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COMMUNITY CHURCH

**CHILDHOOD BAPTISM
AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP:
A POSITION AND POLICY FOR SOJOURN
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By Scott Holman and Jared Kennedy

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Introduction

At Sojourn, we make it the highest priority to care for you and your children. This is particularly the case when it comes to a child's spiritual life. We want to encourage your kids to place their faith in Christ and have a faith that continues to grow as they grow up. We are also passionate about Jesus Christ and the beautiful symbols he has given to his church in baptism and the Lord's Table. It is a great privilege to discuss these matters with parents and their children, and it is our desire to sit and talk through these matters with you. As you read this document, please know that you have freedom to ask any question.

This paper begins by summarizing two positions within the Baptist tradition regarding the questions of childhood participation in the church ordinances, baptism and communion, and as childhood church membership. The two views are:

1. Withholding baptism and communion from children until they reach a level of maturity that is independent of their parents in matters relating to God and the church.
2. Immediate participation in baptism and communion for believing children, who are recognized as church members with limited responsibilities.

Early in the church's history, some began wrongly baptizing infants. This was in spite of the fact that the church during the New Testament times had only baptized believers—baptizing only after evidence of a changed heart. Infant children were considered to be part of "covenant families"—children of Christians to whom God had promised a family inheritance. Families who baptize their infant children expect that God will confirm this promise by giving faith to their children as they grow to adulthood. In churches that practice infant baptism, a child's faith is often "confirmed"—sometimes with a special ceremony—once the child has reached an age of accountability. The Baptist tradition, though only several hundred years old, has always practiced *believer's baptism*, rejecting the infant baptism of the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed traditions.

Both positions on childhood participation in church ordinances have strong historical support. In 1858, Southern Baptist theologian, John Dagg, wrote in favor of immediate participation for children:

Intelligent piety has, in all ages, been found in children who have not yet reached maturity; and such children have a Scriptural right to church-membership [which would imply participation in baptism and communion].¹

In 1864, Charles Spurgeon, an English Baptist pastor who wrote extensively about teaching the gospel to children, preached a sermon, in which he seems to imply that his Metropolitan Tabernacle also welcomed children as members:

Of the many boys and girls whom we have received into Church-fellowship, I can say of them all, they have gladdened my heart, and I have never received any with greater confidence than I have these.²

On the other hand, it is worth noting—if only as an historical point—that most Baptists in history were not baptized until their late teens or early twenties. Most held jobs before they were baptized. Even Spurgeon waited to baptize his own sons—who may have been believers for years—until they were eighteen.³ Simply put, as far as Baptists were concerned, baptizing young children was rare.

This is not the case in Southern Baptist churches today. Between 1977 and 1997 there was a 250 percent increase in the number of baptisms of children under age six in Southern Baptist churches.⁴ Moreover, there is evidence that this trend is not only recent but distinctly American. English Baptist Anthony Cross observes that Southern Baptists tend to approve of baptizing younger persons than do Baptists in England.⁵ Why is this the case?

Perhaps our parental desire to see our children saved has trumped our responsibility as both parents and church members to protect our children and the church from error. We want to see our children embrace Christ and experience authentic salvation. This is right and good, but it can nevertheless be dangerous if we are not equally wary of deceiving our children by giving false assurances. In our day, there is a tremendous amount of social pressure on the church's pastoral leadership to confirm the conversion of a young child.⁶ Pastors and teachers must take care not to pressure children for a quick decision without waiting for understanding about what it means to turn away from sin and truly trust in Jesus. Parents also should consider how dangerous it is for the church to allow nominal Christians—those who are believers in name only—into its membership. Nominal Christians weaken the church by giving a false witness to the watching world and pose even greater dangers if given positions as teachers or leaders. In the 1840s, J. L. Reynolds issued the following warning:

The recognition of unconverted persons, as members of a Christian Church, is an evil of no ordinary magnitude. It throws down the wall of partition which Christ himself has erected and obliterates the distinction between the church and the world... An accession of nominal Christians

may enlarge its numbers, but cannot augment its real strength. A Church that welcomes to the privileges of Christ's house, the unconverted, under the specious pretext of increasing the number of his followers, in reality betrays the citadel to his foes.⁷

So, the issue of childhood baptism and church membership is important on at least two levels. First, it has to do with our children, for whom we desire salvation. Second, because it involves the ordinances (baptism and communion), it has to do with the visible witness of the church in the world.

Position #1: Withholding

The arguments for withholding baptism and communion from children until they reach a level of maturity that is independent of their parents in matters relating to God and the church are as follows:⁸

1. Children, just like adults, are sinful, and they are in need of Jesus' saving work (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-21).
2. Children can be saved. Christ invites children to come to him (1 Samuel 1-3; Psalm 22:9-10; 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34-35; Jeremiah 1:5-8; Luke 1:15; Luke 18:16), and he uses children as examples of the humility necessary for those who wish to enter Jesus' kingdom (Matthew 11:25; 18:2-4; 19:13-14; Mark 10:15-16; Luke 10:21; 18:14-16).
3. Baptism and communion should be given immediately when one's confession of faith is publicly credible. For adults, this means living in the community of faith for a time and being examined by the elders and larger community who watch for an authentic trust in Christ that is independent of others.
4. It is not clear in the New Testament that children were ever baptized or that we should expect they should be (e.g., Acts 4:4, 32; 5:6, 12-14; 6:1; 8:1-3, 12; 9:2; 10:24, 33, 44-48; 12:13). All followers of Christ described in the New Testament are baptized as adults, who are actively participating in church life.
5. A child's faith is primarily nurtured by his or her parents (Ephesians 6:4)—primarily the father, who provides pastoral direction to his child. The New Testament teaching that children must obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20) implies that children relate to God and the church primarily through their parents, and they are not on independent standing before God (see also 1 Corinthians 7:14).
6. Moreover, children are easily deceived. They require the constant supervision and care of parental authority (Proverbs 22:15; Ephesians 4:14-15; 1 Corinthians 13:11).
7. Due to immaturity, children have had little chance to express their trust in Christ independently from their parents. For example, they have had few opportunities to choose between Christ and their peers in a deep way. They cannot make a publicly credible confession.
8. Therefore, baptism and communion should be withheld from children until they reach a level of maturity that is independent of their parents.
9. Moreover, baptism and communion are inseparable from active membership and participation in the local church. So, children should be excluded from church membership as well.
10. God's saving grace is not given through baptism and communion. So, there is no danger to the child in waiting. In fact, waiting can increase the honor associated with this event as well as allow time for the child's discipline and faith to grow.

“Withholding” At Its Worst

In its attempt to judge the faithfulness of each individual’s testimony by the fruits of that person’s life (Matthew 7:16; 1 John 4:1ff; James 2), the church begins to emphasize good works as a means of self-assessment. Tender children (and adults), in whom the Spirit is at work, may be discouraged by their continuing sinfulness and lack of apparent fruit. A well-intentioned policy may become a stumbling block that encourages these children to have a fearful and introspective view of their spiritual lives. Parents may be discouraged as well, and “withholding” could become an excuse for them to lower their expectations and put off training their children in spiritual things. The adolescent period may be prolonged and filled with many failures. If this occurs, God will judge the church’s teachers for being stumbling blocks to the little ones in their care (Matthew 18:6).

“Withholding” At Its Best

The church welcomes young adults into its membership with the confidence that they have demonstrated evidence of change and new life throughout their adolescent years. These young people demonstrate a deep understanding of the Christian faith without confusion, and they gladly look forward to their public confession and baptism. Once joining the church, these adult believers have fond memories of their baptism as a significant event and rite of passage. In the process, the church’s reputation and leadership is protected from those who are Christians in name only.

Resources for Parents:

Dever, Mark E. “Who Should Be Baptized? At What Age Should Believers Be Baptized?” Sermon at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., on Sunday, April 21, 2002.

Elliff, Jim. *How Children Come to Faith in Christ*. Audio cassettes. Little Rock, AR: Family Life, 1994. MP3s available at *Christian Communicators Online*, <http://www.ccwonline.org>.

_____. “Childhood Conversion.” Available at *Christian Communicators Online*, <http://www.ccwonline.org/cconv.html>. Published in 1997.

Position #2: Immediate Participation

The arguments for immediate participation in baptism and communion for believing children who are also recognized as church members with limited responsibilities are as follows:⁹

1. Children, just like adults, are sinful, and they are in need of Jesus' saving work (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-21).
2. Children can be saved. Christ invites children to come to him (1 Samuel 1-3; Psalm 22:9-10; 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34-35; Jeremiah 1:5-8; Luke 1:15; Luke 18:16), and he uses children as examples of the humility necessary for those who wish to enter Jesus' kingdom (Matthew 11:25; 18:2-4; 19:13-14; Mark 10:15-16; Luke 10:21; 18:14-16).
3. Believing children should be welcomed into the church through baptism. The NT authors addressed these children as members within the church (Ephesians 6:1 "in the Lord;" Colossians 3:20), and we should as well.
4. The New Testament knows nothing of un-baptized followers of Christ. If a child is a believer, he or she is a disciple. If a child is a disciple, then Christ commands that this child participate in baptism and communion (Matthew 28:18-10).
5. Baptism and communion are intended for every member of Christ's church. They are ways of experiencing and remembering God's goodness and the gracious gifts that he has lavished on his people. None of Jesus' gracious gifts—worship, teaching, preaching, community, pastoral care, communion, or even church discipline—should be withheld from young followers of Christ.
6. In his pastoral epistles, Paul limits the position of elder to men (1 Timothy 2:11-12; 3:2). Moreover, the term "elder" itself suggests that the attainment of age and experience is required for one to exercise this role in the church (though Timothy should not be considered to be too young—4:12). Paul also sets an age limit (age 60) for widows who can receive support from the church (5:9). In the spirit of these limitations, it is suggested that church leadership roles and responsibilities that call for a certain level of maturity should be withheld from children until they reach that level. In other words, believing children are full-fledged members of the church that have limited responsibilities until they reach a level of independence from their parents. Until that time, their primary responsibility *in the Lord* is to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1).

"Immediate Participation" At Its Worst

The social pressure on the church's leadership may lead them to confirm the salvation of children at a very young age. Teachers and parents may pressure

children for quick decisions without waiting for understanding about what it means to turn away from sins and truly trust in Jesus. False assurances may be given to some children. As these children grow, their Christianity is shown to lack credibility, and this damages the church's public reputation as well as its witness to the gospel. As loving shepherds of the church, the elders are responsible to confront any professed believer (adult or child) whose life is not lived in accord with his confession (2 Tim 4:1-5; Heb 13:17). Therefore, if a baptized child continues in sin without repenting, the elders will have to take corrective measures. The goal in any "church discipline" situation is restoration, and our hope is that any correction from Sojourn's elders would augment parents' discipline. The worst cast scenario would occur if the elders were at odds with the parents.

"Immediate Participation" At Its Best

The church teaches parents that salvation is a work of God and not merely a decision by the believer. Children, like adults, show understanding and evidence of believing faith before the church accepts them for baptism. Christ's goodness, love, and gracious mercy are taught to children. The church receives believing children into its membership and corporate worship gatherings with confidence and glad hearts—knowing that their faith is made strong by Christ. The children, encouraged to obey their parents, read their Bibles, and talk to God in prayer, grow in wisdom and grace even as they grow in stature.

Resources for Parents:

Christman, Ted. *Forbid Them Not: Rethinking the Baptism and Church Membership of Children and Young People* (booklet). Owensboro, KY: Heritage Baptist Church.

Spurgeon, Charles H. "Children Brought to Christ, and Not to the Font." Sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on Sunday, July 24, 1864. Available at *The Spurgeon Archive*, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0581.htm>.

- ed. M.E. Dever, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 327.
- 8 See Jim Butler, "Church Membership and Young Children" a paper presented to Free Grace Baptist Church, Chilliwack, British Columbia, on April 14, 2001; Mark E. Dever, "Baptism in the Context," 344-50; "The Baptism of Children at Capitol Hill Baptist Church," a paper presented to Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C. in 2004; "Who Should Be Baptized? At What Age Should Believers Be Baptized?" a sermon at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., on Sunday, April 21, 2002; Jim Elliff, *How Children Come to Faith in Christ*, audio cassettes, (Little Rock, AR: Family Life, 1994), [MP3s are available at *Christian Communicators Online*, <http://www.ccwonline.org/>]; "Childhood Conversion," available at *Christian Communicators Online*, <http://www.ccwonline.org/cconv.html>, 1997; Jim Elliff and Daryl Wingerd, "Is Baptism a Requirement of Church Membership?" available at *Christian Communicators Online*, <http://www.ccwonline.org/baptismrq.html>, 2006; and David W. Merck, "Children and Church Membership," available at *The Reformed Reader*, <http://www.reformedreader.org/rbs/cacm.htm>, accessed December 7, 2007.
 - 9 Ted Christman, *Forbid Them Not: Rethinking the Baptism and Church Membership of Children and Young People* (booklet), (Owensboro, KY: Heritage Baptist Church); John L. Dagg, "Chapter 4: Infant Church Membership" in *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order*, (Greenville, SC: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858); text found at http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/dagg_vol2/ch4.html; Charles H. Spurgeon, "Children Brought to Christ, and Not to the Font," a sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on Sunday, July 24, 1864; available at *The Spurgeon Archive*, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0581.htm>.
 - 10 The following policy was adapted from Bruce Ware and Shawn Wright, "A Recommendation from the Elders of Clifton Baptist Church on Childhood Baptism and Church Membership," February 15, 2004; and David Michaels, "Preparing Young People for Baptism and Church Membership." Bethlehem Baptist Church, 2007.
 - 11 Adapted from "On Children and the Lord's Table" by Ron Elwardt, Associate Pastor of Children and Families, Camelback Bible Church, Paradise Valley, AZ; Available online at http://www.cbcaz.org/pcevents_and/Why_Can't_I_Have_a_Snack_Like_Everyone_Else?Thoughts_on_Children_and_the_Lord's_Supper by David Michael (Children Desiring God, 1997).
 - 12 Wording here from the NIV Study Bible.

different conclusions about these things. Do not judge others because your approach is different (Romans 14:1-23).

8. What if I don't have kids, but I work with the children's ministry at Sojourn? How can I encourage a child who expresses faith in Christ without overstepping or pressuring the child?
 - *Stress the facts of the gospel. Teach children God's laws and commands, which the Holy Spirit uses to bring conviction of sin (Deuteronomy 6). Then, teach them God's promises and plainly speak about their need to repent from sin and trust Christ (Acts 2:38-39).*
 - *Encourage under-churched children to come to SojournKids' regular gatherings. God saves sinners through exposure to His preached and taught word. Pray that the ministry of SojournKids will influence every child that walks through our doors.*
 - *Recognize that children are easily deceived and manipulated (Ephesians 4:14), and, just like adults, they may be tempted to find assurance in things they can manipulate—their own knowledge, emotional experiences, prayers, or good works. Discourage children from finding assurance in such things, and encourage them to trust Jesus alone.*
 - *Do not offer false assurances or pressure children for commitments. Do not assure children that a prayer for mercy (a "sinner's prayer") guarantees their eternal destiny. It does not. Salvation is a work of God. We must teach children that assurance is found in Jesus Christ and his work alone.*
 - *Do not be skeptical about a child's sincerity. Although we want to be careful not to give a child a false sense of security, neither do we want to unwittingly discourage children from believing that God can grant them saving faith as a child.*
 - *Trust God to work in the hearts of his children to bring them to himself through faith, in his time and in his ways. Your responsibility is to faithfully tell the gospel to them and leave the results to the Lord (Philippians 1:6). We can trust that the Holy Spirit will assure those who are truly changed (Rom 8:16).*
9. What if a child—on her own initiative—says she is trusting in Christ?
 - *Express joy, but use discernment about validating that expression as one of saving faith. Offer encouragement to her to continue placing her trust in Christ throughout her life.*

Lord's Table in an unworthy manner. He instructs his readers to test the attitude of their own hearts and actions and their awareness of the significance of the supper.¹² Each person should examine the genuineness of his faith and life so as to avoid taking upon himself the Lord's judgment.

In light of these two concerns, Sojourn's pastoral leadership advises parents not to allow their children to participate in the Lord's Supper until after they have been baptized. If for the above reasons one is inclined to encourage his child to wait, take note of the following:

- *Make waiting positive. Instead of only focusing on why your child shouldn't partake, focus on your eager anticipation that they will partake. If you can do so truthfully, let your child know how you have seen the Lord's work in their lives, and how you look for them to grow. Encourage them to continue trusting Christ. Children*

"One simple believing site of Christ will produce more light and peace and joy than a lifetime of looking within ourselves for evidences and signs of grace."

Octavius Winslow, Soul-Depths and Soul-Heights

in whom the Spirit is at work will be aware of their sins. Do not encourage children to be introspective and worried about their faults. Point them to Christ and assure them of your confidence that since he has begun a good work in them, he will finish it (Philippians 1:6).

- *While you wait, prepare. If your children are with you during the communion service, allow them to hold your hand as you hold the elements. Allow them to quietly observe you as you take each element. Share with them how much the Lord loved us to give His life for us. Pray with them thanking the Lord for His death and life.*
 - *Set an example of worthy partaking. If bitterness or anger or any sin troubles you, do not partake. This will show your child that you are serious about Paul's admonition that we should not partake of the Table in an unworthy way.*
5. *What if my child has not been baptized, but has already been partaking of the Lord's Supper?*
- *As stated above, our counsel is that you not continue allowing your child to take communion until after he or she has finished the childhood baptism process. We recognize that this may be discouraging to a child that has already been taking the Lord's Supper, and he or she may view*

conscience tender and ready to hear the gospel (Galatians 4:1-5).
Pray these prayers in front of your kids.

- Talk to your children.
 - Talk to them about the benefits of obeying God and living with wisdom (Proverbs 3:13-18; 8:12-21; Exodus 20:12; Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20-23; 7:1-3; 24:13-14; Ephesians 6:1-3).
 - Lovingly warn your children that failing to trust and obey God results in death and hell (Proverbs 12:1-2; 13:1; 15:32-33; 19:20, 27-29; 23:12; Luke 12:4-5).
 - Assure your children that Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and joy to those who trust him (Romans 5:8).
 - Correct your children when they disobey. Remember mercy when correcting your children. A truly just punishment destroys, but Christ already has taken the rebukes and beatings our sins deserve. Repent and ask your children for forgiveness when you fail to be merciful (Psalm 39:10-11; Proverbs 13:24; 29:15; 1 Timothy 3:16; Ephesians 6:4; Psalm 6:1-2; 38:1; 39:11; Isaiah 53:4-5; Romans 5:8).
 - Don't rush your children to be baptized if you feel they are not ready. Some members of Sojourn's leadership are convicted that their children should wait to participate in the ordinances until they are older than age twelve. Do not feel you have failed as a parent because you do not see fruit. Trust that God will work according to his own timetable (Philippians 1:6).
 - Ask for help. God has put us in community together so that we can help one another. Sojourn's pastoral leaders have identified parent mentors that will talk and pray with you about your parenting struggles. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask.
3. What if my child was baptized at another church before our family came to Sojourn?
- By asking parents to wait until their children are twelve years old to present them for baptism, we are not saying that a genuine baptism cannot occur before age 12. Several members of Sojourn's leadership were baptized before this age. If a child was baptized as a believer at another church before coming to Sojourn, we will not ask that this child be baptized again.

- *Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit, who uses God's laws and commands to bring sin and the necessity of trusting Christ home to the child's conscience (2 Kings 22; Romans 7:7-9). Does your child demonstrate sorrow and remorse about his or her sin? Does your child recognize that he has sinned against God and not just against others? Does your child confess her sins to God and ask for his mercy without your prompting? Does your child demonstrate commitment to Christ in the midst of strong temptation to disobey?*
 - *Revelation is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he reveals the thoughts of God to people so that a person may obtain a true understanding of Christ and his word (John 10:26-27; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16). Does your child understand that she is a sinner and cannot save herself? Does your child understand that his sins deserve death and punishment in hell? Does your child understand that Jesus died as a substitute for his sins? Does your child understand that she is saved only by God's grace and not because of any good within herself? Does your child demonstrate an understanding of the Scriptures when they are taught or is your child confused by the Scriptures?*
 - *Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives life to a dead soul, and produces a credible profession of repentance and faith (John 3; Romans 6; 10:9-10) as well as a new valuing of the Scriptures (John 6:45). Does your child demonstrate a genuine interest in spiritual things? Does your child pray or read the Scriptures on their own initiative? What sins have your children repented of? Does your child desire to talk with you about the Scriptures? How does your child demonstrate that he trusts Jesus? Does your child demonstrate a genuine desire to tell others about Jesus?*
3. Neither sorrow over sin nor interest in spiritual things alone is sufficient evidence of a regenerate heart or the work of the Spirit (Acts 8:9-25; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Hebrew 12:17).

Why Wait Until Age 12?

We are open to baptizing younger children but strongly encourage parents to wait until at least age twelve. Since baptism precedes church membership it follows that a decision to delay participation in the ordinances is a decision to delay church membership as well. There are at least three things for which to wait.

1. Wait for Evidence. Several factors might lead a child to demonstrate sorrow over sin or an interest in spiritual things. However, permitting a child to participate in the ordinances and become a church member

Grandpa's Box by Starr Meade.

3. At the conclusion of this study, the child will meet for an interview (or series of interviews) with his or her parents, the parents' mentors, and a representative from Sojourn's leadership. The purpose of these studies is for the mentors and leadership representative meeting with the child and parents to discern if the child understands and has embraced the gospel. The elders will proceed to the next step only after speaking with the mentors and leadership representative and based upon their recommendation.
4. Mentors and parents will jointly present a child to the elders for church membership and participation in the ordinances at the conclusion of their teaching/mentorship meetings.
5. If the elders are convinced that a child has given evidence of a genuine conversion, the child shall be baptized and accepted into the fellowship and discipline of the church. The child, under the authority of his or her parents, will be without voting responsibilities until the age of eighteen.
6. At the age of eighteen, the child will attend Sojourn's membership classes and interview with an elder. The voting responsibilities given to adult members will only be exercised after the completion of this interview.



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