

The Sacraments – Questions and Answers for Parents

1. What is a sacrament (or ordinance)?

A sacrament, or ordinance, 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, also known as communion (Lk 22.19; 1 Cor 11.23-26). 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?

A child should 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
- Demonstrate godly sorrow over sin, followed by repentance which leads to the fruit of the Spirit
- Have the ability to examine himself and the condition of His soul (1 Cor 11.27-32)
- Have demonstrated a willingness to turn away from the world and instead live a life keeping God's command and loving God's church (1 John 2.15-17; 5.1-5)
- Exhibit in his life fruit 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; Acts 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 high confidence 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(s) 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 (Pr 22.6)
- Bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6.4)

At the same time, pastors 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 (and especially fathers) would be wise to seek input and involvement of others in evaluating the readiness of their children for baptism. Parents know their children best and are ideally situated to discern the fruit of repentance in their children, but the observations of others—in Care Group, trusted friends, and others in the church—is also extremely helpful in this process. Additionally, your pastors are available to help you discern and confidently decide whether the time is right for a child to be baptized.

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 and proclaims the Lord's death and renews his commitment to participation in the Lord and his church. In eating and drinking the believer is nourished and strengthened to grow in grace.

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

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

A child should receive the Lord's Supper only after he or she has made a believable profession of faith in Christ and has been baptized.

12. Should non-baptized 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 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 believe you are being called to faith in Christ! That is an answer to our prayers, and we are looking forward to celebrating your new life in Christ with you and the church. We are going to pray and talk with some other people that we trust to decide when it would be best for you to be baptized. That will help us to make a wise decision."

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 pastors stand ready to provide counsel and support in discussing these issues and caring for your children in the process of arriving at wise decisions.

15. If I have a child who is not baptized (or baptized as an unbeliever) but receiving the Lord’s Supper, must I withdraw this privilege?

If your child has been baptized, but is showing signs that he or she might not really be a believer, this provides wonderful opportunities for humble parental leadership. A parent who has led his non-baptized child into receiving the Lord’s Supper must first develop biblical convictions about why this practice is wrong. Then he must humble himself before his child, taking responsibility for any confusion or difficulties this has caused. He will then seek to lead his child through a process of understanding about 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 pastors but also from others in the church community.

16. Why not baptize infants?

Scripture nowhere instructs us to baptize infants, nor does it describe infants being baptized. The baptism of Christ himself serves as a model of an informed, mature declaration of that into which God had called him. An informed, mature declaration for believers would include repentance from sin and the placing of faith in Jesus Christ. Because infants are not able to do this, they 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 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 your child has been baptized, but is showing signs that he or she might not really be a believer, this provides wonderful opportunities for humble parental leadership. A parent who has had his non-believing child be baptized must first develop biblical convictions about why this practice is wrong. Then he must humble himself before his child, taking responsibility for any confusion or difficulties this has caused. He will then seek to lead his child through a process of understanding about 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 pastors but also from others in the church community.

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

The pastors understand that we have a great responsibility to lead and care for the people of the church as a shepherd would a flock (Heb 13.17; Acts 20.28). Pastors have a unique charge from God to preserve the purity of the church and maintain the integrity of membership. In light of this, and in an effort to serve parents in the church, the pastors encourage parents to draw upon them for assistance in deciding if children are ready to receive the ordinances.

For further study:

- Gundersen, Dennis. *Your Child's Profession of Faith*. Amityville, NY; Calvary Press, 1994.
- "Childhood Conversion" by Jim Elliff, www.ccwonline/cconv.html
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Leicester, England; InterVarsity Press, 1994.
- "Why Can't I Have a Snack Like Everyone Else?" by David Michael, www.bbcmpls.org/childministries/snack.htm
- Whitney, Donald. *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian?* Colorado Springs; NavPress, 1994.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (John McNeill, ed.) book 4, chs. 14, 15, & 17. Philadelphia; The Westminster Press, 1960.

Thanks to Mark Mullery and the pastoral team at Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax for their excellent work in preparing this document. It has been adapted for our use by their permission.