

Are Children Qualified Subjects for Baptism?

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ABSTRACT

The origin and development of the New Testament baptism is considered in determining the meaning of the rite of baptism. This theological study concentrated on the common practice of child baptism. It compared the biblical meaning of and qualification for baptism to the level of maturity among children to determine whether they are qualified subjects for baptism. The study (a) connected “accountability” and “true repentance” as manifestations of a believer and major factors for qualification and (b) examined Jewish traditions as well as legal treatment of children with regards to these concepts.

Combined with theologies derived from the meaning of baptism, this paper utilized a systematic review of findings from various researches and sources about moral development in children to determine an age range when children transition from childhood to considerable adulthood and be qualified for baptism. Historical, theological, and psychological approaches were considered.

The findings presented in this study indicate that children need to be capable of building an internal moral code, a “spiritual coming of age” before their salvation turns to be at jeopardy and be required to make their decision for baptism. In a general sense, this age appears to be 12 to 13 years old.

When children come to age where they are aware or conscious of what is right and wrong, then, it indicates that they are capable of responding in the criteria of believer’s baptism. Baptism requires maturity and ability to make independent, decision for which one can be held accountable for. It appears that between the ages 12 to 14 a child experienced a major change in spiritual and moral perception. For that reason, pastors should consider delaying baptism at this age and give room for maturing..

Keywords: Baptism; Child Baptism; Maturing Age; Mature For Baptism.

INTRODUCTION

The sacrament of baptism has been for centuries a sacred practice and cannot be taken serious enough. Countless of authors and theologians have been debating whether infant baptism or believer’s baptism should be the practice of the church. The New Testament has a huge amount of references to believer’s baptism, but is silent on infants and children. At His own

baptism Jesus proclaimed “he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16 KJV).

Luke in Acts speaks of “multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number” (Acts 5:14). However, infants were not included in the count of membership. Eduardo Cierra y Prat (Prat, 1929:323) affirms that “in the first centuries of the church baptism was given to none but adults, after they had been well instructed the mysteries of faith.” Alexander V. G. Allen write, history has captured the “transition from adult to infant baptism” (Allen, 1906:406). This transition has been accurately outlined by Henry F. Brown in his book “Baptism through the Centuries” and by Robert Robinson in the book “History of Baptism.” If believer’s baptism should be the practice of the church, the next problem to solve is when does one stop being a child and starts being a believer. However, there is little discussion about when that transition takes place to become a capable believer.

In recent years church members and administrators have observed an increase of baptisms from a group that belongs neither to “infants” nor can be classified as adults. How are these children to be treated when it comes to the questions of salvation and baptism? Do they meet the requirements for baptism? Is there a certain age bracket that children must reach? Where is the border line that divides the childhood from adulthood? Is the current criteria by which Seventh-day Adventist ministers approve candidates for baptism in line with the meaning and purpose of the New Testament concept of baptism? Finally, and in the broadest sense of the study it attempts to answer; how can a minister know that a child has reached a stage in its development which is ready for baptism and how should the child be guided if it is not?

The researcher certainly must admit that these questions cannot be easily categorized, because it is dealing with moral and spiritual development stages of a child. In order to arrive at a conclusion this study must answer two essential questions.

First, what is the meaning of baptism in the life of the believer? Second, what is the level of maturity and capability of discerning deep concepts in the minds of children? Concepts such as: conviction of universal and personal sin, repentance, confession and conversion, being dead to sin and alive for Christ, covenant relationship with Christ, entrance and belonging to the church.

Research Questions

Warren Carr writes (Carr, 1964:122) “It is Hard to take believers baptism seriously in the wake of revival campaigns in which children at the age of nine are subject to mass

evangelism” He claims that evangelizing children into baptism is the “grossest form of subjectivism.” Current baptism practices include children down to the very young age of seven. Can Children at this age be considered believers capable of making an intelligent decision for baptism? At what age is the moral and cognitive development of children ready to assume accountability for their actions and experience true repentance?

The purpose of the research is first, to determine the qualification of children as candidates for baptism. Second, to review criterion for baptism as recorded and instructed by biblical writers, in the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and in the writings of Ellen G. White.

This is significant, because right theology and practice of baptism directly effects the work of the ministers, the church as a body, and the Christian as an individual. It recalls the biblical understanding of what baptism means in the life of the believer. It can help ministers and laymen evaluate how children can be guided in the preparation for baptism and make intelligent decisions. Furthermore, it will contribute theological confidence in the exercise of the sacrament of baptism.

The presupposition of this research is that children are not to be neglected in the preparation for baptism. Children should be nurtured and introduced to Christ in their early stage so that “less care will be given to worldly matters” and more to care to the spiritual development. Yet, as Tertullian put it, the “delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children” (Brown,1965:25) until they reach the age where they understand between right and wrong – since repentance of sin is the requirement for baptism.

The scope of this research includes a look at the origin of baptism, and New Testament practices of baptism. It will discuss the transition from childhood to adulthood from different angles. In addition it will review the meaning of baptism and how it relates to the qualifications for the rite. The limitation of this study is that the theology and history behind the rejection of infant baptism is evidently the most truthful concept of the sacrament of baptism. Only believers baptism should be considered as legitimate.

To give clarity, the terms “child” or “children” in this research refers to children ranging from grade two primary school till grade nine secondary school. The age in these grades ranges from six to 13 years of age. The reason for choosing this age group is based on Lawrence Kohlberg’s (Kohlberg, 2009:249) stages of moral developments. According to Kohlberg it is between the ages of six to 13 and above when concrete moral values are develop.

METHODS

There are three lines to the approach of this study: the historical, the theological and the psychological. The historical approach is the attempt to discover any evidence indicating that children have been baptized by the early church.

Theological will seek to present what the New Testament says about the purpose, meaning and relevance of baptism in the life of the believer. Moreover it will scan Jewish and biblical views on the transition from child to believer. As compliment it will consolidate modern research in understanding the moral development of children and their progress of maturity during this stage of their life. The study will conclude with whether or not the New Testament meaning of baptism comprehensible by children. This study will be outlined as follows:

First part of this research contains the research questions, purpose and significance of the research. This is followed by the presupposition, scope and limitations, definition of terms and the methodology.

Part 2 explores baptism practices in the early church and “spiritual coming of age” in a Jewish context. It discusses the meaning and purpose of baptism. It concludes with a short review of repentance as a qualification for baptism

The third part deals with determining a child’s qualification for baptism. It includes an investigation of the psychological development of children and their ability to be conscious of morality and sin. It follows by pointing out the consideration of a minimum age and the problem of premature baptism. It ends by considering the child as adult as a qualification for baptism.

The last part ends with a precise summary and conclusion. The conclusion will include a stand on whether or not children need or qualify for baptism and suggestions for how children could be guided in their desire for making a decision for Jesus through baptism. A recommendation will be given regarding further research in this field. Lastly, it follows the bibliography.

RESULTS

Baptism of Children in the Early Church

This part explores the development of the baptismal practices in the early church and the biblical view of how children were regarded in respect to moral accountability, maturity and membership. This will end with a discussion of the meaning of the holy sacrament.

Development of the Rite of Baptism

Baptism was not a unique practice of Christians. It was a very common practice even among heathens. Henry F. Brown (Brown, 1965:1) states that already “the ancient pagans practiced a form of water baptism as a form of purification rite.” Also among the Jews purification by water washings was well known. Baptism as it is known today is a development that has its roots founded all the way back in the establishment of the Levitical priesthood system.

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (Rodríguez, 1999:1) notes in his paper “Baptismal Instruction in the New Testament and Other Related Issues” that Jewish proselytes received instructions on the commandments and on the meaning of conversion before they experienced the cleansing water. Proselytes were gentiles or non-Jewish persons who decided to accept the Jewish religion and join the nation. Oscar Cullmann (Cullman, 1950:8) writes they were “admitted into the fellowship of Israel through the act of baptism.” He continues to say that “it is interesting to note that when a gentile became a proselyte through the immersion into water, his whole household, including children and servants, would be baptized.” Cullmann (Cullman, 1950:9) did an insightful historical study on baptism in the New Testament. He identifies that John the Baptist picked up on the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism and based his baptism on the same principles. John’s baptism was a call to confession and repentance. This was a crucial development for the Christian baptism. Hans Lietzmann (Lietzmann, 1937:80) distinguishes that “John’s baptisms was taken up into primitive Christianity in its original significance of a washing away of the uncleanness of the old aeon, a cleansing necessary for the entry into the new Messianic world.” The Gospel of Matthew states that “then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan and were baptized of him” (3: 5-6). Although these were men and women, it is unclear here whether or not children were part of these groups.

Baptism by the Holy Spirit

However, as predicted by John, when Jesus began his work as the Messiah, he yet intensified the scope of baptism. Jesus introduced a baptism by the Holy Spirit. This became the indispensable component of the sacrament. In fact, when left out it was even ground for rebaptism. In Acts 19 it is recorded how Paul, when speaking to certain disciples, asked “have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed” (v. 2). Because they had not even heard

of the Holy Ghost Paul, questioned the validity of their baptism. He continues “unto what then were ye baptized?” (v. 3). These men have experienced repentance, but have not understood that the only way to be truly cleansed from sin is by the blood of Jesus. “Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” (v. 4).

This baptism of water and spirit is the Christian baptism as we know it today. It is the method by which a believer identifies himself with Christ and his church. It is of greatest importance for each believer to fully comprehend its meaning and purpose for each individual.

This also was the baptism of which Luke reports a great number of priests who were becoming “obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Paul records the people “gave heed” to the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:6). In chapter eight a number of references is found to people responding with “believe.” The people believed and were baptized”(v. 12). Simon believed and was baptized (v. 13). “If though believest... though mayest,” the Ethiopian was told, and he responded, “I believe.” “It is easy to understand, in the first centuries of the Church baptism was given to none but adults, after they had been instructed in the mysteries of faith” Eller (Eller, 1972:42) confirms this by stating it is “Incontestable,” that “every person named or identified in the New Testament as being a recipient of baptism was an adult believer.” The questions is, at what age could one be considered an adult?

There is a tradition in the Jewish circles which gives some direction in understanding how children transitioned from childhood to adulthood. There was even a set age when childhood had been considered to have come to an end. All Jewish children, boys and girls, reach a state of “Spiritual coming of Age.”

“Spiritual Coming of Age”

In the Jewish tradition, there was, and until today is, a time and event for children to signify the transition from childhood to adulthood. In the early 14th century it was started to be called bar/bat mitzvah, for boys and girls respectively.

Ralph Gower (Gower, 1987:79) precisely describes how children were trained from early years to be worshippers of God. He points out that “boys were taught the law by their father from three years of age.” Jews parents accurately understood that this work is done only to form characters in their children so that they choose to follow God once they grow old enough to make their own decision. Hence, Gower (Gower, 1987:79) explains that children were stimulated to ask questions about festivals (Ex 12:26; Deut 6:20-25) by facing them

with unusual objects (Ex 13:14-15; Jos 4:6). In this way it became natural to teach them the acts of God.”

When, however, the Jewish boy reached the age of 13, he would have celebrated his bar mitzvah and now be considered a voice in the synagogue. Grower (Gower, 1987:57) says that “By the New Testament times a boy of 13 became a “son of the law”. A girl, on the other hand, celebrates her bat mitzvah already at the age 12 after which she will be considered to qualify for marriage.

Interestingly enough, Jesus’ age is mentioned only once in the Bible. “And when he was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem... after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions” (Luke 2:42,46). Gower (Gower, 1987:57) argues,

“The significance of the account of Jesus being left behind at the Temple is that it showed he was leaving his childhood (Luke 2:41-49). It was the last time he would attend the Passover as a child. Only after age 13 did the child qualify to become one of the ten men who could constitute a synagogue.”

It is thus reasonable to assume that children below the age of 12 were not regarded to make spiritual decisions for themselves, but rather followed simply their parents. Since the baptism of John was a call for the repentance of personal sins, it is less likely that children would participate in the baptism before the ‘Spiritual coming of age.’”

“An Age of Innocence”

Is there a time in a human’s life when he or she is innocent of his action? A time in which accountability cannot be required because the child is physically not capable to comprehend the true scope of its actions? Can such an idea be supported by the Bible?

Legal Scale

From a governmental standpoint most developed countries today recognize that children in their childhood cannot be held accountable for their action. There is some disagreement as to what that age is. Some countries allow even eight year old children to be sentenced for their criminal actions, while others do not recognize an offence by a child up to the age of 15. The common consensus, however, lies somewhere between 12 and 14 years of age (CRIN, 2018). The Center for youth justice in Germany remarks concerning the Minimal Age of Criminal Responsibility (Papadodimitraki, 2016:2) that “a child above 14 is only held responsible if

he/ she is morally and mentally mature when the offence took place; this way he/she can realize the unlawfulness of his/her behavior and act according to that realization.” To answer the first question, whether or not there is such a thing as an “innocent age”, yes there exists such a concept in our society. It has a huge influence on how courts judge criminal violations committed by the youth.

Biblical Scale

There is a concept of an “innocent age” in the Bible. However, there must be caution in defining such terminology. Specifically there must be set a clear distinction between the penalty for universal and individual sin. Universal sin is that which makes all humanity guilty, independent of our action. The book of Psalms points to an inherent sin, thus making man’s guilt a state of being. David exclaims, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5). Thus humans are guilty before even having the capability to disobey the commandments of God. Paul further explains that earth is guilty because of its original sin through Adam and Eve. He states, “by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation (Rom 5:18).

However, Paul presents an extended definition of humanities guilt by pointing to individual sin. He proclaims that the penalty of that original sin has been settle by Jesus Christ, “even so by the righteousness of One the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life (Rom 5:18). So now God “will render to every man according to his deeds” (Rom 2:6). The same idea is presented by John. He was looking in a vision at the day of judgement, saw “another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev 20:12). Meaning to say that there is an accumulating guilt in the life of each individual, which is a result of immoral actions. These actions can be settled through repentance and confession of sin (1 John 1:9). But are children excluded from this formula or are they included?

A most interesting scenario is recorded by Matthew, which recalls Jesus using children as an example of those that will be saved. Jesus said, "In solemn truth I tell you that unless you turn and become like little children, you will in no case be admitted into the Kingdom of the Heavens” (Matt 18:3). There is something about children that marks an indispensable characteristic which adults need to adopt. What exactly this characteristic is goes beyond the scope of this study. Yet, independent of what aspect of childhood Jesus is here referring to,

the presumption in being “like” is that little children go to heaven despite their inability to reason like adults.

Thus it appears that they are not judged according to their deeds, but according to their innocence. They are covered by the saving blood of Christ. Norman Gulley (Gulley, 2012: 691) agrees in that “the blood of the lamb covers all humans until they are old enough to decide and accept that sacrifice and be baptized.” As Paul boldly asserts “when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” and “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:6, 8).

There are two major concepts a child must be grown and mature enough to fully comprehend and internalize. Ellen White (White, 2004:296) speaks to parents who wish for their children to be baptized at an early age and reiterates that “if you are satisfied that your children understand the meaning of conversion and baptism, and are truly converted, let them be baptized.” Yet even if parents are satisfied with the understanding of the child, she stresses, “Never allow your children to suppose that they are not children of God until they are old enough to be baptized. Baptism does not make children Christians; neither does it convert them; it is but an outward sign, showing that they are sensible that they should be children of God by acknowledging that they believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and will henceforth live for Christ.”

The meaning of baptism and the meaning of conversion are indispensable for the child’s baptism. Robin Robinson (Robinson, 1817:33) makes the following remarkable observation. He argues, “In the kingdom of heaven which John was forming, rank was nothing, superior faculties were nothing, moral excellence was all in all, and faith and repentance were indispensable qualifications for baptism.” It is necessary to review the meaning of both.

The Meaning of Baptism

In the context of this study, several questions will help set the mood for the discussion of this sub topic. Why is baptism necessary? What does a person need to understand in order to make an intelligent decision for baptism? What difference does it make in the life of the believer?

The meaning of baptism has many sides. The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists (1988,184) precisely identifies five different aspects. Baptism is a “symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection” and also, for the individual, a symbol of “being dead to sin and alive to God.” It extends its meaning as a “symbol of a

covenant relationship with Jesus,” “consecration to Christ’s service” and “entrance into the church” (the body of Christ). Baptism portrays some symbolism as the following lines show.

Christ’s Death and Resurrection

When Jesus Himself was baptized it had nothing to do with repentance from sin, rather it had a prophetic meaning. The Ministerial Association (1988,184) further explains that “immerging into the water represented anointing a messiah, but also his death and burial and the immerging out of the water foreshadowed His resurrection.” In baptism the Christian identifies with and joins in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-5). This is a crucial symbolical and metaphorical concept that shapes the worldview.

Being dead to Sin and alive to God

“Therefore we are buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead...we also be should walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:2,4). Baptism is an expression of the faith, it is not that people receive faith through baptism. This makes clear that the child who chooses to be baptized goes first through the experience of conversion and rebirth. This becomes the driving factor to move the child to take the next step and be baptized. Carr (Carr, 1964:125) affirms this by pointing out that there is “obviously a time lapse between conversion and baptism, for the latter is conditioned on the former in the New Testament concept of faith salvation.” Joseph Harvey Waggoner (Waggoner, 1878:102) supports this view. He argues that “If we were not dead to sin, why were we buried? The proper time for burial is after death, not before death. The proper time for burial in baptism is when we die to sin. This points to the next aspect of baptism as a symbol of a covenant relationship with Jesus.”

Covenant Relationship

Through the act of baptism we enter into a spiritual covenant which finds its origins all the way back to Gods first covenant relationship with Abraham (Gen 17:1-7). The Ministerial Association (1988:186) has it right by concluding, “one can be a Jew through birth; but one can be a Christian only through new birth.” Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). This new birth is manifested and expressed through the act of baptism. It is the conversion of the person. After conversion, the child would enters into a covenant/contract with Jesus. In summary this contract contains two

parts. First, God promises to give the believer a new heart and spirit (Ezek 36:25), salvation (Luke 19:9), and the strength and support to live a holy life. On the part of the child, he commits his life to the influence of the Holy Spirit that he may do his best to live in holiness and obedience to God's law.

Entrance into the Church

It cannot be overlooked that through baptism a person is joined to the body of Christ, which is the church. The New Testament is clear that baptism meant adding believers to the church. Luke in Acts records that they were "baptized" and "added," "the Lord add daily to the church" (Acts 2:41,47). When a child shows the desire to accept Christ through baptism, he must understand what it means to belong to the body of Christ as a member of the church. The Ministerial Association (1988, 187) asserts that "One cannot be baptized without joining the church family."

"Repentance" a Qualification for Baptism

Waggoner (Waggoner, 1878, 98) makes the following statement:

"Baptism has its subjects. To destroy the distinction of character in the subjects, and administer it to all without discrimination, would entirely destroy the ordinance as an institution for the followers of Christ."

The Adventist Handbook of Fundamental Beliefs (1988:187) identifies four areas of qualification. Faith, repentance, fruits of the spirit and examination of the candidate. When it comes to determining a child's qualification, the most difficult part is to assess repentance. Repentance requires a solid and fully developed moral and the capability of independent reasoning. White (White, 2000:14), giving the most simple definition, writes "repentance includes sorrow for sin and a turning away from it." Halford Luccock (Luccock, 1951:649) adds true repentance is a thoroughgoing change. "Repentance is more than penitence. It is not remorse; not admitting mistakes...It is more even than being sorry for one's sins. It is a moral and spiritual revolution." He continues "It is a breakdown of pride, of self-assurance, of the prestige that comes from success, and that inmost citadel which is self-will."

The twin sister of repentance (Matt 4:17;21:3; Luke 17:3; Acts 3:19; Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:9) is confession (1 John 1:9; Jas 5:9; Jer 3:13; Prov 28:13). These two go hand in hand. White (White, 2000: 26) clarifies "If we have not experienced that repentance, which is not to be repented of, and have not with true humility of soul and brokenness of spirit confessed our

sins, abhorring our iniquity, we have never truly sought for the forgiveness of our sin.” George Knight (Knight, 2004: 41) confirms that confession is the second element. He goes on to describe what confession is. Knight writes confession is a “religious concept that calls for both, heart searching and change.” Moral and mental maturity are indispensable for making sound and independent decisions in order to exercise true repentance and confession. This is the historic reason why infants do not qualify for baptism. Carr (Carr, 1964: 130) asserts such “accountability is primarily ethical and moral in nature. The need for intellectual understanding was. secondary”. For this reason it will be discussed in the following chapter how to determine a child’s readiness for baptism.

Determining a Child’s Qualification for Baptism

This section of the research aims to point out the factors that could be considered when determining a child’s qualification for baptism. It elaborates on moral development and a minimum age as considerations when examining a candidate for baptism. It ends by discussing the danger of premature baptism.

Consideration of Moral Development

The greatest challenge with children is to determine their level of maturity. Are children psychologically ready to experience repentance? Lawrence Kohlberg presents 3 levels and 6 stages of moral development, which help to understand what drives children in making moral decisions. The two stages of Level 3, which occur at the age 13 and up, are of the greater significance for this study. Kathleen M. Thies and John F. Travers, (Thies & Travers, 2009, 250) point out that “If true moral is to develop, it appears during these years. The individual does not appeal to other people for moral decisions; these decisions are made by an enlightened conscience.” It is interesting to note that this age has already earlier been identified in the Jews practice of Spiritual coming of age (bar and bat mitzvha) as well as in the mention Jesus’ age when he went to the temple as a teenager.

Outward Manifestation of Moral

Stage 1 of Level 3 can be summarized as follows: “An individual makes moral decisions legalistically; that is, the best values are those supported by the law because they have been accepted by the whole society” (Ibid.). The motivation with which children are relating to moral issues at this stage is rather a legalistic or outward moral code. This was the problem

that the common Pharisee and Sadducee blindly suffered. Jesus warned of being in this condition with the words “take heed therefore that the light in thee be not found darkness” (Mark 11:35). A person thinking that he has salvation without experiencing true conversion is thus lost and not even aware of it. Lewis Bevens Schenk (Schenk, 1940:55) boldly confirms: “It is clearer than day that many who are inwardly, or in respect of inward covenant, the children of the devil, are outwardly, or in respect of outward covenant, the children of God. Hence, therefore it is that when we say that children are in the covenant, and inward church members, who enjoy the inward and saving benefits of the covenant, but that they are in external and outward covenant, and therefore outwardly church members, to whom belong some outward privileges for their inward and eternal good.”

Hence, the danger, if Kohlberg is right, is that children who are baptized in this age or earlier will yet have to grow up and mature to finally internalize the covenant and principles that are behind baptism. The experience of true repentance is thus still ahead of them.

Inward Manifestation of Moral

The second stage of Level 3 in Kohlberg’s Stages of moral Development is the stage that every minister wants to penetrate when preaching the Gospel. Thies and Travers (Thies & Travers, 2009:250) share that only in this stage “an informed conscience decides what is right. People act not from fear, approval, or law, but from their own internalized standards of right and wrong.” This last stage is built on the previous stage. It is already presumed that the person has known and accepted the law, however the law is not just written in a book anymore, but in the heart of the person. It is that of which God said, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them” (Heb 10:15). Here takes place true repentance and true conversion. Thus, looking from the point of view of the moral development in children, it is only in the sixth stage that children could truly be guided into baptismal waters. This will allow a child to grow up before being confronted with making an intelligent and authentic decision for Jesus.

Consideration of a Minimum Age

At this point it is important to again reiterate the fact that the development of any given child is not a mechanical process which does not deviate from these development stages. The Ministerial Association (1988:189) concluded that “because individuals differ as to their

spiritual maturity at any given age...we cannot set a minimum age for baptism” However, the stages of development can be seen as a general benchmark that signify a coming of spiritual maturity. The Jews have recognized this age to be 12 or 13, and the New Testament record suggest that Jesus spiritual coming of age took place at the age of 12. The research of Kohlberg and the stand of most governments appears to uphold this time as most appropriate to recognize a child’s level of maturity to be accountable for its own decisions. Since “a person’s salvation is at jeopardy only when he has come the age of accountability”, it appears to be an appropriate age range to be considered.

Advantage of a Minimum Age

Carr (Carr, 1964: 122) points out that there is a serious problem with baptizing children. “He writes “in endeavoring to make believers out of the young child, the churches make him a hermit.” He calls this child a “victim”. Ministers, being pressured with reaching baptismal goals, are often tempted to reach out to children. Children in return are very receptive because of their openness and appreciation for attention. This makes them vulnerable to aggressive persuasions and thus jeopardize the opportunity for true repentance and an intelligent decision. Although setting a minimum age for baptism may seem restrictive to those desiring to be baptized, it may serve as a guard for ministers against the temptation to reach out to children for the fulfilling of a goal. Ministers would be guided in identifying candidates for baptism. This clearly does not reduce children from being interests, however it would be a reminder that more time needs to be invested with children to guide them in maturity first, before inviting them to make an intelligent decision for Jesus.

Limitation

Just like seasons change gradually so is the change in children a gradual process. And just as it is known at what time of the year winter will come, it is also known during what years a child leaves its childhood and becomes an adult. How is it known? Only by observation. Observation is crucial in the work of leading children to Christ. Observation, not of just the fruit of the spirit, which will be considered next, but observations of the level of maturity of the child. Is the child demonstrating the ability of deep reasoning? Is there evidence of internalized moral code, a “law written in the heart”? Is there evidence of real repentance and understanding of the fundamental principles of Christianity? Does the child demonstrate a thorough comprehension of the significance of church membership? Is the child mature

enough to be considered as a voice in church decision? Although there is a loose guide in regard to age, it is clear that it is not age that qualifies the child but rather the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Yet, the age or rather maturity is a prerequisite to authentic fruit of the Spirit.

The Problem of Premature Baptism

When children are invited and accepted for baptism before they have grown up enough to qualify for baptism It will confuse the meaning of baptism. The Methodist Church faced the problem by giving baptism a slightly modified meaning when children are the recipients. 'The Book of Worship for Church and Home' (1945:394,397) reflects this dilemma. Instead of calling for true repentance the child is charged with the question, "will you faithfully put away from you all known sin, of thought, word, or deed, and accept and confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord"? When a child is not mature enough to internalize the Christian values, which it may have learned from childhood on, it cannot be asked to commit to more than he is able to do. The difference is seen in the charge that is given to adults at their baptism. In the same book the charge to adults is formulated as follows:

"Dear beloved, who have come hither desiring to receive holy Baptism, the congregation gives thanks to God for your coming, and prays that the Holy Spirit may dwell within you, and that your faith may not fail. In the hearing of this congregation you should now make known your purpose to accept the obligation of this holy Sacrament. Do you truly repent of your sins and accept and confess Jesus Christ as your savior and Lord."

It is clear that call for repentance is appropriate here, while children have been simply invited to outwardly perform the duties of the Christian life. And that rightly so, because unless the child is old enough this is all it knows to do. The danger in falling into this practice is that children make a legalistic covenant with Jesus. While baptism is supposed be a dramatic experience to signify a special covenant, children are being placed on a path only to discover later that they were baptized into an intellectual faith rather than an experiential relationship. Carr (Carr, 1964:130) noticed this direction, in which the church is heading, way back in 1964. He writes that "intellectual understanding is primary and ethical accountability is given secondary place."

Considering the Child as Adult

The qualifications for baptism of a child does not differ from the qualifications of an adult. Once a child reaches cognitive and moral abilities of an adult, it is considered an adult believer. It no longer is a Christian child covered by the blood of Jesus by default. Now, as an adult believer, the youth is challenged to make a stand whether for Christ or whether for the world. The youth is faced with the accountability for his own actions and make a decision stay with Jesus or live without him. Thus all baptisms continue to be adult believers baptism..

DISCUSSION

The rite of baptism began as a symbol of purification. A person, being convicted of the need to find forgiveness for wrongdoing, and to be cleansed from sin was able to find relief and peace through the immersion into water. This act was a symbol for the work of salvation which has been deepened in the ministry of John the Baptist and finally brought to wholeness through Jesus Christ. The early church appears to have practiced only adult baptism. Although there is not mention whether or not infants or children were included in baptism, the theological argument strongly recommends that it was not the case.

The reason for that was that baptism called for repentance and confession of sin. Only a person who is accountable for his own actions is guilty and requires confession and repentance. The blood of the lamb covers all humans until they are old enough to decide and accept the sacrifice and be baptized.

The Jewish custom gives some clarity when this transition from childhood to manhood took place. It was a spiritual coming of age. For boys this age was 13, while for girls this age was 12. It is this time when the person decides for himself. For this reason the new testament writers have captured this importuned age in the life of the messiah.

Most governments share a similar thought by setting the age of accountability in a similar time frame. Through the world a significant number of countries have agreed that a child reaches an age of criminal accountability between 12 and 14 years of age.

In addition research on moral development suggest that a child goes through stages of moral development. The stage in which a child is enabled to internalize moral values and decide for himself what is right and wrong is reached at the age of 13 and above.

The vitality of being a mature person for making a decision for baptism is seen in the need to understand the meaning of baptism. Scripture reveals five important meanings of baptism which a person need to be able to comprehend and commit to in order to make an intelligent decision for Jesus. The symbol of Christ's death and resurrection; the symbol being dead to

sin and alive to God; the symbol of a covenant relationship; the symbol to the consecration to Christ's service; and the Symbol of entrance into the church.

Young children are easily persuaded into accepting these meanings head knowledge, which makes them vulnerable to aggressive methods of evangelism. However, they still lack the capability to make these values and meanings their own. Baptism has been greatly abused by evangelizing young children in order to keep up with church growth and baptismal goals. As a result children are persuaded with head knowledge and baptized without experiencing true conversion and repentance.

Because children are so different one from the other it is difficult to set a minimum age that would apply to all. Yet it could serve as a way to create order and minimize hasty decision in leading children into baptismal waters.

Conclusion

Baptism requires maturity and ability to make independent, decision for which one can be held accountable for. The challenge in determining if children are proper subject for baptism is in determining their maturity. Jewish tradition of spiritual coming of age, the mention of Christ's age in his childhood, modern research on moral development, and governmental policies and practices concerning the minimum age of criminal accountability all point to the same conclusion. It appears that between the ages 12 to 14 a child experience a major change in spiritual and moral perception. What used to be outward behavior now manifests as a internal moral code. Although setting a minimum age is not appropriate, it is most appropriate for the minister to keep this age in mind when reaching out to children. Great confusion can be done to children when leading them into a legalistic entry into their covenant with Jesus as adult believers.

Children should be given the time to reach a mature stage in their live before being invited for baptism. Children who express a desire to be baptized before this age should be guided into a greater understanding of Christian values and practices until the time come when they experience true conversion and are able to internalize these values. They should not be invited, motivated, or made believe to have the need for baptism before their time. Instead they should be reassured of God's love for them and their security in God.

Recommendation

The findings of this research predict that most children, baptized at the age of 13 and below will in later years testify that they did not really understand the meaning of baptism and did not experience true conversion. A quantitative study that will survey the spiritual journey of adults who have been baptized in the following age brackets would be a test of this research: ages 7-11, ages 12-13, and ages 14-16, It will give a deeper insight and help in setting the future course of baptismal practices.

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