



# Preparing Young People for Baptism and Church Membership

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# Preparing Young People

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Faithfully preparing a young person to follow the Lord in the obedience of baptism and to become a covenant member of a local church is an important responsibility entrusted to Christian parents and to the church. We believe that parents are responsible for instructing their children and overseeing their spiritual development. The church leadership is responsible to sustain and guard the ordinance of baptism and to faithfully “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Peter 5:1-3). We believe this “faithful shepherding” includes preparing our young people well. Therefore it is fitting for leaders of the church and parents to work together in preparing young people for baptism and for the responsibility and privilege of church membership.

## **GOALS OF THE PREPARATION PROCESS**

The goals of this process are to:

- Glorify Christ and the redeeming work of the cross.
- Help discern the candidate’s readiness for baptism.
- Involve the spiritual leader of the home in the preparation process.
- Provide the candidate with another opportunity to profess faith in a credible, decisive, public and memorable way.
- Inspire the candidate to live in obedience and faithfulness to the Lord.
- Prepare and equip the young person for the privilege and responsibility of membership in the local church.
- Provide an opportunity for the immediate family and the wider community of believers to publicly affirm, support, encourage and pray for the candidate.

## **AT WHAT AGE SHOULD A YOUNG PERSON BE BAPTIZED?**

We recommend that parents ordinarily wait until their child is at least eleven years old before beginning this process. Please note that this is a recommendation and not a mandate. As a matter of policy we do not set an age requirement. The Bible does not give us a precise age at which we should baptize children, and there is no minimum age requirement for church membership. All that we can biblically infer is that a child must be able to give a credible profession of faith. Therefore we depend on the candidate’s parents (or mentor) to discern when the young person is ready to begin the preparation process.

## WHY WAIT?

While we are open to baptizing younger children, we strongly encourage children to wait until at least age eleven. Since baptism precedes church membership, it follows that a decision to delay baptism is a decision to delay church membership, as well. There are at least four things to wait for.

### 1. Wait for Understanding

While children can confess faith in Christ when they are very young, they will likely not be able to contemplate the significance of baptism until they are older. It is important for children to understand the meaning of the ordinance and also to be mature enough to understand the significance of this act of obedience.

### 2. Wait for More Independent Thinking

It is not uncommon for those who were baptized during their pre-teen years to feel a need to be "re-baptized" when they are older. Memories of the first decade of our lives are often fuzzy at best. Even if we do remember a decision or an event like baptism, we usually cannot recall any reasoning behind the decision or event. Once young people have the capacity for reasoning and for more independent thinking, they are more likely to embrace as their own the decisions and commitments they make. Therefore it is reasonable that we refrain from baptizing children until they are more likely to remember the experience and more fully embrace the commitment that is represented by this public declaration of faith.

### 3. Wait for Significance

Encouraging children to wait until they are more mature reinforces the significance of baptism. This is especially true in a "me-oriented" culture that reinforces a mistaken notion that "if you want it, you can have it and you can have it now." Our hope is that as children wait, there will be a growing sense of anticipation as they look forward to following the Lord in the obedience of baptism. Such anticipation can add meaning and significance of the experience when they are eventually baptized.

### 4. Wait for Maturity

The process for preparing young people for baptism is designed to instruct and encourage them in their faith. It is also designed to help parents and church leadership to discern the candidates' readiness for baptism. As it is, this process is a stretch even for many eleven-year-olds, and most children younger than this simply lack the maturity they need to satisfactorily complete the process. Moreover, baptism can be one of the experiences in a young person's life that mark "coming of age" – the time when a person puts "childhood" behind and picks up the mantle of maturity.

## YOUTH BAPTISM PREPARATION PROCESS

### *Interest Expressed*

Parents of prospective baptism candidates usually enter the process in answer to the inquiry about their child's baptism.

### *Consent*

It is expected that candidates under the age of eighteen will have the consent of their parents before beginning the preparation process.

### *Identifying a Mentor*

Each candidate will be expected to have a mentor. Candidates from the same family may share one mentor, but the mentor will be encouraged to meet with the candidates separately. [Note: The ideal is for one child at a time to be prepared during the preparation cycle. Parents preparing more than one child should consider the potential difficulty if, at the end of the process, it is determined that one child is ready for baptism and the other is not.]

- The candidate's father is encouraged to be the mentor, if he is a maturing believer and living in the home.
- If the father is not a believer or not living in the home, the candidate's mother, grandparent or some other mature believer should assume this responsibility.
- If neither parent is a believer, the candidate may select (or seek help in finding) a maturing believer as a mentor who can lead the candidate through the preparation process, and who is willing to assist and encourage the young person in his or her walk with the Lord following baptism.

### *Mentor Orientation Session*

This meeting is designed to help prepare mentors for their significant role in the preparation process. [Note: Youth candidates should not attend this session.] This session will provide an opportunity for mentors to get acquainted with each other and to be equipped to prepare the candidate for baptism.

### *Mentors' Individual Sessions with Candidates*

Mentors are encouraged to have at least six separate, one-on-one sessions with the candidate. Mentors receive a guide that will assist them in leading the young person through each session. This usually occurs over a period of eight weeks. During this time mentors determine if the candidate should continue in the preparation process or if he or she should be encouraged to wait.

## *Combined Sessions for Mentors and Candidates*

Session 1 (generally on a Friday evening): Mentors and candidates meet together with one or two church leaders. Candidates share their testimonies with the group and review the meaning of baptism. [Note: Session 1 is required for all baptismal candidates.]

Session 2 (generally on a Saturday morning): It is important for candidates to understand that they are being baptized into the body of Christ and that their church is the local expression of that “body.” In this session we emphasize the importance of active participation and formal membership in the church. Candidates are introduced to our heritage, our distinctives and the meaning of church membership. The church covenant and statement of doctrine are also reviewed. [Note: This session is important for all candidates to attend and is required for all who are pursuing church membership.]

### *Interview for Baptism*

After both the candidate and sponsor have indicated the candidate’s readiness to move ahead with baptism, the candidate is interviewed in order to confirm a credible profession of faith and clear understanding of the meaning and significance of baptism. The interview team will include an elder, an adult leader (e.g., Sunday School teacher or small group leader) and, when available, an older youth who is a church member. During this interview the candidate gives his or her testimony and responds to informal questions concerning faith and church membership.

### *Interview for Church Membership*

If, at the time of the baptism interview, the candidate desires to proceed with church membership, the membership interview will be combined with the baptism interview (above). The aim of this interview is to determine the candidate’s readiness for church membership. The interview team will be interested in the candidate’s grasp of the church covenant, the statement of doctrine and the privileges and responsibilities of church membership.

### *Baptismal Service*

Once the interview team recommends the candidate for baptism, the candidate will be scheduled for a future baptismal service.

Excerpted and adapted from church practice of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis.