

Forbid
THEM NOT

Rethinking the Baptism
and Church Membership
of Children and Young People

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Forward by Pastor Fred Malone, Ph.D.

F O R W A R D

Twenty-five years ago it was necessary for me to write a pamphlet entitled, “Toward a Biblical Theology of Teaching Preschoolers” because most church literature then available did not teach that children are sinners under God’s wrath and in need of salvation in Christ. In short, the gospel was being withheld from the children. Having thus addressed the issue of evangelizing children, the question for me became, “How can we know WHEN to baptize children and young people?” Such questions have often concerned Baptist churches, especially when our paedobaptist brethren wrongly accuse us of believing in adult baptism exclusively, versus infant baptism. The issue deserves our prayerful attention. Each pastor and church inevitably deals with this matter both in their own practice and in accepting membership transfers of children and youth from other churches whose practices may differ. So this is most definitely a valid issue for the local church. It also carries practical implications for the development of unity in an association of churches.

Pastor Ted Christman takes up the question of baptizing children and young people in Baptist churches. Clearly, he strongly opposes the premature baptism practiced in many Baptist churches. He also argues for close examination of a young person’s confession of faith and life by discerning parents and elders. Moreover, he offers sound questions and principles for so doing. However, appealing to “the baptism of disciples alone” from the Great Commission, he also pleads for charity toward children and young people in accepting their good confession toward baptism - the same charity we must give to adults. And he practices charity in his argument toward those who may differ with him.

In a conciliatory fashion, Pastor Christman draws out a principle from our Lord’s correcting the disciples for “hindering” the children from coming to Him. He then lovingly challenges the set practice of some churches not to baptize until a certain age. Rather, he argues, if a child or young person exhibits a sound confession and reasonable evidence of a life of faith, he or she should be considered for baptism and church

membership in the same way as adults. This our brother argues as a necessity from the Great Commission. I might add that Acts 2:38-41 gives the same promise of baptism upon genuine repentance both to “you and your children.”

Of course, Pastor Christman’s position brings questions to mind: Should children and youth be given all the privileges of church membership such as teaching, leading, or voting in congregational meetings?...Should children and youth be subject to church discipline in light of parental oversight?...What is more biblical, to withhold baptism from young people (even where there is evidence of conversion) simply because of the possibility of a false profession, or to exercise the ordinance and deal with such a possibility by church discipline? These questions and many more, our dear friend answers with sound pastoral advice.

Obviously, there are differences among Baptists on this subject. However, all are constrained by providence to face this issue in pastoral care and all of us should be willing to examine the Scriptures humbly for the regulation of our practice. For these and several other reasons, I commend Pastor Christman in this effort and recommend the reading of his position to all Baptists. May the Lord graciously guide us from the Scriptures.

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P R E F A C E

For more than thirty years Heritage Baptist Church has been baptizing only those who give credible evidence of true conversion. There is nothing remarkable about that claim. It is simply a part of what it means to be a biblical Baptist church. What might be noteworthy, however, is the fact that for the same period of time we have been baptizing everyone who gives credible evidence of true conversion – including young people and children.

In the passing of three decades our church has literally witnessed the emergence of another generation. Many of those newly born babies we visited at the hospital were graciously converted and baptized at a young age. Now they are getting married and having their own children. With regard to those who were thus baptized, we have seen very few “miscarriages.” For this we praise the Lord.

Some time ago a pastor friend of mine who was inclined to embrace and implement our practice asked how we justified it. The short answer was, “It is simply a matter of obeying the Great Commission. Those who give credible evidence of being true disciples are to be baptized.” While my friend appreciated the validity of the short answer, he also wisely recognized that there are many difficult and complex questions revolving around the subject. He asked if I would be willing to expand my thoughts on paper and send them to him. I envisioned several lines of argument limited to one page and said, “Yes.” For better or for worse, the following treatise is what evolved. I have since been encouraged by several friends to share these thoughts more widely. Hence, the booklet.

If you should be inclined to give the thirty to forty minutes it will take to read the apologetic, there is something you must know first. You must know the spirit and attitude with which I have written. I have not meant to be “dogmatic” in the negative sense of that word. I am quite aware of the fact that there are diverse views on the subject, held and practiced conscientiously by those who have a profound allegiance to the Word of God. Though I may differ with their

conclusions, I have a genuine respect for such persons and their views.

Please consider this humble endeavor to be an effort on my part to stimulate helpful discussion concerning the subject. Perhaps we will experience the blessing of the proverb concerning iron sharpening iron (Prov. 20:17). May the Lord make it so!

INTRODUCTION

How the pure and impeccable Son of God could live on this earth among vile and wicked sinners without being perpetually enraged with holy anger is a mystery beyond comprehension! It surely speaks volumes concerning the patience and longsuffering of God.

On some occasions, however, lest we wrongly interpret His patience and self-restraint, He chose wisely to pull back the veil, as it were, and through the display of emotion, give us some needful insight into His perfect disgust of sin. In that sense, our Lord's emotional life was revelatory, not only of His true humanity, but also of His divine hatred of iniquity.

One of those more remarkable manifestations occurred where we would have least expected it – in the very place where God chose to manifest His special presence, the temple. When He saw the hypocrisy and sacrilege of the professed worshippers, His soul became inflamed with the holy passion of indignation, and it had to go into action. He made a whip, turned over the tables, sent coins rolling all over the floor and scathingly rebuked the thieves as He drove them from the premises. Ignorant people would have called it an old-fashioned temper tantrum. We know better. It was a pure and perfect act of devotion. His indignation was noble, appropriate, restrained and pleasing to the Father. It became a fearful revelation of how the Son of God feels about sin.

On other occasions however, our Savior manifested a less intense response to sin. The mitigation of His anger is easily explained. The sin was less heinous and those who committed it were often His own beloved disciples. Nevertheless, there was still a revelatory display of emotion – perhaps not holy indignation, but rather what might be called “righteous irritation.” Unbelief frequently elicited this response.

On at least one occasion, it was insensitivity and lack of spiritual compassion toward children that produced the holy emotion. Concerned parents were bringing their little children to Christ, hoping that He might lay His hands upon them and pray for an early blessing upon their lives. The disciples, not possessing the same kind of tender compassion for children, miscalculated their Master's attitude and

callously rebuked the parents for infringing upon His precious time. When Jesus saw what they were doing He became indignant. The NKJV says He was “greatly displeased.” Instead of appreciating their apparent favor, He admonished His disciples for their ignorance and insensitivity and said, “Permit the children to come to Me; and do not hinder them” (Mark 10:14). The Authorized Version reads, “Forbid them not.” He then went on to say that “the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

In no way was our Lord teaching that these children, just because they were children, were already in the Kingdom or saved. In no way was He suggesting that children are innocent until they reach some ethereal, nebulous, indefinable “age of accountability.” He knew and understood perfectly that all children are not only born accountable, but are indeed conceived accountable in their fallen federal head, Adam. Nor was He teaching that since these children were brought to Him by believing parents, they were thereby “covenant children.” He was simply using the occasion to illustrate that all who are graciously ushered into the Kingdom of God become childlike in their hearts and demeanor. His words were not “for the Kingdom of God belongs to these,” but rather “such as these” (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16).

Having affirmed all of the above, we must still understand what caused our Lord’s righteous irritation. The simple explanation is that it grieved Him to see the children so easily despised and neglected by His disciples. The disciple’s lack of tenderness and desire to see children spiritually encouraged at the earliest age possible, produced in Christ a holy frustration. By way of contrast, how encouraged He would have been with the twelve if they had rather come to Him with an earnest inquiry about childhood conversion. Imagine a different scenario:

Lord, you see these parents here with their children. They want you to bless them and pray over them. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all of them came to believe upon You and serve You at an early age? May we bring them to You so that they might be encouraged toward eventual discipleship? Lord, how old does one have to be in order to know and feel that he is a sinner and in need of

forgiveness? How much does one have to understand to be saved? Would You be willing to give us some instruction on this subject later tonight? We feel such concern for these children knowing that they, too, are “dead in their trespasses and sins” and “children of wrath.” Is there any instruction we could give to them or their parents while you continue to deal with all of these adults? Please tell us what You want us to do.

How delighted the Savior would have been with such an attitude! It would surely have reflected something of His own tender heart for children.

Is it possible that some 21st century Reformed churches (including some of the Baptist sort) have unconsciously fallen into the error of the twelve disciples? The circumstances are obviously different. We cannot take our children to the literal lap of Christ. His physical hands of blessing are in Heaven. Perhaps a more searching question is this: How might we be “hindering” the children of our churches?

Thirty years of pastoral experience and observation have led this writer to believe that it is possible to hinder our children by perceiving them as either too young to experience true conversion or too young for us to be sure their conversion is genuine. Hence, where there appears to be actual conversion, we have often been reluctant to allow these young believers to declare their discipleship in baptism. Further, because young disciples are not mature enough to carry out the adult responsibilities of church membership, we have often forbidden them to become part of the visible covenant family of God. Therefore, while acknowledging the possibility (and in some cases the actuality) of childhood converts, we have often forbidden them several vital means of grace. To be sure, the motives for withholding baptism and church membership have been pure and honorable. This cannot be doubted and should not be questioned for they emanate from the hearts of those who are deeply committed to the authority of Scripture, the lordship of Christ and the purity of the Church. The problem is, the apostles also had pure motives in their inadvertent hindering of the children. Out of a realistic sense of the demands upon their Lord's time, they simply wanted to safeguard it so that He could meet what they

perceived to be the higher priority needs. The point is, honorable motives do not in and of themselves keep us from wrong practices. Hence, for slightly different reasons than those of the disciples, perhaps the time has come for us to soberly contemplate all of the implications of our Lord's words "forbid them not." We must make certain that our well-motivated practices are indeed pleasing to Him.

When it comes to the baptizing of children, there exist (in the wide and eclectic world of Evangelicalism) several different "theologies" of practice. The word "theologies" is placed in quotes because some of these practices seem to be rooted more in pragmatism than the Word of God. For example, Arminian Baptists of the fundamentalist sort tend to baptize very young children upon the slightest profession of faith. Often, in the case of these children, there seems to be little content to their understanding of the Gospel. Not surprisingly, with the mere passing of time, a very high percentage of these "converts" prove themselves to be graceless and either trouble the church or leave it.

Reformed paedobaptists baptize their infant offspring on the ground that they are (by virtue of their Christian parents) "covenant children." Many of these children eventually prove themselves to be the elect of God. They demonstrate the certainty of their election by coming to faith in Christ and living godly lives. The Gospel comes to them not "in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction" (I Thessalonians 1:5). Unfortunately, however, they are not baptized post-faith as disciples, according to the Savior's command (Matthew 28:19) and the universal pattern found in the book of Acts. The reason, of course, is simple. They were already "baptized" in their infancy as potential and hopeful disciples. Other children of our Paedobaptist brethren (like children of any denomination) eventually prove not to have been chosen by God. Sadly, they demonstrate their reprobation by remaining in unbelief and living in sin until their dying day. For them, the sign and seal of their "baptism" never came to reality.

Reformed Baptists, however, are distinct in their practice from both their Fundamentalist and Paedobaptist brethren. In contrast to the

latter, they rightfully wait to see objective, life-transforming evidence that one has come into the orbit of New Covenant blessings before they place the “sign” upon them, i.e. before they baptize them into the visible New Covenant family. Some of these evidences are clearly defined in that wonderful prophecy concerning the New Covenant, e.g. a heart-inscribed love for God’s moral law, a true knowledge of the Lord, etc. (Jeremiah 31:34).

For this same reason, the practice of Reformed Baptists is distinct from their non-Reformed Baptist brethren. They see the danger of baptizing professed disciples where there is less than solid, convincing evidence of true conversion. They are understandably fearful of filling the ranks of their church membership with those who are unregenerate and deceived. They long to preserve the lump of faith from the leaven of unbelief.

From this perspective, the practice of Reformed Baptists is to be commended. Their theology of baptism grasps the necessity of faith and repentance preceding the ordinance in an observable and credible way. At the same time, however, we Reformed Baptists may have an Achilles’ heel when it comes to our own practice of baptism. From sincere motives, some of us have practiced the custom of withholding the initiatory ordinance and church membership from childhood and youthful converts. As was acknowledged earlier, the practice is obviously rooted in noble motives and based upon a rational apologetic, but it calls for serious rethinking nonetheless.

In short, it regrettably “forbids the children” who are truly converted to obey the Great Commission. It forbids them membership in the church. It forbids them the Lord’s Table. It forbids them the pastoral oversight that rightfully belongs to all members of the church. It forbids them the sense of belonging to the family of God, even though they do in fact belong to Christ.

The New Covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 31 not only identifies the members of the New Covenant community, but it also characterizes them as a people ranging from the “least to the greatest” (vs. 34). As well as having socio-economic implications (servants to kings), the contrast surely

includes gradations of spiritual maturity much like the Apostle John's use of "children," "young men" and "fathers" (1 John 2:12-14). The church needs to remember that even the least of those who truly know the Lord, in fact, belong to the New Covenant community.

The purpose of this treatise is to assert and defend the view that Reformed Baptist churches ought to be baptizing and receiving into their membership children and young people who give credible evidence of being truly saved. Initially and understandably, the assertion may appear to be bold, radical or even dangerous. The suggestion is indeed bold and if implemented would require changes in practice, which could be fairly characterized as radical. "Dangerous" it is not and a careful argument will be made to that effect. Honesty requires all of us to acknowledge how difficult it actually is for us to be willing to rethink our positions and practices – especially if they are long standing. May the Lord give us genuine humility, objectivity and illumination as we think through these issues.

With regard to baptizing young people or children, the challenge lies in discerning true discipleship. The difficulty of this task is often (but certainly not always) in direct proportion to the youthfulness of the professing convert. Nevertheless, where there is convincing evidence of genuine conversion, that disciple, irrespective of age, ought to be baptized. Furthermore, because of the biblical purpose and significance of baptism, such a person thereby should become a visible member of the local church before which that profession of faith was made. Moreover, as a member of the church, virtually all the privileges and most of the responsibilities of membership should become his or hers. Every means of grace ordained for the edification of the saints should now be extended to this young disciple – worship, teaching, preaching, fellowship, pastoral care, the Lord's Supper, even church discipline. Stated differently, there is no means of grace that should be withheld from such a convert.

However, activities such as teaching a Sunday School class, leading in prayer, holding the office of deacon or elder and participating in church business meetings are not "means of grace." They are rather ecclesiastical

functions and responsibilities that in some cases require maleness, but in all cases call for the acquisition of a certain level of maturity. Therefore, with regard to these young members, it is necessary for the church to postpone the exercise of such ministries and duties until they reach requisite maturity. Our congregation has chosen (admittedly somewhat arbitrarily) the age of eighteen as a reasonable time for entrance into the full responsibilities of membership. We see this decision as one of those envisioned by the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, which acknowledges that some matters “are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence” (1:6b). When that maturity is obtained, such persons are then required to attend a membership class focusing upon the doctrine of the church articulated in the confession and the various responsibilities that accompany adult commitment. At the conclusion of such instruction, the candidate is carefully interviewed by the elders as to his or her understanding, commitment to the church and resolve to live up to the responsibilities of mature membership. If such a person remains willing and desirous to embrace the new responsibilities, they immediately become his or hers. At such time, the congregation is happily informed of the member’s new level of commitment by way of a public covenanting to live responsibly and biblically in the assembly.

If for some reason the person is not ready or willing to live up to the responsibilities of mature membership, his privileges (formal pastoral care, coming to the Lord’s Table, etc.) are withdrawn. The assumption, of course, is that the various phases of redemptive discipline have been lovingly, patiently and prayerfully administered. Naturally, the same form of discipline is administered if at any point prior to adult membership one’s life demonstrates that he is not truly converted. Obviously, such a conclusion is not drawn quickly, nor is that person’s removal from the membership executed in haste. He or she is dealt with by the elders and congregation redemptively through each of the phases of church discipline. How that ought to be handled will be addressed more fully later.

Here then, is a brief summary of what has been asserted thus far:

1. Childhood conversions are discernable, though often with greater difficulty.
2. Every person who gives evidence of true conversion should be baptized, irrespective of age.
3. Children who are baptized (with congregational approval) thereby become members of the church.
4. All of the means of grace should be extended to and enjoyed by these young members.
5. Some of the privileges and responsibilities of membership must await adult maturity.
6. When adult maturity arrives, that member should formally and publicly covenant to embrace the heightened privileges and responsibilities of church membership.
4. If a childhood conversion proves to be spurious, such a person should be removed (via church discipline) from the membership of the church and no longer allowed to come to the Lord's Table. As the baptism of the individual was approved by the congregation and made public in its declaration, so should his or her discipline be carried out.

Having asserted the above, three matters concerning this suggested practice deserve elaboration – 1) its biblical warrant 2) the unique challenges of such a practice and 3) a brief comparison of its intrinsic dangers with those of its alternative.

It has been emphatically asserted that “every person who gives credible evidence of true conversion should be baptized irrespective of age.” The first twelve words of the assertion actually make the last three superfluous. If it can be demonstrated biblically that “every

Chapter One

BIBLICAL WARRANT

person who gives credible evidence of true conversion should be baptized,” then such a criteria necessarily includes children as well as adults in the same way that it would include black, white, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, employer, employee, American, Chinese, etc. In fact, the Bible does clearly teach that all who give credible evidence of true conversion not only may or ought to be baptized, but with regard to obedience to Christ, must be baptized. The Great Commission cannot be misunderstood. Words could not be clearer. “Make disciples...baptizing them” (Matthew 28:19).

A disciple, by biblical definition, is any person who turns in godly sorrow from his sins to rely upon the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ and to live a life of obedience to Him as his rightful master. Are children capable (mentally and with regard to moral consciousness) of becoming brokenhearted for their sinfulness and of understanding their desperate need of forgiveness from God? Are they capable of understanding that their sinfulness requires punishment from the holy and just God whose law they have willfully violated? Are they capable of understanding that Christ came to live the perfect, sinless life they have totally failed to live? Are they capable of understanding the simple truth that the sinless Lord Jesus suffered the wrath of God in the place of sinners while He hung on the cross? Are they capable of understanding the straightforward promises of the Gospel revealing that God’s gracious forgiveness is theirs for the asking? Are they capable of understanding that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life?” Questions like these can be easily multiplied. The answer to all of them is a resounding “yes!” Admittedly, they, as well as adults, are incapable of coming to any

saving understanding of the Gospel apart from divine illumination and regeneration. That is not the issue. The concern of the preceding questions has rather to do with the mental and moral capabilities of children. The fact of the matter is that children are very capable of such an understanding. Much of that ability resides in their nature as image bearers of God. By virtue of creation, they know God exists and in their unconverted state they have to work hard at suppressing the truth and subduing their consciences (Romans 1:18). By the same virtue of being image bearers, they know as well that they are sinners. It is also a matter of fact that where the Gospel is consistently, clearly and passionately presented by parents, pastors, Sunday School teachers, etc., young people and children often understand it, embrace it and experience true conversion. What God literally creates in such cases are new disciples – they are simply young ones.

If indeed He has brought about a “new creation,” that infused spiritual life will begin to manifest itself in several discernable and positive ways. Obviously, it will not become apparent by a turning from gross external sins such as vulgarity, drugs, promiscuity and violence. These sins most likely never came to characterize the young convert we have in mind. He was born into a Christian home where the Lord is feared and served – where the dynamics of common grace have been operative in a restraining way. But what will become increasingly clear are the positive evidences of grace. There will now be a new tenderness of conscience manifesting itself in increased obedience to mom and dad, more spontaneity in seeking their forgiveness, better attitudes, a new kindness, patience and sharing with brothers and sisters, a new interest in family worship, the beginnings of a desire to read the Scriptures and pray, etc. Will this new behavior pattern be seamless and uninterrupted in its progress? Of course not! It isn't perfect in his parents' or anyone else's post-conversion experience either. The point is simply this. Where there is truly new spiritual life, regeneration will progressively manifest itself. And when it does so in a way that makes the profession of faith credible, that young disciple, his parents and his pastors have a biblical command to obey. That

command is for him to be baptized.

Reformed Baptists occasionally enjoy stimulating dialogue with their paedobaptist brethren. When we are misunderstood or misrepresented as those who practice adult baptism as opposed to infant baptism, we quickly correct our friends by reminding them that the issue is not adult vs. infant, but believer vs. unbeliever. It is precisely at this point, however, that we may not be as consistent with our theology as we profess. While we resolutely affirm faith as the prerequisite for baptism, we may deny this conviction in our practice by not baptizing some who give encouraging and sustained evidence of saving faith. We may do this under the apparent pressure of two arguments. First, it seems too difficult to determine the genuineness of childhood conversion and second, children surely are not mature enough to meet all of the requirements of church membership. These two concerns are respectable and need to be addressed. However, the point being presently stressed is simply that while we confess to practice believer's baptism, in many cases we actually practice what could more appropriately be called adolescent believer's baptism or adult believer's baptism. Our confession of faith (ch. 29 para. 2, BCF of 1689) clearly states, "Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance." That they are the "only proper subjects of this ordinance" does not negate the fact that they are the proper subjects of the ordinance and should therefore be baptized.

Having commented briefly on the biblical warrant, the second issue to be addressed concerns the unique challenges of baptizing young people and thereby receiving them into the membership of the church. The first challenge pertains to the potential of prematurely

Chapter Two

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

baptizing some who are not truly converted. The second is a necessary consequence of the first – namely, what should we do with those who prove not to have been truly converted when they were baptized? Should such be allowed to continue coming to the Lord’s Table? Can we still regard our unconverted young friend as a member of the church? If the answer to these last two questions is “no,” how shall we proceed to remove such a person from the membership of the church? How could we call this removal anything less than church discipline? Does the church have a right to discipline those who are still under the authority of their own home and parents? Admittedly, both of these challenges are sobering. Nevertheless, where there exists a wise and loving eldership along with a mature, well-taught congregation, they can be surmounted. Here are some practical suggestions.

With regard to the first challenge, how may we minimize the potential of prematurely baptizing some who are not truly converted? Consider the following. In the case of those who have been raised in godly homes, where there exists common and restraining grace, youthful converts have faced little or no worldly persecution “because of the word” (Matthew 13: 21). The same may be said concerning worldly seduction. These two tests of the reality of grace (persecution and seduction) generally make their more intense approach during the years of high school, college and young adulthood. That being the case, they cannot be applied to those who have not yet faced them. Hence, some would argue that a professed disciple has not been adequately tested prior to those years and experiences. The Word of God, however, nowhere asserts that these are the only tests whereby we may discern the genuineness of conversion. For this reason, other tests must be utilized – tests both negative and positive but appropriate to the pro-

fessed convert's age and maturity.

What are these tests? To begin with, it should be observed that regenerating and sanctifying grace dethrones the dominant power of sin in children as well as adults. Its gracious, transforming power has no respect for age. Wherever it comes, it "cleans house" and beautifies. In the case of children, it assaults pride, selfishness, irresponsibility, blame-shifting, spiritual disinterest, disobedience, bad attitudes and the like – not perfectly, thoroughly or all at once, but actually and observably. Hence, in the case of true conversion, parents and pastors should expect to see discernible behavior changes taking place – changes which correspond to the young person's former and unique sinfulness. If there is no evident and lasting "putting off the old man with his deeds" (Colossians 3:9), there has been no true conversion. However, if there is indeed an obvious and sustained "putting to death" of sin, there exists a very significant (though not in and of itself sufficient) evidence of saving grace. This optimistic hope may be entertained simply because it is difficult to attribute such changes in behavior merely to common grace. Whether these changes emerge suddenly and radically or more gradually, their sustained and ongoing presence is an important evidence of saving grace.

However, what needs to be witnessed, as well as this turning from specific sins, is the corresponding "putting on of the new man" (Colossians 3:10). Earlier, it was observed that saving grace not only "cleans house," but also beautifies. For every vice that saving grace assaults in the life of a young convert, an opposite virtue is supplied to replace it. Hence, truly regenerate children progressively manifest a new humility, kindness, generosity, responsibility, owning up to sin, spiritual interest, obedience, tenderness of conscience, meekness of attitude, etc. Once again, it must be acknowledged that these positive graces do not appear perfectly, thoroughly or all at once, but nonetheless really and truly. Therefore, in seeking to discern genuineness of conversion, parents and pastors should expect to see the emergence and manifestation of such virtues, including the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23). If they do appear and abide, what should be

concluded? Again, the origin of such virtues is difficult to ascribe merely to environment, culture or common grace.

When we place both of these evidences side by side – the putting to death of sin and becoming progressively more godly, what are we to deduce? Are these the products of fallen, sinful human nature? Do these kinds of fruit grow and abide on the trees of domestic and ecclesiastical culture? When a child manifests a new kindness and patience toward siblings, when he comes more quickly and sorrowfully to seek forgiveness from mom and dad, when he has a new and growing interest in the Bible, prayer, family worship and church in a sustained sort of way, what does it argue? The answer is simple. It strongly argues that this young person has been graciously transferred “out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son” (Colossians 1:13). His eyes have been opened so as to turn “from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). It powerfully suggests the new birth – “the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

In summary, the soul of any true convert (adult or child) is like a depot from which certain trains are departing while others are arriving. They don’t depart and arrive as fast as jets, but their movement can be clearly observed. These are the kinds of changes that must be carefully and thoroughly explored by parents and pastors. In terms of a regenerate membership, the church must be kept as pure as is humanly possible. If baptized young people are going to become a part of the membership, it is vital that they, too, give convincing evidence of true conversion. They are the future makeup of the body. If their salvation experience is spurious, their spiritual deadness will have a detrimental leavening influence upon the overall godliness of the assembly. Therefore, when the elders conduct baptismal interviews, their inquiry and dialogue ought to be characterized by conscientious thoroughness as well as warmth and gentleness.

A loving and faithful shepherd will ask the young professor many critical and penetrating questions. While he tries not to be unduly technical or profoundly deep, he cannot avoid being theological. He is seeking

to discern if this young soul understands the heart of the Gospel. He is also looking for a transformation of life. Questions such as the following should be asked of the young professing Christian – in a way that is pastoral and not overbearing, overwhelming or intimidating.

What is a Christian? How does one become a Christian? What is the Gospel? Why do you need Christ? What did He do for sinners? Why did He have to do that? Who required Him to do that? Could God have just forgiven us? If not, why not? What is there in God the Father that required Him to punish His Son? What was Christ doing on the cross? Who was He making a payment to? What if He didn't make that payment? Who are the only two persons who can pay for our sins? If we pay for them, how long will it take? When do you believe you first trusted in Christ? What specific sins do you need Him to pay for? Which sins in your life have made you most aware of your need for Christ's atonement? How do you feel about your sins? After you realize you have sinned, when do you ask God's forgiveness for that sin? Do you try to do that immediately or do you usually wait until the end of the day? What do you say to Him? What people has God used the most to show you your need for Christ? Are there any sermons or Sunday school lessons that God especially used to convict you of sin? What verses of Scripture give you the most hope and comfort? Why do they give you comfort? Do you believe that your life is changing? In what ways is your life changing? Has your attitude and behavior changed toward your brothers or sisters? In what ways? How has your relationship changed with your parents? Are you more obedient to mom and dad than you used to be? In what ways? How do you feel about going to church? Do you ever get anything out of the sermons? Do you ever feel that God is talking to you during the sermons? Could you give an example? Do you ever find yourself praying during a sermon because of what you have just heard? Could you give an example? When you see your father and mother observing the Lord's Supper, do you desire to be doing it with them? Why do you desire to

participate in this ordinance? Do you ever pray during the day? What do you say to God? Do you read your Bible? What do you get out of your Bible reading? What sins do you presently struggle with the most? Do your friends know that you are a Christian? Do you want to be baptized? Why do you want to be baptized? If Dad and Mom and your pastors feel that it's too soon for you to be baptized, how will you feel about it?

Obviously, a youthful convert will possess only a limited understanding of many of these subjects. Nevertheless, there must be some true knowledge of why he or she needs Christ, what He has done for sinners and how the benefits of the atonement are appropriated. Such knowledge, though limited, is theological. There must also be some observable evidence of conversion in the young person's life. Hence, the need for careful inquiry with parents, Sunday School teachers and others who know the candidate well. Usually, such interviews with the young person are not limited to just one. Ideally, there should be several over an extended period of time. This will give the elders a broader context for their careful evaluation.

Here, however, comes the searching question. If such a person, observed and interviewed in so careful a manner, gives encouraging, convincing and sustained evidence of being a true disciple of Christ, how should the church posture itself? What should the church do with him? Since baptism and church membership are inseparable, can we justify postponing his baptism and the benefits of the Lord's Table simply because he isn't yet mature enough to carry out all of the responsibilities of church membership (supporting the church financially, voting in business meetings, etc.)? If he gives discernable and credible evidence of having been baptized by the Spirit into "the one body" (I Corinthians 12:13), can we in good conscience forego baptizing the same precious soul into the local body where he would be more directly surrounded by the precious, sanctifying means of grace? Can we in good conscience continue to forbid the Lord's Table from such disciples? How could such a course of action (or shall we call it inaction) be justified in light of our Lord's commission to baptize disciples and teach

them to observe all that He commanded?

Reality is that God saves children and makes them a part of the body of Christ. Their conversion (as well as one's spurious conversion) can be discerned. Where true salvation is discerned, such converts should be baptized and given all of the means of grace. They are now members of the church. The only aspects of church life withheld from the young disciple are those responsibilities that require maturity. The privileges become his as a baptized believer and member of the church.

Will such a practice open the church to a greater possibility of baptizing some false converts? The honest answer is yes. Hopefully however, it will be a rare occurrence because great care and caution are being exercised. At the same time, it is important to remember and acknowledge that the church cannot make infallible judgments about anyone's conversion, including adults. In fact, it could be argued that spurious adult professors have more potential than even children or young people to deceive the elders in a baptismal interview. This may be accounted for by their greater knowledge and sophistication of social skills. We must remember that it was under the watchful eye of Philip the evangelist who was "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3), that Simon the sorcerer was misjudged to be a Christian and prematurely baptized (Acts 8). The sobering reality is that the church is always open to the possibility of baptizing false converts. Such a possibility, however, must not cause the church to go into a kind of fearful paralysis in the evaluating of professions of faith. It doesn't seem to with regard to adults. It shouldn't with regard to children and young people either. Such was the concern of the esteemed John Angell James of Birmingham, England. Writing in his *Church Member's Guide* under the heading of "The Admission of Members to the Church" he says:

Unscriptural caution is sometimes displayed towards those converts, who are young in years. It is surprising to see what a panic some members are thrown into, when a young person is proposed as a candidate for fellowship; and if they happen to discover that the youth is only fifteen or sixteen years of age, they

seem to feel as if the church was either going to be profaned or destroyed. Is there, then, a canonical age of membership? Is the same rule established in the kingdom of Christ, which is observed in the kingdoms of the world, and every one considered as unfit for the privileges of citizenship, till he arrive at the age of one and twenty? If not, what right have we to speak or think about the age of a candidate? Piety is all we have to inquire into; and whether the individual be fourteen, or fourscore, we are to receive him, provided we have reason to suppose that Christ has received him.

(The Third American Edition, page 181-182, 1830).

These thoughts naturally bring us to the second challenge unique to baptizing young converts and considering them members of the church - namely, their becoming the legitimate objects of church discipline if they eventually prove to be false. Since the New Testament equates baptism with church membership, in the event that a youthful member eventually demonstrates the absence of saving faith, the church will be biblically obligated to dismiss that person from its membership. As was indicated earlier, this must never be done rashly or harshly but, all the same, it must be done. It was also indicated earlier that as the young professed disciple was received into membership publicly (via vote of the congregation and baptism), in like manner his removal should follow a procedure that keeps the congregation informed and redemptively involved.

By what means should such a process be carried out? How can the church discipline someone who is still under the authority of the home? Wouldn't this be a usurpation of the God-ordained sovereignty of the parents? These questions are legitimate and serious. With regard to the latter, the simple answer is "no" because parents have no authority in the church as parents. Their children should not be dealt with as the children of so and so, but rather as members of the church. The church and the home are separate institutions, each with their own unique God-given authority. Neither may legitimately usurp the rule of the other. It is very sobering, however, to realize that sooner or later this hypothetical scenario will likely become a reality, i.e. a young convert

proving to be spurious. If and when it does, it will naturally present a challenge to the church – especially the eldership. Again, however, it must be asserted that where there exists a wise and loving leadership, along with a well-taught congregation, this challenge can be very successfully met.

Such an individual must be dealt with in the same redemptive way that an adult member would be dismissed. For purposes of illustration, imagine someone apparently converted and baptized around the age of twelve. Suppose further that at the age of fifteen this person begins to stray from the things of God, embraces a new set of ungodly friends and manifests a grievous worldliness. Imagine further that the eldership is informed of this downward spiral by the young person's parents in an oversight meeting. What should be done? How should the church proceed?

First of all, the pastors need to immediately meet with the young professor. This loving and faithful dialogue should take place in the presence of his parents. In this meeting, they must tenderly but firmly reason with the wayward soul, pleading with him to renew his repentance, forsake his sinful lifestyle, utilize the means of grace and return wholeheartedly to the Lord. On this occasion he should be reminded of the significance of his baptism and the serious incongruity between what it professed and his present sinful life. Romans 6:1-14 should be carefully opened up and applied. Special emphasis should be given to clearly explaining again (assuming that this passage was wisely addressed at the time of the individual's baptism) how those who have "died to sin" can no longer "live in it." The possibility that he was not truly converted at the time of his baptism must be pressed upon his conscience. He must also be made to understand that lack of a renewed repentance and faith will certainly confirm the sobering fear of a spiritual miscarriage. He must be told what the elders (along with his parents) will be looking for objectively as evidence of the "fruit of repentance" (Matthew 3:8). He must be informed as well that the signs of his recovery will be eagerly looked for in the approaching weeks and months. He must be told that if they are not forthcoming, ultimately, there will be

no alternative but to terminate his membership and the special privilege of coming to the Lord's Table. All of this, let it be emphasized again, should be discussed in the presence of the young person's parents. During this sobering conference, and any others held in the future, these heartbroken parents should demonstrate a clear sympathy with and support of their faithful pastors – a support they pledged to give prior to their child's baptism. Such an expectation, of course, assumes they too are believers and members of the church.

If the weeks and months to follow reveal no evidence of genuine repentance, concern for his spiritual state should then be conveyed to the congregation (as discreetly as possible) so that they may enter into the spiritual burden of his parents and pastors by way of intercessory prayer. The focus of these prayers should naturally be for the young person's spiritual restoration. Moreover, in response to the recommendation of the elders, the members of the congregation should agree to indefinitely suspend the privileges of church membership from the young professor – most notably, coming to the Lord's Table. By such an action, the young person will be made to realize that the genuineness of his conversion is now in serious and public question. If the person under consideration is in fact truly regenerate, this disciplinary means of grace should eventually become the catalyst for spiritual recovery through the renewal of repentance and faith. At such time the privileges of church membership would be happily restored.

Assuming however, at the end of this extended period of time (to be determined graciously by the pastors), the person continues to be impenitent, he or she must be removed from the membership. Again, such an action must also be carried out by a vote of the congregation. At the next corporate worship service (following the membership meeting where the decision was made) the pastors may choose to inform the congregation at large of the sad course of events. If they do so, an announcement similar to the following could be made.

Sadly, it is our duty to inform you that our young

friend _____ may no longer be considered a member of this church. After much consultation, exhortation and prayer on the part of his parents and pastors, and after having suspended his membership privileges for a lengthy period of time (during which we saw no encouraging signs of repentance), we are constrained to conclude that he was not truly converted at the time of his baptism. At a recent business meeting of the congregation our loved one's membership was terminated. It grieves us to say that he will no longer be allowed to gather with us at the Lord's Table. Our brotherly communion with him has been broken by his own course of sin, impenitence and unbelief. Please join us in earnest prayer for his true conversion and ultimate restoration. Until such times comes, if indeed the Lord grants it, we must be redemptive in our posture toward him, extending every reasonable token of our love and concern. Please be sure to tell _____ that you are praying for his salvation and that you are willing to do anything you possibly can to encourage him spiritually.

Addressing the issue in such a public manner would be a striking and sobering call to self-examination and perseverance – especially to the youthful members of the assembly. Again, it should be observed that the church may choose not to publicize the discipline openly before the congregation at large. The announcing of the church's action is not nearly as important as the action itself. The point is simply that the previously deceived person has been faithfully dealt with for the good of his soul and the purity of the church.

The purpose of the preceding scenario is designed to demonstrate that the challenge of potential church discipline can be met in a very natural and reasonable way, even though it may seem somewhat more complex due to the element of one's youthfulness and ongoing responsibilities to the authority of the home. Keep in mind what was made clear earlier, namely that at the time of a young person's baptism, the parents should be made fully aware of what the church would be compelled to do in the event their son or daughter eventually proved to be unconverted. At that same time, prior to their child's baptism,

the father and mother should express (perhaps even in writing), their commitment to sweetly acquiesce to the leadership of the church and the will of the congregation if such actions should become necessary.

The third matter to consider is a comparison of the intrinsic dangers of the proposed practice with those of its alternative. For purposes of clarity, it may be helpful to simply restate the two approaches.

Among some Reformed Baptists, the normal policy regarding

Chapter Three

INTRINSIC DANGERS COMPARED

childhood or youthful converts is to withhold baptism until they are seventeen or eighteen years of age. The reasons cited by those who defend this practice, as previously noted, are generally two-fold. First, it gives parents and pastors more time to be sure of the reality of saving grace. Second, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, the baptized new member will then be reasonably mature enough to take on all of the responsibilities of church membership – especially participating in church business meetings. These are surely respectable considerations.

The practice proposed in this treatise however, is that children or young people (of any age) who give convincing evidence of true conversion ought to be baptized and received into the membership of the visible New Covenant family of God. They should thereby be granted most of the privileges and all of the means of grace that belong to the members of a local New Testament church. This proposed practice distinguishes between the privileges of church membership, which belong to disciples as disciples, and the responsibilities of church membership - a few of which require adult maturity. These advanced responsibilities are to be embraced by the member, at a reasonable age chosen by the congregation, after completing the church membership class and publicly covenanting to carry them out.

It has already been acknowledged and discussed that such a practice carries with it potential liabilities. Stated simply, there is an increased possibility of perceiving conversion where it has not truly taken place. In other words, there is an increased danger of making mistakes in judgment resulting in premature, inappropriate

ate baptisms. Such cases, upon their discovery, would then require the dismissal of the false convert from the membership of the church. Without minimizing the seriousness of the mistake, the error nevertheless needs to be put in perspective. What is more serious is not the possibility of someone being prematurely baptized and perhaps someday needing to be baptized again after experiencing true conversion. The truly serious matter is someone living protractedly in deception about the state of their soul and possibly even dying in that delusion.

However, the assumed ecclesiastical context of this spiritual miscarriage must be kept in mind. If it happened in the average evangelical Baptist church, the sad occurrence could be deadly – perhaps in an eternal way. The church implementing our proposed practice, however, would have proven itself to expect and require ongoing evidence of conversion. It would have demonstrated strength, caution, patience and discernment in the very interview and decision-making process. Such a church, no doubt, would also have the strength and character to recognize its error and respond in a courageous, loving and redemptive way. When it does so, what lasting or eternal harm has really been done? The answer is none. The previously deceived person will have been helped to understand that he was never truly saved. His conscience will bear witness with the testimony of the church. In a strange, almost ironic way, the whole experience will bring the potential for self-deception before the entire congregation in a most sobering way. It will also afford unique opportunities for wise and conscientious parents to speak earnestly with their children about the nature of true conversion and the numerous warnings of Scripture to not be deceived. The disciplinary event will become a renewed summons for everyone to make their “calling and election sure” (II Peter 1:10).

On the other hand, the practice of withholding baptism, church membership and the means of grace from those who give credible evidence of conversion is fraught with at least three intrinsic dangers. First and foremost, it makes the “withholding” church culpable of

the sin of disobedience. The command of her sovereign Lord is clear and simple. “Make disciples...baptizing them” (Matthew 28:19). It does not say, “Make disciples and when they become mature enough to take on all of the responsibilities of church membership, baptize them.” Nor does it say, “Make disciples of those who are mature enough to become church members and then baptize them.” Nor does it say, “Make disciples, and when your judgment concerning their spiritual state approaches infallibility, baptize them.” Forgive the hint of sarcasm. It is born out of a sense of how utterly wrong it is for a church to passively disobey a plain command. The irony is that the churches most guilty of this sin of omission happen to be those which are most committed to the regulative principle. It should be recalled, however, that the regulative principle does not merely forbid us from doing what the Scriptures do not require. It also obliges us to do what they do require. In this case, they require us to baptize those who give credible evidence of being disciples of Jesus Christ.

The second danger intrinsic to the “withholding” practice is that, in addition to depriving the young believer of the blessing of baptism itself, it deprives him of several valuable and maturing means of grace. For starters, the very privilege of viewing oneself as a member of the church carries with it the spiritual dynamic of responsibility. In a way similar to remembering who we are in Christ, or what our new relationship to sin is, remembering that we have become members of a local New Testament body of believers becomes a motivating and energizing catalyst. Even a young child can reason, I have become a part of a family known for their allegiance to Christ. I, too, must consistently behave like a Christian or I’ll do harm to our church’s reputation. These older believers are going to expect me to be obedient to the Scriptures! This is not to suggest that nothing is expected of a young professor who has not yet been baptized. Indeed, much is expected of such a person. The point is simply that even more is expected of one who has made his or her profession public.

Postponing baptism and church membership deprives the young disciple of at least two other significant means of grace – namely,

formal pastoral care and the Lord's Table. If young disciples become members of the church, they also ought to come under the sanctifying influence of oversight. Their spiritual progress (or lack thereof) and struggles should be inquired after just like adult believers. The pastors of churches who practice "withholding" should humbly and honestly answer the question, "How much spiritual interest am I presently showing outside of the pulpit to the children of this congregation who may be regenerate, but not yet members of the church?" If they were members of the church, would they not be given more focused oversight?

Moreover, what shall we say of depriving these young disciples of the precious strengthening privilege of observing the Lord's Supper? Their simple hope is like that of their parents. At their own spiritual and intellectual level, they also understand that Christ's body had to be broken for their sins. They also believe that "without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness" for their sins (Hebrews 9:22). Disappointingly, however, in "withholding" churches, young believers are not allowed to symbolically confess that hope and reliance. They can only watch their parents or other adult believers with a kind of hopeful longing and anticipation. Wouldn't their repentance and faith also be renewed at the table? Wouldn't they also go away from it with an increased love for the Savior? If He is their only hope for salvation and they have in fact "received Him" (John 1:12) and been received by Him, how can the church rightfully withhold such a means of grace?

The third intrinsic danger of the "withholding" practice is a natural consequence of what has just been discussed. Forbidding several vital means of grace from young believers carries with it considerable potential for unnecessary discouragement. It is difficult for children who possess a simple but real trust in the Lord Jesus as their Savior to understand why they cannot profess it in the ordinances. The only thing parents and pastors can say to such children by way of consolation is something like, "Son, be encouraged to know this. Baptism and the Lord's Supper cannot save you. If you are truly trusting in Christ alone, you are as saved and safe as you can

possibly be. Just be patient and some day you will be able to be baptized and join the church. Then you will be able to come with dad and mom to the Lord's Table." Such an explanation may carry with it some measure of comfort for the child, but it is still very difficult for him to understand. Ironically, in many cases it is the very possession of saving grace that enables such a child to sweetly submit to his parents and pastors under these disappointing circumstances.

As this argument for "reforming" our practice is drawn toward its close, perhaps it will be helpful to recapitulate. What is being proposed is really quite simple. Children who give credible evidence of being truly converted should be baptized, received into the membership of the church and granted all of its privileges and responsibilities except those of

CONCLUSION

participating in business meetings, holding office, teaching, preaching, leading worship, etc., which must await an age of maturity determined by the congregation.

The biblical warrant for this assertion is not based upon historical narratives where only men and women (as opposed to children) are mentioned as being baptized or added to the company of believers (Acts 8:12; 5:14). At best, we can only infer from such passages. Rather, the argument is founded upon the profoundly regulative words issued to the Church by its Head – the Lord Jesus Christ. He said, “make disciples...baptizing them” (Matthew 28:19). The matter is settled and incontrovertible. We are commanded to baptize those who give evidence of being disciples – not infallible evidence, because no such evidence exists for disciples of any age. We are to baptize those who give credible evidence of being disciples.

The unique challenges of this practice have been addressed. There is, it must be acknowledged, an increased likelihood that the church will occasionally err in her judgment and baptize some who are not truly regenerate. That likelihood, however, is not nearly so great as is feared. Where the elders are wise, careful and thorough in their examination of professed converts, and where the parents of these young people and the congregation are well taught and discerning, the potential of deception is greatly reduced.

It has also been acknowledged that where an error in judgment has taken place, there emerges the challenge of undoing the damage – that is, dealing faithfully with the false convert and removing him or her from the membership of the church. Again, however, where there exists a wise and loving eldership along with a well-taught and faithful congregation, the challenge can be effectively met. As was mentioned earlier, the end result will be a renewed corporate sobriety for examining and testing ourselves as to whether or not we are “in the faith” (II Corinthians 13:5).

Finally, a comparison was drawn between the dangers of the

proposed approach and its customary alternative. It was acknowledged that each approach carries with it intrinsic dangers. The question becomes, “Which is the greater danger?” When baptizing someone prematurely is compared to disobeying the Great Commission and withholding several vital means of grace from a young believer, the danger of the latter seriously outweighs the former. An honest mistake in judgment can be publicly and humbly acknowledged through church discipline, thereby bringing the person who was deceived back to square one. No harm has been done to his soul. He was unconverted to begin with. He remained unconverted, though deceived. He is lovingly brought to realize that he was never truly converted and therefore simply ends up right where he started. Only now, he may be significantly wiser because he better understands how true conversion must be life transforming.

However, the young believer who is unable to take full advantage of the ordained means of grace has been sadly hindered in his growth. He has also been unnecessarily discouraged by his sense of not belonging to the body. For many, this deprivation of baptism, church membership and increased means of grace can last as long as six, eight or even ten years – depending on when the young person first came to faith. These years are forever gone. The fact that he has likely grown in grace while still not a member of the church will not be denied. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, no doubt, has produced a genuine love for the Truth. The tragedy is that he may not have grown as much as he would have, had all of the means of grace been extended to him and appropriated by him earlier. Hence, it is fair to say that the practice of “withholding” is clearly the greater of the two dangers.

We end where we began. Children who believe have been made members of Christ’s body by God Himself. If they are regenerate and have been granted the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8), even the “least of them” (Jeremiah 31:34) truly knows the Lord. They have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the invisible family of God (I Corinthians 12:13), and now they should be baptized by water into the visible family with all of its privileges.

Young children, in any home, are not yet capable of taking on some of the responsibilities of the family. The little girls cannot yet do the laundry or prepare the Sunday dinner. The little boys cannot yet change the oil in the car or clean the gutters. These tasks will require time, growth and maturation. Nevertheless, these precious young lives are as much a part of the family as their parents. Someday, they will embrace the mature responsibilities of the home. In the meantime, they must do what they are able to do while they enjoy the privileges of being members of the family – love, security, shelter, provision, nurture, counsel, sense of belonging, etc. So it should be in the family of God! Recognizing converted children and young people as members of the family of God does not make us paedobaptist. It makes us more biblically Baptist.

Our Savior still receives children of any age who sincerely come to Him in faith and repentance. Those whom He graciously receives to Himself ought to be lovingly and fully embraced by our churches as well. To refuse such as these, who give credible evidence of true conversion, may cause us to deserve His sobering admonition, “Forbid them not.”