testimony and personal conversation
- It is our general practice to delay the baptism of children until around the age of 12 (see *Issues Related to the Baptism of Children*)

Issues Relating to the Baptism of Children

Some General Statements

1. It is the obvious command of Christ that the church should actively proclaim the gospel to all (including children of all ages).
2. Regeneration is a supernatural act of God that is tied to the understanding and reception of the gospel message preached, and therefore can occur at the earliest moment a child can understand the truths contained. Once born again, no matter how initially difficult to discern by others or even by oneself, this work cannot be undone, lost, or diminished.
3. Certainty of salvation is the special topic of the book of 1st John, in which assurance is not only given in terms of "sincerity of profession" but primarily in terms of evaluating that profession by one's consistent obedience to it. See also 2 Cor 13:5, where the standard of testing whether or not you were in the faith included following "apostolic" teaching (v. 6).
4. "Household baptisms" in the NT (Acts 10:2,44-48; 16:33-34; 18:8) - there is no conclusive evidence one way or the other about whether young children were included in these households, but it is certain that those who were baptized had the capability to hear, understand, and receive the message preached (Acts 2:41, 16:32). It is also possible within the language of "baptized, he and all his household" that there were some within that household who were too young to be expected to hear and receive, and therefore were not baptized with those who did (similar to the way you might say, "our family went to a movie", even though the youngest child was left with Grandma...).
5. We do not believe that the baptism of infants conveys some special grace upon them, nor do we believe that it predisposes them to a reception of the gospel later in life. In this, we do not believe that Scripture teaches that baptism is a replacement for OT circumcision as a sign of their entering into the "covenant family of God." (i.e., we are "baptistic" - practicing believer's baptism)
6. In answering the question of how old should children be before they are baptized, Wayne Grudem seems to sum up much sound pastoral wisdom when he replies, "...old enough to give a *believable* profession of faith." (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 982)

Cautions Related to the Nature of Childhood

It seems wise for the church to be cautiously patient in considering the baptism of young children for 3 primary reasons relating to the nature

of children in general.

1. General immaturity

Children must naturally grow over time in their ability to grasp the significance of abstract concepts that are necessary components of the gospel message (sin, forgiveness, guilt, nature of Christ, eternity, dying to self, repentance from sin, etc.). Though they may understand the words or examples offered, often a true understanding comes gradually with intellectual maturing. Scripture presents the humility of children as a model for faith (Mark 10:15), but also describes the thinking of children as undeveloped and suspect (1 Cor 13:11, 14:20).

The ability to recognize the reality of a child's conversion often does not occur until he is at the point where he begins to take steps of independent devotion to Jesus Christ. While this is certainly not impossible for a young child, it is near impossible to recognize (not the devotion itself, but whether or not that devotion is independent or simply an innocent mirroring of the parent's devotion).

2. General instability in decision-making and commitments

Jesus uses the natural indecisiveness of children playing in the marketplace to condemn the fickle crowds in His day (Mt 11:16-19). Isaiah uses the term "capricious children" to describe the arbitrary nature with which children make decisions. It is not that they cannot make a decision and stick to it, but it is just that young childhood is characterized by fickleness. This makes it very difficult for parents and church leaders alike to determine the true nature of a child's profession of faith.

3. General susceptibility to being deceived (both internally and externally)

The general immaturity in thinking and fickleness of heart that characterizes childhood makes young children characteristically susceptible to being misled (Eph 4:14). Of all people, the young child is the least equipped to know his own heart in this matter. He can easily be swayed by his own deceptive heart as he tries desperately to make others around him be pleased with him (Jer 17:9), or simply falling in line with what the parents believe and expect.

We need to understand (for both children and adults) that simply believing the facts of Christianity are true is not equal with conversion, and that self-deception, once believed, is not easily changed. Parents and church leaders need to help children avoid this deception by instructing them diligently in the truths of the gospel, and in the process avoid the natural tendency to attempt to extract a decision that may not be coming from God. We

can rest in the fact that salvation essentially comes by a work of God in the heart (John 6:37) in the presence of the truths of the gospel message (Rom 10:17), and that a profession is an unstoppable outward response to that inward work. John 6:37 also teaches us that true conversion will manifest itself undeniably over time.

Conclusions to be Drawn

1. Due to the factors mentioned above, since a child's profession of faith is very difficult to discern, it seems wise to establish an age at which much of this reason for caution is removed. Though a 4 year old might profess faith in Christ, and be able to state his own sin, Christ's death on his behalf, etc., it would be highly unlikely due to his stage in life that any (even parents) would be able to "validate" this profession of faith as representing genuine conversion. Therefore, since some age (or better, "condition") must be set in which we can say a child has a "credible" profession of faith necessary for baptism.
2. Both the Scriptures and nature suggest that the general immaturity, fickleness, and proneness to deception of childhood begin to disappear as a child approaches the teen years (true for some earlier, true for some later).
3. Since the Bible does not give us a precise age at which we should baptize children, all that we can biblically infer is that it seems wise to wait until a child nears the age of 12 to consider baptism, even in cases where the child is certain of their conversion and demonstrates a heart to follow Christ earlier than that. The decision to wait is not based on the individual child himself, but based upon the nature of childhood in general compared with the necessity of the "credibility" of one's profession.

We also see several natural benefits to waiting until this time...

Benefits of Waiting

1. Significance for the child - It is not uncommon for those baptized in young childhood to have "fuzzy" memories of their baptism (not so much of the event itself, but of the reasoning behind why they wanted to be baptized at that time). As we grow older, we often discount or distrust decisions we made as small children. Teens and young adults are much more likely to embrace the decision and commitments they know they made independently. Therefore it can greatly benefit the child to delay their baptism until they can more fully embrace the commitment that is represented by this public declaration.
2. Confidence for the church - The church as a whole gains a degree of certainty as to the true nature of conversion of the individual if baptism is delayed until after the natural instability of childishness begins to disappear. This also preserves the ordinance of baptism in the eyes of all as a truly *independent* step of

devotion to Christ, leaving no room for any to question its validity.

3. Protection for unconverted child - In the case of a young child whose desire to be baptized is simply a response in immaturity to what their "church culture" expects of them, delaying baptism serves as a form of protection against the church's implicit validation of what is not yet a completed work of God in their conversion. In this way, far from hindering a child from coming to Christ, we are actually preventing one of these "little ones" from mistaking as conversion what may only be the beginnings of the work of grace in their hearts.
4. Promotes True Evaluation of one's own conversion - if properly guided (see below), this "waiting" time may actually draw one truly converted closer to his Savior, as he pursues visible evidences of his devotion to the Lord (i.e., sanctification)
5. Takes the Pressure Off - For a young child within the church with a heart sensitive to spiritual things, they can experience a constant pressure from the pulpit, family members, siblings, Sunday School teachers, and even Scripture about the necessity of baptism for those who follow Christ. These "adult-level" pressure points may overwhelm a young heart sensitive to spiritual things, and unnaturally make them feel they must be baptized right away. Yet the reality may be that they are just beginning to understand the things of God, and it may be premature for them to take this decisive step, even before they have truly contemplated the real decision at hand (Luke 14:28).

By establishing a point for the child to look forward to actually allows his formative years to be characterized by a time of pursuing his personal relationship to Christ and anticipating the day when he can be baptized, and removes the constant pressure of making an outward profession in baptism. If a child desires baptism and the church leaders have determined that it is best to wait, the child has honored Christ by desiring baptism, and further honors Christ by submitting himself to the church's authority to determine when is the most appropriate time for him to be baptized.

Dangers of Waiting

1. The child develops a sense of complacency about the things of God or begins to consider baptism as "unimportant" - Parent's should carefully instruct their children that it is precisely because baptism is such an important step that they are waiting to see the true fruits of repentance (Gal 5:22-24, Acts 26:20).

2. Disobedience to the Scriptural command to be baptized - There is a tension between the necessity to *baptize* all those who give a credible profession of faith, and necessity to baptize all those who give a *credible* profession of faith. Where any two commands of Scripture seem to be in tension, the elders must determine for the church as a whole how to wisely obey both in a way that best upholds the intent of each requirement. Such is the case in relation to the baptism of young children.

How to answer a young child who expresses faith or desires baptism

1. Encourage him that this is a positive step of desiring obedience to the Lord
2. Respond that you are thrilled that he is repenting of his sins and trusting Christ, and you encourage him to continue to do so, for this is the true mark of one who is a Christian. And that before one is baptized, it is important to know for certain that God is at work in you. That sometimes it is difficult to know until you face some difficult trials in life, where you on your own have to choose to obey Christ rather than follow the world. Let's watch and see what God does in your life as you face some of those trials. We'll pray and work through them together, and talk about it more as you grow up.
3. Use this "waiting" time as a time to regularly discuss with him the true nature of conversion, obedience, how the Scriptures say we gain confidence in the genuineness of our faith, the work of the Holy Spirit, etc.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. *This concept is not familiar to me - Do other churches handle this issue this way?*
Many Baptist and independent churches have very similar positions - John Piper, John MacArthur, Mark Dever, Jim Elliff, etc.
2. *Are there some resources I can read?*
Childhood Conversion by Jim Elliff
(<http://www.ccwonline.org/cconv.html>)
Your Child's Profession of Faith by Dennis Gunderson are the two best resources for thinking through this issue.
3. *What if I or my child has already been baptized at a younger age?*
As a child matures, they naturally question everything through top to bottom many times. Parents should sensitively guide them through this process. If their baptism was from a sincere desire in their heart and after what appears to be a genuine conversion by God, then

this will become clear to the maturing child. If as the child matures toward the teen years and questions their previous conversion or baptism, accept that this may be a normal part of the growing up years, and it may be appropriate to be re-baptized. Each case is unique.

4. *How does this relate to children who have professed faith taking the Lord's Supper?*

We practice "open communion" in that we do not restrict the taking of communion to members only. This means that it is upon each person's conscience to determine their own fitness to participate in this memorial and proclamation that the blood and body of the Lord Jesus is their highest treasure in life, like unto their necessary food. Given our discussion as to the caution to be exercised in dealing with a young child's conversion, we entrust this decision ultimately to the parents as to whether or not they believe their children should be taking the Lord's Supper.

5. Yet we would give this counsel in this matter...

a. It seems that the participation in the Lord's Supper is very closely tied to Baptism, both being commanded ordinances for all those who are members of His Church. So that if Baptism is delayed, so would be the participation in the Lord's Supper (it would be difficult to explain to your 9 year old why they could take the Lord's Supper, but that you are wisely waiting on their baptism). Therefore we would recommend that you allow actual participation in the Lord's Supper only after they are baptized. But in the meantime, that you clearly explain to them what the communion table symbolizes, and if they have professed faith, encourage them to use this time to meditate on the Lord's death for them...

b. If your children are already in the custom of taking the Lord's Supper, and you realize that this may not be best, you may be in the situation of needing to sit down and explain your reasoning. Though they may not fully understand at the time, children generally submit to the authority of parents on matters like this. Trust that as they gain maturity, they will come to understand why you made this decision.