

Every conscientious pastor strives to address his entire flock—children and young people as well as adults. By God’s blessing, some of those children and young people respond savingly to the gospel. Then the question come, what do we do with the youthful professor of faith in Jesus Christ? Pastor Ted Christman skillfully addresses that issue. Questioning the temptation to withhold baptism and church membership until they are more mature, he forges a path that is biblical, pastoral and wise. You will find this to be a gracious and stimulating discussion on an important issue of pastoral practice.

Pastor Ted Tripp, DMin.
Grace Fellowship Church,
Hazelton, Pennsylvania

Every Baptist pastor and church must confront the question, “How should we handle children who profess faith in Christ?” Some do so with little thought, producing multitudes of godless, unregenerate Baptists who can testify of their childhood “baptism.” Others, in reaction to this thoughtlessness and concerned about the harm it brings, go to the opposite extreme and refuse to baptize anyone under an arbitrarily determined age. With pastoral wisdom and fatherly tenderness, Pastor Ted Christman does a wonderful job addressing both errors while charting a course for the careful practice of believer’s baptism regardless of the candidate’s age.

Pastor Tom Ascol, PhD
Grace Baptist Church,
Cape Coral, Florida

FORBID THEM NOT

*RETHINKING THE BAPTISM AND
CHURCH MEMBERSHIP OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE*



TED CHRISTMAN

Forbid Them Not:

Rethinking the Baptism and Church Membership of Children and Young People

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FOREWORD

TO THE 2024 EDITION

“Pastor Ted,” a name cherished by those who knew him. A title’s value lies in the life it represents. There’s a marked difference between being called ‘pastor’ and truly being one. For those who knew Pastor Ted, the title ‘pastor’ carried a weight beyond the ordinary. My father had a profound love for people. Radiating joy, his presence was felt everywhere, as if he were ubiquitous. How could he make so many people feel equally loved and cared for simultaneously? No matter how stretched he was for time, you always knew he was a phone call or text away from being right beside you for as long as you needed.

While I’ve often described him as the consummate shepherd, he was not THE prototype—that role is reserved for Christ alone—but in many respects he was a small “p” prototype. He certainly would never have characterized himself that way, but those who knew him would acknowledge his unique gift. If there were a book I wish he would have written, it wouldn’t focus on the baptism and church membership of children, but rather on the characteristics and qualities of a

true shepherd. However, it's precisely because of those qualities that he was so qualified to write on this topic.

He loved his people, and children were at the forefront of his pastoral concern. He would have soul-to-soul, gospel conversations with them even at a very young age. He approached the hearts and minds of children with the skill of a teacher and the care of a physician. In fact, moments before the Lord swiftly called him home, he was texting a young man in our church urging him to give his life to Christ. He devoted himself to fostering deep relationships with the children of our church through prayer, consistent interaction, teaching, and soul-care. He was a spiritual father to the kids in our church—all of them.

During my upbringing, our youth group was vibrant and spiritually minded. Dad regularly gathered us for “Teen Sunday,” where he invested in us relationally and spiritually. But this initiative began long before our teenage years. He established a Bible reading club for children, encouraging us to cultivate the habit of reading the book of Proverbs twelve times a year, or the entire Bible. Students who completed this challenge were rewarded with a celebration at a local restaurant. Each year, there were typically multiple winners.

As I reflect on that group of twenty-five to thirty students, I am struck by the fact that the overwhelming majority of them are still faithfully walking with Jesus to this day. My father played a pivotal role in nearly all of their conversions. He baptized them, officiated their weddings, and then con-

tinued the cycle with their own children, baptizing and marrying many of them as well. This was an example of “long obedience in the same direction,” a pastor pouring his life into the children of his flock.

As you read this book, you’ll quickly realize that it transcends mere theoretical discussions on the baptism and church membership of children. It is written by a seasoned practitioner—an experienced pastor who routinely shepherded children towards faith in Christ.

Chapter 2 stands out as the book’s gem. Within that section, Pastor Ted presents the diagnostic questions he consistently asked children to assess their understanding of the gospel and discern credible evidence of saving faith. Through his consistent interaction with these children, he was able to observe the transformation that took place in their hearts and lives.

I vividly recall the time when my dad set out to write this book. We were walking on a beach in South Carolina as he shared his deep personal conviction in this area. Born from extensive experience witnessing children coming to the Lord at a young age and undergoing obvious conversion, he was compelled to dig into the biblical data regarding the baptism and church membership of children. His conclusion was straightforward: If children are converted and give credible evidence of faith, they should be baptized, just like adults.

So what does that mean for their inclusion into the membership of a local church? Undoubtedly, this is a topic that

invites a wide range of opinions. Even so, he approaches this matter wisely and thoughtfully. But however one handles the membership issue, one thing remains clear: children were baptized upon their conversion—they were not asked to wait until adulthood since the biblical data does not support such a notion.

I extend my gratitude to Founders Press for republishing this volume, trusting it will prove invaluable to pastors grappling with these critical issues. Dad, thank you for your profound love and investment in our souls. Our enduring love for Christ today is a testament to the sacrificial love you poured into us through Christ.

Jonathan Christman

Jonathan Christman, a graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with a MDiv in biblical and theological studies, served as the pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Owensboro, KY for ten years before transitioning to the corporate world as a financial technology consultant. He continues to express his passion for the church and gospel work, particularly in India. He operates a YouTube channel called “Sneaky Greek,” designed to teach Biblical and Classical Greek to students in a fun and engaging manner.

FOREWORD

TO THE 2004 EDITION

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, in opposition to 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 doing so. 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.

Pastor Fred A. Malone, Ph.D.
First Baptist Church
Clinton, LA

PREFACE

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 ap-

preciated 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 this 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 worshipers, 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, “Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them” (Mark 10:14). The Authorized Version reads, “Forbid them not.” He then went on to say that “for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

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 heaven become childlike in their hearts and demeanor. His words were not “for to these belongs the kingdom of heaven,” but rather “to *such*” (Matt. 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 disciples’ 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 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 twenty-first 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” (1 Thess. 1:5). Unfortunately, however, they are not baptized post-faith as disciples, according to the Savior’s command (Matt. 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 (Jer. 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 of them to the greatest” (v. 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—espe-

cially 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 the Second London 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 discernible, 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.
7. 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.