

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SHOULD SOUTHERN BAPTISTS BAPTIZE THEIR CHILDREN?
A BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL DEFENSE OF THE CONSISTENCY OF THE
BAPTISM OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH CREDOBAPTISTIC PRACTICES

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APPROVAL SHEET

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To my wife, Jessica

Without you, this goal could never have been achieved. You are my best friend, and I am continually blessed by your love, support, and encouragement.

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My parents, William and Carol Matz, first introduced me to Jesus Christ, the life of the church, and the Bible. As a young child my mother taught me to read with a children's Bible. At the age of seven, it was my dad who shared the gospel with me and led me to commit my life to

Christ. My interest in this subject matter is in no small part a result of their faithful witness to the Christian faith throughout my childhood.

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ABSTRACT

Thesis: The baptism of young children is consistent with Southern Baptist understandings of credobaptism so long as the children are genuinely confessing Christians.

Southern Baptists have expressed increasing degrees of alarm over allegedly rising rates of child baptisms. As a result, an increasing number of Southern Baptists have argued that the baptism of young children is inconsistent with Southern Baptists' understandings of credobaptism and a regenerate church membership. Against these allegations, this dissertation asserts that children can be converted and when converted they should be baptized.

The first chapter of this dissertation argues that water baptism is prescriptively contemporaneous with Spirit baptism. It establishes such based on the relationship between water and Spirit baptism as seen in the seven direct references to Spirit baptism in the New Testament. It also examines the New Testament data regarding the timing of water baptism as it relates to faith, repentance, confession of sins, and Spirit baptism. Baptism is shown to be the proper confessional response to Christian conversion. As a result, delaying baptism undermines its confessional nature and its close temporal connection to conversion.

The second chapter explores the biblical data pertaining to the spiritual condition of children as such data relates to conversion. It examines both Old and New Testament discipleship and initiation processes, as well as the biblical data related to individual responsibility and the age of accountability. It establishes that even relatively young children are valid candidates for conversion.

The third chapter explores historical views of Southern Baptist regarding the spiritual condition of children as well as the validity of baptizing children. It establishes that claims of a uniform practice by Southern Baptists in which the baptism of children is delayed until they

reach a specific age are suspect from a historical perspective. It also offers statistical analysis of the historical trends in regards to baptism by age.

The final chapter examines how the baptism of young children affects a regenerate church membership. It argues that children cognitively can respond to the gospel and behave as converts. This is against how some have applied Piaget and Fowlers developmental stages to child conversion. It also explores soteriological, ecclesiological (rebaptisms), and evangelistic objections relating to the baptism of young children.

WHEN SHOULD SOUTHERN BAPTISTS BAPTIZE THEIR CHILDREN?

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no doctrinal issue takes on greater significance to Baptists globally than that of believer's baptism.¹ Yet among Southern Baptist in the United States few issues spark greater consternation. SBC leaders have recently lamented their declining baptisms and tried to develop strategies to counter such.² Particularly troubling for some has been the claim that "The only consistently growing age group in baptisms is age five and under."³ For example, Beason Divinity School Dean Timothy George responded to the report noting that "'toddler' or preschool baptism is something different, and relatively new in Baptist circles...[and that] baptism...has been reserved for a later stage in the journey of faith."⁴ George is troubled by this emerging trend.

George is not alone in his objection to "semi-pedobaptism." For example, John Hammett and Mark Dever have both recently written well-researched critiques of the practice of baptizing

¹Also known as credobaptism. Regardless of one's understanding of Baptist origins, Baptists throughout history have been defined by the idea that entrance into the community of faith involves an individual, voluntary commitment to Christianity as pictured in baptism. See, e.g., Paige Patterson, "What Contemporary Baptists Can Learn from the Anabaptists," in *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists: Restoring New Testament Christianity*, ed. Malcolm Yarnell (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2013), 11-12; William Roscoe Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996), 267ff. William H. Brackney, *Denominations in America*, vol. 2, *The Baptists* (New York: Greenwood, 1988), 71ff.

²"Pastors' Task Force On SBC Evangelistic Impact," NAMB, last modified May, 2014, accessed May 29, 2014, <http://www.namb.net/baptismtaskforce/>.

³Ibid., 1.

⁴Timothy George, "Troubled Waters," *First Things*, June 2, 2014, accessed March 19, 2015, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/06/troubled-waters>.

young children. The objections to the practice are numerous and come from a host of scholars. Young children cannot meet the cognitive or volitional requirements of salvation. They are biblically incapable of being saved. Their baptism rejects historic Baptist practices. Even if they can be saved, their baptism should be delayed as to insistence on an immediate or quick baptism is a move towards sacramentalism. The baptism of young children is the cause of re-baptisms.⁵ Further, several dissertations have been written criticizing the practice.⁶ Thus a movement has coalesced (primarily within the academy but now beginning to trickle down into the churches) that seeks to delay the baptism of children for as long as possible.

⁵John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 266-77; Mark Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology, vol. 2, (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 344-50. Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary College Dean John Mark Yeats also recently lamented this trend, stating "At its best, baptizing so many who are very young, we run a high risk of minimizing the significance of baptism and at its worst, we have become semi-pedobaptists." John Mark Yeats, "Baptizing Preschoolers?," *Unfinished Works*, May 17, 2014, accessed May 29, 2014, <http://www.johnmyeats.com/unfinished-works/baptizing-preschoolers>.

⁶Six dissertations have been written either explicitly rejecting or at best cautioning against the baptism of young children, four of which are from a Southern Baptist perspective. The earliest of these comes from Lewis Craig Ratliff who argues that children are cognitively incapable of grasping the doctrine of Lordship and therefore cannot be saved. The second comes from Melvin Douglas Clark also of Southern Seminary. He argues that since children struggle with self-identification while conversion involves a change at the inner-core of one's being, it is inappropriate to view children as converts. Following up on Clark and Ratliff, Gary Thomas Deane studies the gospel comprehension of children at Vacation Bible School. Viewing this data through the lens of Piaget's stages of development, Deane argues that older children grasp the gospel better than younger children. Withers's dissertation is the most recent from a Southern Baptist perspective. He argues that young children should not be baptized and that the reason that there has been a spike in baptism is because of social forces within the convention. He further argues that churches should adopt policies restricting baptism to those age 12 and older. Booth and Gutekunst examine this issue from a Seventh-Day Adventist perspective. Gutekunst argues against baptism prior to the age of 12 based on the Piagetian stages of development. Booth argues that conceptions of salvation increase with age. Lewis Craig Ratliff, "Discipleship, Church Membership and Children among Southern Baptist: An Investigation of the Place of Children in a Baptist church in View of Christ's Teaching on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963); Melvin Douglas Clark, "The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969); Gary Thomas Deane, "An Investigation of the Child's Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development" (EdD. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); John Warren Withers, "Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), accessed November 5, 2010, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses; Bradley S. Booth, "Development of the Concept of Salvation in Seventh-day Adventist Children and Adolescents from 7 to 18 Years of Age who Attend Public Schools" (Ed.D. diss., Andrews University, 1996); Daniel Gutekunst, "The Implications of the Piagetian Stages to Readiness for Baptism" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1983), accessed November 7, 2010, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Mark Dever is one of the leading current voices of this movement. He offers his church's rational:

The normal age of baptism should be when the credibility of one's conversion becomes naturally evident to the church community. This would normally be when the child has matured, and is beginning to live more self-consciously as an individual, making their own choices, having left the God-given, intended child-like dependence on their parents for the God-given, intended mature wisdom which marks one who has felt the tug of the world, the flesh and the devil, but has decided, despite these allurements, to follow Christ. While it is difficult to set a certain number of years which are required for baptism, it is appropriate to consider the candidate's maturity. The kind of maturity that we feel it is wise to expect is the maturity which would allow that son or daughter to deal directly with the church as a whole, and not, fundamentally, to be under their parents' authority. As they assume adult responsibilities (sometime in late high school with driving, employment, non-Christian friends, voting, legality of marriage), then part of this, we would think, would be to declare publicly their allegiance to Christ by baptism.⁷

Yet many churches consciously or unconsciously reject such reasoning. A plurality of Southern Baptist's baptisms occur among children.⁸ As one comes to the New Testament, one finds Jesus rebuking the disciples, saying "unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁹ Further, within the New Testament, one is hard-pressed to find a single example of baptism being delayed after conversion.¹⁰ Thus, many

⁷Capitol Hill Baptist Church's total statement on the baptism of children is much longer. This paragraph was chosen because it outlines Dever's preference for a delay of baptism until an age of independence.

⁸Broadly defined as age 11 and under. In 2013, the most recent year for which statistics can be obtained, Southern Baptists baptized 93,756 children under the age of 12; 73,201 youth between the ages of 12 and 17; 51,599 young adults between the ages of 18 and 29; and 91,852 adults ages 30 and up. This data was provided to the author by Ms. Paula Hancock of LifeWay Research, who is responsible for assembling the Annual Church Profile Report data from the reporting churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. Paula Hancock, email message to author, June 13, 2014.

⁹Matthew 18:3, all quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰Even advocates of delaying child baptism concede as much. For example Dever states "No delay is present in the baptism accounts in Acts..." Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," 345.

Southern Baptists have historically argued that baptism is the *first* act of obedience one makes in response to salvation.¹¹

Also, against the assumption that children are cognitively incapable of responding to salvation, some psychological research has cast doubt on the inability of younger children to respond to the gospel.¹² Further, there has been one Ph.D. dissertation written that mostly assumes the validity of the conversion and corresponding baptism of younger children.¹³ Thus, while scholarly consensus has trended in one direction, both the baptismal practice of Southern Baptists as well as the New Testament teaching raises significant questions in regards to this consensus.

¹¹Examples of such are numerous. A few are offered here and more will be provided throughout the dissertation most notably in Chapter 3. Examples include figures ranging from Richard Fuller in the nineteenth century who, closely relates belief, baptism, and obedience stating that, “when old enough, it would still be the duty of the child to believe and be baptized in obedience to the commission.” J. M Frost founder of the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay) advocated something similar in the early twentieth century. Frost therein gives the example of a young boy reading through the first three chapters of the Gospel of John. Upon reading John 3:7, “the boy leaped to his feet, rushed into the house shouting as he came, ‘O mother, mother, something has happened; something has happened.’ That was the new birth; it was of God.” It is significant that following on the heels of this example, Frost immediately goes on to explain that “all this comes before baptism, and in baptism finds an outward expression.” This is because baptism is initial act of obedience for Frost. See Richard Fuller, *Baptism and the Terms of Communion* (1854; repr.; Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 138-139. J. M Frost, *Evangelism and Baptism* (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1916), 64-67.

Such ideas remain influential at the pastoral level. For example, local church pastors such as Ted Chrisman of Kentucky and Bob Mowery of Tennessee have recently offered much the same argument as Frost and Fuller. For both, children can be converted and baptism is the proper initial act of obedience to that decision. Ted Chrisman, *Forbid Them Not: Rethinking the Baptism and Church Membership of Children and Young People* (Owensboro, KY: Heritage Baptist Church, n.d.), 15, accessed June 19, 2014, http://www.hbcowensboro.org/mediafiles/uploaded/f/0e1609819_forbid-them-not-pdf.pdf. Bob Mowery, *The Significance of Baptism* (Nashville, TN: by the author, c. 1990), 21-22.

¹²Robert S. Siegler, *Children's Thinking*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 60

¹³Thomas Sanders presented a dissertation to Dallas Baptist University doing an empirical study on pastoral influence on children. He concluded that because of a pastoral influence, children could be converted and baptized. He only briefly directly dealt with arguments pertaining to the legitimacy of child conversion or baptism. Instead, Sanders postulates an understanding of conversion that takes into account the experiences of young children. Thomas Sanders, "The kingdom of God Belongs to Such as These: Exploring the Conversion Experiences of Baptist Children," (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2009), 237ff.

Research Question

The relationship of children to baptism has become an increasingly debated issue among credobaptists in general and Southern Baptists in particular over the last 50 years. As a result, this study will seek to answer the following question from a credobaptist perspective specifically rooted within the Southern Baptist context:

Q: Are there compelling (including Biblical, historical, statistical, theological or psychological) reasons to delay the baptism of children until a certain age, life situation, or maturity level or conversely does the data (Biblical, historical, theological, statistical or psychological) indicate that converted children should be baptized shortly after a valid profession of faith?¹⁴

The goal of this dissertation then is first to understand the Biblical status of children as they relate to conversion and to seek to discern the relationship between baptism and conversion. Then, based on this biblical data,¹⁵ to interpret that teaching through a specifically Southern Baptist context while keeping in mind the insights of both other theological contexts as well as secular research into child development.

¹⁴Outside the scope of this study are questions of original sin, original guilt, and the spiritual condition of infants. Regardless of the position one takes on these contentious issues, no credobaptist argues that infants can cognitively affirm salvation. Therefore, this study will specifically examine only the question of children's ability to respond to the gospel and the corresponding question of if baptism of such children is appropriate from a credobaptist perspective. For those desiring additional reflections on the issue of original sin and guilt from a credobaptist perspective, see Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), which offers a broad survey of the history of Baptist interpretation to this question and goes on to argue for uncondemnable depravity. From the paedobaptist perspective, see Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹⁵Within the Southern Baptist context, the Bible is assumed to be authoritative. Within the prelude to their confession of faith Southern Baptists state "That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments." Article one of that confession declares that "all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy...and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried." Clearly, Southern Baptist understand the Bible as authoritative for their faith and practice. Given that this dissertation is written within a Southern Baptist context, the authoritative nature of the Bible is presupposed. Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 edition, Prelude.

Toward that end, this dissertation will establish the following threefold thesis. First, the New Testament closely links water baptism with conversion and not with the credible evidence of that conversion. Second, the Bible as a whole presents children as valid candidates for conversion. Third, the baptism of even young children is compatible with Southern Baptist ecclesiology (specifically a regenerate membership), Southern Baptist historical practice, and even secular understandings of cognitive development so long as children are making a credible confession of faith.

Relevance of This Study

As already mentioned, the alleged declining age of baptism among Southern Baptists has been a cause of concern for many. The concerns voices regarding this decline are mostly theological in nature (the growing prevalence of rebaptisms, faulty evangelistic practices, regenerate church membership, etc.). Such concerns rest on certain assumptions (either explicit or implicit) about the cognitive and volitional abilities of children (namely that they are cognitively incapable of grasping or evidencing salvation) that has previously been rooted within the research of Piaget and Fowler.¹⁶

¹⁶Piaget is cited in all four Southern Baptist dissertation that express hesitancy towards the baptism of children. More recently John Hammett draws on Hendricks argument that “it is highly doubtful children below the age of nine can express or have experience despair for sin as radical separation from God.” Hendricks makes such statements based on the Piagetian stages of development.

The most substantial engagement comes in Withers’s dissertation (whom Dever cites approvingly). He offers a threefold argument based on Piaget as to why children should not be baptized. First, Withers argues that Piaget shows that children are incapable of moral reasoning until the age of 10. Therefore, children cannot understand sin until that age. Second, Withers asserts that according to Piaget most children are incapable of introspection from age seven and younger. As a result, Withers argues that “if children are not yet capable of thinking through and understanding a commitment of life, children cannot understand sufficiently the concept of salvation” (Withers, “Social Forces,” 89). Third, since Piaget noted that seven and eight year olds lack skills of judgment and reasoning as evidenced by children’s propensity to waffle between and even hold to two mutually exclusive opinions at the same time, Withers argues that “It would be an error to move children too quickly on their faith journey during a time when they are arranging their thoughts so as to be able to make decisions based upon good judgment and sound reasoning” (Withers, “Social Forces,” 92).

Withers also address the faith development stages of Fowler. In regards to Fowler, he notes that children

Yet the assumptions of Piaget and Fowler has been significantly modified in recent years.¹⁷ The vast majority of child development scholars readily admit that “it is now indisputable that young children can learn concepts once thought to be ‘too advanced’ for their age group” as defined by Piaget.¹⁸ Thus the relevance for the current discussion of the movement within the psychological community beyond the assumptions of Piaget and Fowler regarding the baptism of children remains largely unexplored.

Also, those arguing against the baptism of children have largely assumed that water baptism and conversion can be temporally separated. Yet even advocates of such separation acknowledge that they possess little in the way of direct Scriptural justification for delaying baptism.¹⁹ Instead, they normally assert that the Scriptures pertaining to baptism following

are incapable of reaching Fowler’s fourth stage of faith development until early adolescence. Based on Fowlers’ research, Withers argues that children who are converted at a young age and remain in Baptist churches “will not go through the normal processes and stages of faith development and remain in that stage of non-faith development for life” (118) Thus for Withers, Fowler’s work “should cause any church which believes in baptism for believers only to re-examine seriously the practice of baptizing preschoolers.” (Withers, “Social Forces,” 120) See Withers, “Social Forces,” chapter 3; Ratliff, “Discipleship,” chapter 7; Deane, “Investigation,” chapter 5; Clark, “Evangelism of Children,” chapter 2; Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 272. Dever, “Baptism,” 346; and William L. Hendricks, *A Theology for Children* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1980), 249.

¹⁷For example, evangelicals have argued for the rejection of Fowler’s paradigm in its entirety. It is largely seen as incompatible with Christian conceptions of faith. Further, Piaget’s theory cannot be viewed with near the rigidity which Hendricks, Deane, Ratliff or Withers assert. See Timothy Paul Jones, “The Basis of James W. Fowler’s Understanding of Faith in the Research of Wilfred Cantwell Smith: An Examination from an Evangelical Perspective,” *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 345-57.

¹⁸ Robert S. Siegler, *Children’s Thinking*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 60.

¹⁹For example, Mark Dever, in his section on “When is Baptism to be Done” confines his scriptural treatment on the timing of baptism to the book of Acts. He states that one finds “examples of baptism in Acts [which] involve the establishment of a church (e.g. in Jerusalem, Philippi, Ephesus) and therefore do not directly instruct us on every question conversing the practice of the baptism in the continuing and settled life of the congregation.” Therefore, when Dever turns to the issue of children he argues, that while “no delay is present in baptism accounts in Acts, in Acts there would have been little question of the state of those people... Certainly the Bible gives us no command for immediacy or for delay, but the nature of baptism clearly shows that it is to be only for those who profess saving faith. Therefore, if delay is necessary to ascertain genuine saving faith in the person, then delay would seem to be the path of prudence.” Yet, Dever fails to explore more normative teaching relating to baptism such as the Great Commission and the relation between Spirit and water baptism. Dever, “Baptism,” 336, 345.

salvation do not demand that baptism quickly temporally follow salvation.²⁰ Therefore, a more thorough Scriptural analysis of the temporal connection between conversion and water baptism is in order.

As already noted, Thomas Sanders' dissertation in 2009 does look favorably on the conversion and baptism of young children from the credobaptist perspective. He briefly notes that the most of the psychological community has significantly modified the findings of Piaget and Fowler, yet Sanders' focus is not primarily focused on the biblical data or the theological implication of child baptism (although he does touch on both issue). Instead, Sanders focus was upon empirical research in the examination of the conversion experiences of 12 children at age of 12 or younger looking back on their conversion experiences.²¹ As a result, a fully developed theological study examining positively the idea that children are valid candidates for both conversion and baptism from a credobaptism does not exist despite the prevalence of such practices amongst Southern Baptists. The purpose of this study is to fill this void in the literature

Biases

The author of this study comes from a Southern Baptist background, was converted and baptized as a seven-year old in a Southern Baptist church, and has frequently been employed as a pastor or interim pastor of Southern Baptist churches. He presently works as a faculty member at a Southern Baptist denominational agency. He readily admits a great affection for the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. He currently is a member of a Southern Baptist church that

²⁰Ibid., 336.

²¹Sanders, "The Kingdom of God Belongs to Such as These," chapter 2.

has no age-related restrictions on baptism. At times in the past, however, he has been a member of a church that did have such restrictions (in that case the age was 10).

Further, the author is the father of three young children ages five, three, and one. While the author has explained the Christian gospel to his children, none of his children have made decisions of conversion, yet alone been baptized. As a result of his own experience and the experience of his children, the author has a personal interest in this field of study.

Others who have examined this issue in the past have confessed a personal experience of being baptized at a young age but not having been saved.²² While possessing a great interest in this subject matter because of the presentations others have made against the baptism of children, this author would claim prior to coming to this study that he was legitimately converted at seven and properly baptized as a result of such.

Therefore, the author approaches this study with a degree of skepticism toward those who oppose the baptismal practice of many Southern Baptist churches and seek to delay the baptism of some because of their youthful age. Despite this skepticism, the author will labor to understand all arguments in their specific context and to give deference to the biblical data, while also taking into account historical, psychological, and theological concerns. Further, the author asserts that approaching this study with a personal background that seems to substantiate the

²²Of the previously mentioned dissertations, Withers has been the most influential, being cited by Dever, Hammett, and others. Withers states in the preface to his dissertation

When I was eight years old, the youth Director in the church where I attended made a visit to the children's Sunday School classes. He said something to this effect: 'Next Sunday is Easter. We are planning a big baptism service. How many of you boys and girls have not yet been baptized?' I raised my hand along with a few others. The following Sunday I presented myself to the church by walking down the aisle and that evening I was baptized by immersion. Nine years later I was converted. I soon acquired an intense interest in the role of baptism in the life of children. I had trusted in my baptism as a means of grace." While Withers attempts to avoid personal bias, he concedes that he approached his dissertation "uncomfortable baptizing children at all" even though he acknowledges it is "that children can, and do, experience personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" because it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of faith in a child. Withers, "Social Forces," 14-16.

validity of child conversion and baptism gives him a less-biased perspective than others who have approached this topic negatively and who have come from a background possessing a premature false conversion and baptism.

Methodology and Chapter Summaries

Southern Baptists are a self-proclaimed biblical people. They have claimed this to the point that the Bible alone is seen as the sole authority for faith and practice. Many reject even non-binding confessions (such as the Baptist Faith and Message 2000) with the cry that “we have no creed but the Bible.”²³ While the consistency of Southern Baptist adherence to Biblical perspicuity is suspect,²⁴ the fact remains that the vast majority of Southern Baptists claim to be Biblicists.

Given that this dissertation is written by a Southern Baptist for a Baptist audience, removing oneself from a high view of the Bible would be antithetical to its purpose.²⁵ Therefore, this dissertation will assume both perspicuity and authority of the Bible.

²³Cries of “no creed but the Bible” have even been picked up in secular newspapers. See for example Albereta Lindsey, “‘Creed’ Request Stirring Disputes: Some Baptist Refuse to Sign,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 9, 2002, under “B1,”

²⁴See, for example, E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, wherein he argues for a simple Biblicism as interpreted through the lens of Christian experience. Mullins claims can be found in Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (1917; repr., Dallas: Digital Publications, 2006), Chapter 1.

²⁵Baptist history is filled with examples of those who assert that the Bible is superior to all other sources of knowledge. For example, James Leo Garrett, an especially noteworthy late-twentieth century Southern Baptist theologian, who taught at both Southern and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, claims that theology should not be based on “the adoption of any philosophical system or philosophical motif in the light of which the doctrines of Christianity ought to be interpreted,” but rather “on the fruitage of biblical theology and the history of Christian doctrine.” See James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical & Evangelical*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 1:6.

The dissertation can be divided broadly into two sections. The first section will examine the biblical data regarding the timing of baptism in relationship to conversion as well as the biblical anthropological nature of children as such relates to conversion. The second section will analyze both historical Baptist practices regarding the conversion and baptism of children and theological and psychological issues the conversion and baptism of children raises in regards to a regenerate church membership.

Chapter Summaries

Following this introduction, this study opens with a review of the New Testament teaching regarding the temporal relationship between conversion and baptism. A careful study of the relationship between water and spirit baptism is undertaken (the latter of which is shown to be largely equated with conversion from a Baptist perspective). This chapter establishes that there is a contemporaneous link between conversion and baptism in the New Testament. It shows how, from a New Testament perspective, the absence or delay of water baptism calls into question the validity of an individual's conversion. It also argues that, biblically, baptism is the proper confessional response to a Christian conversion. As a result, delaying baptism undermines its confessional nature and its close temporal connection to conversion.

Chapter two explores the Biblical data pertaining to the spiritual condition of children as such data relates to conversion. From the Old Testament data, children are understood as candidates for discipleship, as accountable before God and as partial members of the faith community. From the New Testament perspective, children are understood as disciples, converts, responsible for their own sins, and potentially as members of the church. This chapter will establish that, biblically, children are valid candidates for conversion.

The third chapter explores historical views of Southern Baptist regarding the spiritual condition of children as well as the validity of baptizing children. It establishes that any claims of a uniform practice by Southern Baptists in which the baptism of children is delayed until they reach a specific age of accountability are suspect from a historical perspective. It will also offer statistical analysis of the historical trends in regards to baptism by age based primarily on the last approximately fifty years of annual church profile data (ACP). It will call into question statistical claims of a declining age of baptism among Southern Baptists.

The fourth chapter examines the most significant theological objection to the baptism of young children, namely that it undermines a regenerate church membership. Three broad objections the baptism of children will be addressed. First, this chapter will examine claims relating to the cognitive inability of children to respond to the gospel or to behave as converts. Within this context the cognitive requirements of salvation from the Southern Baptist perspective will be examined.²⁶ Since previous studies have utilized both Piaget's stages of cognitive development and Fowler's conceptions of the stages of faith²⁷ as screening device to determine an age of accountability, responsibility or initiation and thus to prevent the baptism of children, the first section of this chapter will be shown that more recent modifications to the theories of cognitive and faith development render such objections at best suspect and at worst irrelevant.

²⁶The author acknowledges that a diversity of opinion exists amongst Southern Baptist at this point. Toward that end a diversity of opinion of leading Southern Baptist thinkers will be applied to determine the cognitive *maximum* required of someone in order to be saved. With such a maximum in view, lesser rigorous cognitive standards, which are more common, could then be applied. Cognitive understanding of salvation will be examined from both Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic perspective to arrive at such a consensus. Examples of such would include Albert Mohler, "The Doctrine of Salvation," in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 37-45; Malcolm B. Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), chapter 5.

²⁷Substantial evidence of such is found above. See particularly Withers, "Social Forces," chapter 3.

After addressing psychological concerns, Withers's sociological concerns will be examined in a brief second section. These concerns will be shown to rest on a false presupposition. The third section of this chapter explores various theological concerns (regarding soteriology, rebaptisms, evangelistic practices, etc.) relating to the baptism of children and a regenerate church membership. Each of these objections will be addressed in turn. From the responses offered to these objections, this chapter will establish that children can cognitively grasp conversion, churches can discern if children are converts, and children should be taught to function as converts both before and after conversion.

A brief conclusion follows which synthesizes the findings of this dissertation. In light of the biblical spiritual condition of children, their psychological state, the historic Baptist practice and the temporal connection between salvation and baptism established in the previous chapters this conclusion asserts that children can be converted and that converted children should be baptized. It will then offer several applications of this study to local church and pastoral practice and note areas for future research.

Definitions and Key Terms

A number of terms will be used throughout this dissertation. They will range from the psychological to the theological. These terms deal with amongst other issues, human cognition, the stages of development through which a person progresses during life, the age at which a person becomes accountable before God for his or her decisions, conversion, and baptism.

Infant: Used to describe those persons classified by Piaget as in the sensorimotor stage of development. Normally thought of as lasting from birth to approximately 24 months of age.²⁸

Young Child or Early Childhood: Used to describe those persons classified by Piaget as in the preoperational stage of development. Normally thought of as lasting from age two through five years of age.²⁹

Older Child or Middle Childhood: Used to describe those persons classified by Piaget in the concrete operational stage of development. Normally thought of as lasting from age five to approximately 12 years of age.³⁰

Adolescent/Teen: Used to describe those persons entering and progressing into formal operational stage as classified by Piaget. Normally thought of as lasting from age 12 to age 17.³¹

Young Adult: The Piagetian stages end with adolescence. Yet, statistically, Southern Baptists have two other classifications of persons by age. For purposes of this study, young adults refers to those persons classified with the Annual Church Profile of the Southern Baptist Convention as being between ages 18 and 29.³²

Adult: For purposes of this study, adult refers to those persons classified with the Annual Church Profile of the Southern Baptist Convention as being between age 30 and up.

²⁸The age breakdowns defined here are generally agreed upon among child development scholars as evidence by the general cognitive divisions found within basic textbooks of child development. For example, see Laurence D. Steinberg, Deborah Vandell, and Marc H. Bornstein, *Development: Infancy through Adolescence* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), chapters 4, 7, 10, and 13.

²⁹Piaget would extend this to age seven, but most now classify this stage through age five. See Steinberg, et. al., *Development*, 285.

³⁰Again, Piaget placed the relevant ages from seven to eleven, but most now understand the proper age breakdown as lasting from five to twelve. Ibid., 273.

³¹Ibid., 373

³²Hancock, email to author.

Island of Competence: The concept within cognitive development that children are capable of learning more than their cognitive level would anticipate.³³

Conversion: Specifically in view here is the idea of Christian conversion. Such a conversion involves a confession of one's personal status as sinner before God, a repentance of those sins, a placing of faith in Jesus' blood atonement on the cross as the payment for those sins, a belief that Jesus rose from the dead, and a surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord.³⁴

Age of Accountability: A term normally associated with when a person becomes accountable before God for their sins and as a result, the person is responsible before God to be converted.³⁵

Age of Responsibility: Similar to the age of accountability but instead of dealing with regeneration recognizes the responsibilities of a public disciple and church member imply greater responsibility than a simple conversion experience.³⁶

Age of Initiation: The age at which a person can become a member of a church.

Baptism: This is a broad term. Within the context of this paper, when used generically it should be understood to refer a baptism by immersion of an individual confessing a conversion experience to Christianity.

³³Michael Cole and Sheila R. Cole, *The Development of Children*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth, 2000), chapter 9.

³⁴This definition of conversion is not meant to be comprehensive. It intentionally does not touch on the debate regarding who brings about conversion. As has been debated frequently, many argue that conversion is a choice of a person's libertarian free will. Many others that is the work of God sovereignly, effectually calling some to conversion. Yet this debate remains is outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, this definition provides a more substantial fleshing out of the human components of conversion. Erickson rightly identifies these as repentance and faith. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1998), 946ff.

³⁵Hendricks, *A Theology for Children*, 238ff

³⁶Dever, "Baptism," 348.

Children: Another broad term. Within the context of this paper, when used generically it should be understood to refer to persons existing between infancy (ages zero to three) and adolescence (age 12 and older).

Contemporaneous: The normal definition of the term as existing or occurring in the same period of time applies to this dissertation. Applied to the timing of baptism this term is used to emphasize the close temporal proximity that should exist between a person's conversion and baptism.

CHAPTER ONE: THE CONTEMPORANEOUS NATURE OF SPIRIT AND WATER BAPTISM FOR CREDO-BAPTISTS

Introduction

Within the context of a perceived decline in baptismal age among their members, some Southern Baptist pastors, theologians, and leaders have suggested that water baptism does not contemporaneously follow conversion. John Hammett, in his defense of the baptismal delay of children, helpfully notes that there are two biblical issues the baptism of children raises regarding the timing of baptism. First, within the New Testament church, it appears that only adults were baptized. Second, he asserts that Scripture is silent as to the post-conversion timing of baptism.¹ Mark Dever elaborates on this argument stating that “the Bible gives no command for immediacy or delay, but the nature of baptism clearly shows that it is to be only for those who exercise saving faith. Therefore, if delay is necessary to ascertain genuine saving faith in the person, then delay would seem to be the path of prudence.”²

In contrast to Hammett and Dever, advocates of contemporaneous baptism note the pattern of baptisms in the New Testament. They argue that baptism functions as an almost instantaneous response to salvation in the Acts of the Apostles.³ Further, some Southern Baptists

¹ Advocates of this view are numerous and include Mark Dever, John Hammett, Roy Fish, and others. See John Hammett, “Regenerate Church Membership” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal, 2008, 38-40); Mark Dever, “The Practical Issues of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2012), 97-98. Roy Fish, “Introducing Children to Christ” (lecture, Roberts Library, Fort Worth, TX).

²Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Local Church Context,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 345.

³Robert H. Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 65. Richard E. Averbek, “The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1981): 288.

have argued that water baptism is the first step of obedience in response to one's conversion.⁴

Such Baptists therefore conclude that baptism should follow shortly after conversion.⁵ Advocates of delaying baptism respond by noting that the baptismal examples in Acts are descriptive of an event that happens in a narrative and thus are not prescriptive for baptismal practice.⁶

One aspect of this debate between that remains largely unexplored is the relation between water and Spirit baptism. Specifically, does the relationship between Spirit and water baptism suggest contemporaneity between these two baptisms or does it allow for delay? For the majority of contemporary Southern Baptists, Spirit baptism is understood to be simultaneously with or identical to conversion.⁷ Still, a few Baptists argue that the baptism in the Holy Spirit was a one-time event occurring on the day of Pentecost. The church becomes the spirit-baptized community

⁴See, for example, J. R. Graves, *Christian Baptism* (Texarkana, TX: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1881), 36; J. M. Frost, *The Moral Dignity of Baptism* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1905), 64-65; W. A. Criswell, *Criswell's Guidebook for Pastor's* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1980), 203-206. Criswell is reported to have set age restrictions on baptism. Still, he argues that it is an initial act of obedience. Logically this creates a tension between obedience and children unless children are not capable of responding to the Gospel.

⁵Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Wheaton, IL: Moody, 1972), 195.

⁶John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 273.

⁷Examples of this are numerous and transcend normal intra-Southern Baptists conflicts. Such an understanding of Spirit baptism is conceded by "traditional" Southern Baptists, Calvinistic Southern Baptists, and even more charismatic Baptists. Among traditionalists, Malcom Yarnell states, "Conversion to Christ and baptism in, with or by the Holy Spirit is concurrent." Malcolm Yarnell, "The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit," in *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed., ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2014), 530. Garrett "At the moment of regeneration He baptizes every believer into the Body of Christ" Among Reformed Baptists, Bruce Ware argues much the same: "The conclusion to be drawn from these passages is that one of the aspects of God's work of saving sinful human beings is Jesus Christ's baptism of new converts with the Holy Spirit, by which they are incorporated into his (Christ's) body, the church. Such a baptism is initiatory, occurring at the beginning of salvation (along with effective call, regeneration, justification, union with Christ, adoption, and initial sanctification)." Bruce Ware, "Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 16, no. 4 (Winter, 2012): 8. Even Wayne Grudem, who elsewhere argues for the necessity of glossolalia as an unknown language which should be part of the services of the church notes that while Spirit baptism "happened at Pentecost for the disciples, it happened at conversion for the Corinthians and for us." Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 773

that individuals enter upon initiation.⁸ Southern Baptists do not argue for either the Pentecostal or Roman Catholic understandings of Spirit baptism.⁹

This chapter will establish that water and spirit baptism are contemporaneous in the New Testament. It will show that this contemporaneity is not incidental, but that it is prescriptive from a credobaptist perspective. This prescriptive contemporaneity will be demonstrated through an examination of the Spirit-water baptism passages in the Gospels, Acts, and Pauline literature.

John the Baptist and Spirit Baptism in the Gospels

Of the seven direct references to the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament,¹⁰ four occur in the Gospels within the context of the ministry of John the Baptists. In all four

⁸T. C. Smith, “Acts” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 10 (Nashville, TN.: Broadman, 1971), 24-27. James Hamilton makes a similar argument, stating, “the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not the same as or simultaneous with initial conversion or indwelling. Rather, baptism in the Spirit is God’s public mark of approval—first for the believers in Jesus who are in Jerusalem, then for the Samaritan, then for the Gentiles, then for the followers of John the Baptist. The evidence from Acts indicates that the whole church was representatively baptized when these group were baptized on these four occasions.” Spirit baptism is given to “show God’s approval, not to indicate what happens at conversion.” Thus the church as inaugurated at Pentecost stands as God approved body. Individuals become part of that converted body upon initiation to it. James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*, New American Commentary Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2006), 183, 193.

⁹Therefore, this chapter will not deal with Pentecostal or Catholic views of Spirit baptism per se. Undoubtedly, the most robust argument for Spirit baptism as identical to conversion comes from James Dunn in his book on Spirit baptism. See James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Reexamination of the New Testament Teaching On the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). Advocates for the Pentecostal view that Spirit Baptism follows salvation include Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: The Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), R. A. Torrey, *The Baptism with the Holy Spirit* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895) and Howard M. Ervin, *Conversion-Initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Critique of James D.G. Dunn, Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984). A representative advocate of the Catholic view would be Ralph Del Colle, “Spirit-Baptism: A Catholic Perspective,” in *Perspectives On Spirit Baptism: Five Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2004), 241-89. A brief, helpful overview of the various views on the relation between Spirit and water baptism can be found in Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 52-53.

¹⁰Mark 1:2-11, Matthew 3:1-17, John 1:19-34, Luke 3:1-22, Acts 1:5-8, Acts 11:16, 1 Corinthians 12:13

gospel accounts, John the Baptist references Jesus¹¹ as the one who baptizes (John 1:33) or as the one who will baptize (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16) with the Holy Spirit. While there is a general consensus that these passages do not directly explain the relation between water and Spirit baptism as John's water baptism is only anticipatory of the coming Spirit baptism,¹² it is clear and generally agreed upon that John's ministry foreshadows in some ways both baptisms.¹³ Therefore, this section will examine the relationship between John's water baptism and how his water baptism relates to the coming Spirit baptism. It will show that John's water baptism is designed to be a response contemporaneous with an individual's repentance and in anticipation of a coming superior Spirit-baptism.

Mark 1:2-11

In the gospel of Mark,¹⁴ one is introduced to John the Baptist almost immediately. The Baptist's primary activity is a preaching of preparation and a "baptism of repentance for the

¹¹Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus: An Essay in Detection," *New Testament Studies* 4 no. 4 (1958): 263-81 esp 271-72 and Schuyler Brown, "Water-Baptism and Spirit-Baptism in Luke-Acts," *Anglican Theological Review* 59, no. 2 (April 1, 1977): 135-151 esp. 136. Both articles argue that John anticipated Elijah and understood Jesus only as Elijah returned. This argument has rightly largely been ignored because it fails to account for various parts of the narrative surrounding the Baptist. Specifically, it fails to account for both the immediate context of Mk 1:10-11 where Jesus is identified as God as well as the canonical context of John 1:31ff in which John identifies Jesus directly as the greater one who possess and dispenses that Spirit.

¹²George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1972; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 32.

¹³"Christian baptism, anticipated in 28:18, is to be seen as a development from John's baptism. It is not entirely clear why baptism plays no role in the Synoptic account of Jesus' ministry (contrast Jn. 3:22; 4:1-2), but the best suggestion seems to be, though this is not worked out in any systematic way, that there is a general assumption that those who respond to Jesus' ministry have already been baptized by John." John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 141. Cf. W. B. Badke, "Was Jesus a Disciple of John?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990): 195-204, U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 169.

¹⁴For purposes of this essay, Markan priority is assumed although the practical outworking of this assumption are minimal. See Scot McKnight, "A Generation who Knew not Streeter: The Case for Markan

forgiveness of sins (v4).”¹⁵ The narrative then moves quickly towards John’s explanation of water baptism as a rite existing in contrast to a coming Spirit baptism which is to be administered by someone “more powerful than me” (vv. 7-8).” The one who is more powerful, Jesus Christ, is then introduced, water-baptized by John and encounters the Spirit upon coming out of the water (vv. 9-11).

Water Baptism

At first glance, John’s water baptism appears strange. Nothing in the prophecies of Isaiah, which Marks cites (1:2) as determinative for John’s ministry, anticipates water baptism. As a result, John’s water baptism is without Old Testament parallel. Yet, John’s water immersion would not have been a totally new practice to the Jews encountering it. Specifically, John’s baptism is paralleled (and perhaps even finds its origins) in the ritual cleansings common to both post-exilic Judaism and the world of the ancient Near East,¹⁶ as well as more generally in those Old Testament rituals which “were the means God gave to the worshipper to express his repentance and to indicate openly his desire for God’s forgiveness.”¹⁷ Yet, significant differences exist between John’s baptism and the ancient Near Eastern cleansing rituals that would have been more familiar to John’s audience.¹⁸ Specifically, unlike in the Jewish *mikva’ot*, John

Priority,” in *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. David Alan Black and David R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 65-95.

¹⁵Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

¹⁶Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*. Word Biblical Commentary 34A (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 20.

¹⁷James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 17.

¹⁸ John’s baptisms were public, other religious communities baptism were in private. John’s was a singular event, other communities (such as Qumran) were repeated. John was the administrator of his baptism, the Jewish *mikva’ot* was self-administered. Collins, *Mark*, 140

expected the Jews themselves (and not just Gentiles converting to Judaism) to be baptized. Further, unlike with the Qumran community, John's baptism occurs once, whereas Qumran washings were repeated. Thus, the majority of scholars argue that Mark's account draws a contrast between John's baptisms and those ritual cleansings which would have been more familiar to his audience.¹⁹ In so doing, John's baptism emphasizes that one's Jewishness alone is insufficient to bring one into right relation with God.

Rather than national identity, John's water baptism highlights his message that only through individual repentance (v. 4) could one be considered in right standing with God. Through this message of repentance John positions himself as an Old Testament prophet anticipating the day of salvation. As Guelich notes of *μετάνοια* (to repent), "In the OT, this verb, especially in the prophets (e.g., Jer 18:11; Isa 55:7; Zech 1:4), connoted a whole-hearted "return to Yahweh"" and taking Yahweh seriously as 'Israel's God.' Such an abandoning of one's wrong ways and a return to God's ways in obedient surrender belonged to the prophetic hope for the age of salvation."²⁰ John's water baptism then pictures the individual Jew's state of repentance in anticipation of the coming day of salvation. Water baptism then functions as an individual's external confession of that repentance inaugurating a whole-hearted return to Yahweh.

¹⁹As a result of the previous footnote, the majority of scholars understand John the Baptist's baptism in the gospel of Mark to be a "transformation of the Levitical type of immersion in light of eschatological expectation based on prophetic texts." Collins, *Mark*, 140. Still others (such as R.T. France) go even further and reject any comparison of the *mikva'ot* to what the Baptist is practicing at the Jordan arguing instead that the *Mikva'ot* was developed after the fall of the temple in 70 A.D. and that the Qumran community's ritual bathing is in no way parallel to John's practice. These arguments are unconvincing. The *mikva'ot* can be found throughout the excavations of the ancient temple complex, thus indicating that they predate the temple's destruction. Further, strong evidence exists that John the Baptist has some connection or at least familiarity with the Qumran community. See also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 65-67

²⁰ Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, 18-19.

Assuming the rite of John's water baptism is carried over into the church,²¹ then the Markan presentation of John's baptism has significant implications for its practice. Specifically, just as the appropriate response and confession of repentance for John was water baptism, so to in the church. It would not occur to John that someone could claim repentance and then refuse or even delay baptism.²²

Spirit Baptism

Building upon this foundation of water baptism being a rite which finds its origins in the Old Testament idea of repentance, Mark's gospel goes on to place the baptism of John in contrast to the baptism of the coming Messiah. Indeed, Mark's contrast between water and Spirit baptism is the most pronounced contrast between the two found within the four Gospels.²³ Yet, within the context of this passage, there is considerable debate about what type of baptism the Baptist was contrasting with his own water baptism. Such a contrast is particularly troubling for some scholars within the Markan context. In Matthew and Luke the coming one baptizes in the Spirit *and in fire*. In Mark, there is no reference to a baptism with fire. Thus, in order to explain this discrepancy between Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels, three solutions have been offered seeking to explain why Mark emphasizes a baptism of the Spirit apart from a baptism with fire.²⁴

²¹ This assumption will be examined far more thoroughly below within the discussion of the relation between John's baptism and Spirit baptism in Acts 1.

²² Averbeck, "The Focus of Spirit Baptism," 288

²³ Matthew and Luke break up the contrast between Spirit and water baptism with a statement from John the Baptist about his unworthiness to unstrap the coming one's sandal. John's Gospel places Spirit baptism in the context of the divine voice.

²⁴ Cf. Guelich, *Mark 1-8*, 27-29.

First, some argue that Mark gets it wrong. John's contrast was only between his water baptism and that of a subsequent fire baptism. The idea of a Spirit baptism was not John's. Rather, Spirit baptism was a later addition to the Baptist's original statement. Such arguments rest on the assumption of a prior Q source document in which only a baptism with fire is mentioned. This theory argues that Matthew and Luke added the account of a Spirit baptism to John's original saying which only mentioned a baptism in fire. Mark, familiar with the two-part formula found in Matthew and Luke, reduces the baptismal contrast down to just a Spirit baptism.²⁵

A second theory is that John's water baptism is to be contrasted to a baptism not of the Spirit but instead to a baptism of wind and fire. Those who argue such argue that the Greek πνεύματι can be rendered as "wind."²⁶ Second, both wind and fire are symbols of judgment in the Old Testament. Mark, because of his own constraints, simply omits the reference to fire. Within the Markan context, the coming one baptizes with wind. If the coming one's baptism is a baptism of wind, then advocates of this view argue that John's baptism is to be understood as a baptism entirely of judgment.²⁷

Yet, neither of the options is compelling. Two reasons are offered here, although others exist.²⁸ First, both of these readings are incompatible with the manuscript evidence. There are no

²⁵Collins argues such, stating, "the oldest form of the saying did not mention the Spirit; it contrasted baptism in water with baptism in fire." He argues such based on a belief that Mark is late and is preserving a third form of John's sayings. Thus the Baptist intended to contrast fire and water. The water brings life, the fire judgment. Collins, *Mark*, 146. Cf. Harry T. Fleddermann, *Mark and Q: a Study of the Overlap Texts*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 122, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 31-39.

²⁶Ernest Best, "Spirit-baptism," *Novum Testamentum* 4, no. 3 (October, 1960): 236-43.

²⁷ Eduard Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit*, trans. Reginald H. and Ilse Fuller (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

²⁸For a more thorough treatment of these debates Guelich, *Mark 1-8*, 27-29

significant textual variants omitting πνεύματι (contra the first option). Further, against the second option the construction of “πνεύματι ἁγίῳ or ‘Holy Spirit,’ is an anarthrous construction [and] untypical of Mark.” Thus, these facts point to a tradition of a Holy Spirit baptism which predates Mark’s specific interests.²⁹ Second, both of these theories fail to account for the Jewish eschatological expectation which clearly predicates John the Baptist’s ministry. John the Baptist clearly understands his message as prophetic in nature. He is in the wilderness. He understood his ministry to be one of preparation for one coming who was greater than he.³⁰ As Lane notes, Isaiah had foretold of a time when the people would be led in a second exodus into the wilderness (which is a key aspect of the Baptist’s ministry as seen in Mark 1:3-4) in order to experience the rest of the Spirit (Is. 63:11-14) and as a result, the people would experience a fresh outpouring of the Spirit (Is. 32:15, 44:3). Neither of these first two theories accounts for either the manuscript evidence or the prophetic context within which Mark places John the Baptist’s ministry. Thus, both are to be rejected

Therefore, a third option is to be preferred. A reading which emphasizes Spirit baptism independent of any notion of a baptism with fire or wind.³¹ Such a reading is to be preferred because Mark 1:2 directly places the Baptist’s ministry in the context of Isaiah’s prophecies. These prophecies, as already noted, anticipate a fresh outpouring of the Spirit. Such a reading,

²⁹Ibid., 28.

³⁰All four gospel accounts agree at this point. See Matthew 3:11-12, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16-17, and John 1:23.

³¹William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 52.

then building on Isaiah 11:2-4, would mean that John is anticipating a coming Messiah who will bestow the Holy Spirit. This bestowal of the Spirit will bring both grace and judgment.³²

The Relation between Spirit and Water Baptism in Mark

Thus, what is the exact relationship between water and Spirit baptism in Mark? In 1:8, the Baptist's directly compares his water baptism negatively with the coming baptism of the "stronger one."³³ In baptizing with water, John draws a "contrast between the outward act of washing and a change effected at a more 'internal' level."³⁴ John's water baptism comes first. It is "a preliminary rite, of lesser significance; it is the Spirit baptism which is the 'real thing,' for which John's water baptism merely prepares the way, and without which John's ministry is incomplete."³⁵ John's water baptism then is not just a new type of baptism for Jews. Rather in it "the Baptist was declaring the dawn of a new day of salvation, not simply a new baptism."³⁶

Temporally then, John's water baptism stands prior to and as a lesser picture of the Spirit baptism to be given by the coming Messiah. Indeed it is anticipatory of his coming bestowal of the Spirit and as a result prepares those who receive it for Jesus's coming ministry of Spirit baptism. In calling for his baptism of repentance, the Baptist is calling for conversion. These conversions are mediated by John through the ritual of baptism which acts as a confession of

³²Dunn develops this idea of a dual purpose to Spirit baptism more thoroughly. Additionally, the section on Spirit baptism in Matthew below also looks at this idea in greater detail. See James D. G. Dunn, "Spirit and Fire Baptism," *Novum Testamentum* 14, no. 2 (April, 1972): 81-92.

³³Such is the most literal rendering of ὁ ἰσχυρότερός in Mark 1:7. Stein, *Mark*, 49-50.

³⁴France, *Mark*, 71.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Guelich, *Mark 1-8*:26, 25.

sins. This ritual then has both initiatory and purifying functions (similar to that of an Old Testament priest).³⁷

The Baptism of Jesus

Within the narrative, Mark next moves into the accounts of Jesus' baptism in verses 9-11. Jesus is identified as the more powerful one to whom John had previously alluded.³⁸ The Spirit's descent onto Jesus, while perhaps a foreshadowing of the Spirit baptism to which John has just alluded, is not to be thought of as synonymous to such.³⁹ Rather, Jesus' water baptism serves as the "decisive step of identifying himself with John's restoration movement [and in so doing] his own role and identity are declared. His submission to John's baptism becomes the occasion for his commissioning as the one for whom John has been prepared."⁴⁰

³⁷“In light of the reality and certainty of God's judgment, John called for conversion—a reorientation of one's life, a return to God, and a restoration of one's relationship with him—whereby people's confession of sins resulted in divine forgiveness. As the one who administered baptism, John mediated this forgiveness in a way similar to the priest who performed sacrifices within the context of the OT sacrificial system (e.g., Lev 5:5–10).¹⁴ Also, John's baptism had a purifying function, in keeping with OT and Second Temple notions that immersions were concerned with cleansing from uncleanness.... Against the backdrop of references to God's judgment, John's baptism, as well as Jesus' later “baptism,” doubtless has an eschatological dimension. It marks baptism as an initiatory rite into the “true Israel,” the believing remnant. Hence many of John's disciples later became disciples of Jesus (see John 1:35–37), though doubtless there were those who were baptized by John but who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. In contrast to Jewish ritual washings, which were self-administered, John baptized others, which may have given rise to the designation, John “the Baptizer (see Mark 6:14,24).” Andreas J. Kostenberger, “Baptism in the Gospels,” in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 5.

³⁸ As Edwards notes “The heavens were opened above him, the Spirit descended into him, and the heavenly voice spoke to him. The concurrence of these momentous events at the baptism signals that Jesus is the “more powerful one” (1:7) promised in the OT and the inaugurator of God's eschatological kingdom.” James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2002), 34.

³⁹ As France notes “The second element in Jesus' vision (καταβαῖνον is still governed by εἶδεν) is the descent of the Spirit. This fulfils the prophetic expectation of a messianic figure endowed with God's Spirit (Is. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). This is, of course, a different strand of prophecy from that echoed in v. 8, of the widespread pouring out of God's Spirit on his people. It is more in line with the concept of the Spirit equipping special people for special tasks, as in 1 Sa. 16:13 (cf. Jdg. 3:10; 6:34, etc.).” France, *Mark*, 77

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76.

Of particular significance for this study, Mark emphasizes that “as soon as” Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the Spirit. H. Wheeler Robinson argues that such immediacy resulted in Jesus being immediately Spirit-baptized. Therefore, Robinson reasons (in conjunction with 1 Cor. 12:13) that “the ideal beginning of the Spirit-filled life is at the water-baptism of the believer, which in those days would follow immediately on the credible confession of faith.”⁴¹ As a result, Robinson reasons that refusing or delaying baptism would have caused the early church to consider one an unbeliever.⁴² While Robinson goes on to argue for a modified form, of sacramentalism in which Spirit-baptism is received through water baptism, his point that Christ’s water baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit are temporally contemporaneous is textually valid.

In Mark, John’s water’s baptism pictures a confession of repentance. It foreshadows the baptism of the Spirit which is still to come. This Spirit baptism will be brought by the greater one who John goes on to identify as Jesus. Jesus himself receives the Spirit contemporaneous with his water-baptism by John.

Matthew 3:1-17

The account of John the Baptist’s ministry and the baptism of Jesus in Matthew closely parallels the account of Mark. Therefore, the conclusions noted above about this incident in

⁴¹H. Wheeler Robinson, “Believer’s Baptism and the Holy Spirit,” *Baptist Quarterly* 9, no. 7 (July, 1939): 387-392.

⁴²Robinson states “A believer who did not express his faith by baptism would not then have been regarded as a believer. At the baptism, oral confession of the faith was made, and this was regarded as the decisive moment. Thus Paul is doubtless thinking of baptism when he says, “if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans x. 9). From such oral confession, over or in the baptismal water, the creeds of the early Church, such as the Apostles’ and the Nicene, took their origin.” Ibid., “”392.

Mark carry over to Matthew. Still, a few points of difference exist. Most significantly for this study are the facts that Matthew notes people were “baptized by him in the Jordan River *as* they confessed their sins” (v. 6) and that within Matthew’s account (as well as Luke’s) Jesus’ coming baptism will be one of fire and of Spirit (v. 11).

Water Baptism

First, as noted in the section above on Mark, John links repentance and baptism. Matthew’s gospel more explicitly deals with the timing of the relationship between these two events in 3:6. Therein Matthew’s use of the present participle in the phrase ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν, rendered either as “confessing their sins” (ESV, NKJV, NIV) or as “as they confessed their sins” (HCSB, NASB), indicates that John’s baptism was temporally closely linked to the respondent’s adherence. As Donald Hagner notes that while “it cannot be definitely concluded...that this was done during the actual baptism (i.e., while confessing their sins), it was however, clearly done in connection with the baptism.”⁴³

A slight delay between repentance and baptism is possible as 3:1 indicates that John preached in the wilderness and then 3:5 that he was in the region around the Jordan. As John Nolland notes “it is not clear whether we are to envisage John at a stable location near the Jordan or whether Matthew thinks in terms of John itinerating in the wilderness and taking with him to the Jordan those who were ready to respond (perhaps the latter).”⁴⁴ Thus within the Matthean context, John’s baptism is presented explicitly as either simultaneous or contemporaneous with decisions of repentance. The idea of a significant temporal delay between a confession of

⁴³Donald A Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 49.

⁴⁴ Nolland, *Matthew*, 141.

repentance and baptism would have been counterintuitive to John's basic message of repentance and the symbolic nature of his baptismal activity as a "baptism for repentance" (v. 11).

Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire

Second, Matthew provides an additional detail on John's description of the coming Messiah's baptism, namely that it is a baptism with the Holy Spirit *and fire*. The context of John's prophecy in Matthew is slightly more developed than that of Mark. Whereas Mark is placing John within the context of Isaiah and therefore emphasizes Jesus as one who baptized with the Spirit, Matthew emphasizes the specifics of the crowds coming to hear John. Specifically within the crowds are "many Pharisees and Sadducees." As a result, Matthew notes not just that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit, but also that He will baptize with fire. The relation between fire and Spirit baptism within the Matthean context has led to numerous additional positions on the nature of Spirit baptism and its relation to a baptism with fire. In addition to the Markan views on Spirit baptism already examined, four additional views on Spirit-fire baptism will be mentioned herein although other less widely held views do exist.⁴⁵

First, some Baptists (as well as Roman Catholics) have argued that the Spirit-fire baptism is a singular baptism occurring one time, on Pentecost. The fire John mentions herein references the tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. Spirit-fire baptism according to this understanding rests within the church. As a result, a person is baptized into the Holy Spirit by becoming part of

⁴⁵Other, less widely held views of the fire baptism include the idea that the fire baptism is a distinct eschatological baptism unrelated to Spirit baptism. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit: a Comprehensive Study of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958), 148-49.

the church (via water baptism).⁴⁶ A slight variation of this view is that there is a one-time Spirit-fire baptism at Pentecost which each Christian enters at conversion.⁴⁷

While this first view was popular in previous generations, it is largely ignored today.⁴⁸ Indeed, most scholars (Baptist and otherwise) now explicitly reject this reading of Matthew's account of John's Spirit baptism. Ulrich Luz notes one of the common objections when he argues that the Matthew account does not foreshadow Pentecost because Pentecost as a whole is not mentioned in this gospel.⁴⁹ The other common objection to this interpretation comes from Donald Hagner. He argues that "a major difficulty with this interpretation of the reference to fire [as referring to tongues at Pentecost] is that in the following verse (cf. v. 10) fire is so forcefully

⁴⁶Alexander McLaren advocates such in his commentary on Matthew. See Alexander MacLaren, "The Baptism with Fire," in *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel, Minor Prophets, Matthew 1-8* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 293-301. James Leo Garrett has noted the same position of John Broadus, although his reference to such is difficult to locate. See James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical. Volume II* Second Edition. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, 2000), 1:8. Among Romans Catholics, this view is quite old. It dates back as far as John Chrysostom. It's most recent notable advocate is the late French scholar M. J. Lagrange, *Evangile Selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1948), 53.

⁴⁷More recently, Blomberg argues such in the New American Commentary stating, "The expression baptism 'with/in the Holy Spirit' appears six other times in the New Testament. Five of these texts refer to this very saying of John (Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16). Acts 1-2 demonstrates that John's prediction was fulfilled at Pentecost. The sixth reference appears in 1 Cor 12:13, where it is clear that all Christians receive Spirit-baptism. The phrase therefore refers to a ritual that depicts a believer's initiation into the body of Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit, who never departs following true conversion and regeneration. Craig Blomberg, *Matthew, New American Commentary* 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 79. Cf. James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old*, New American Commentary Series in Bible & Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2006), 186-87. Still, neither of these more recent treatments of Spirit-fire baptism from a Baptist perspective deal with arguments against Spirit-fire baptism as referring to Pentecost.

⁴⁸This view has more resonance within the Lukan context. Even more contemporary scholars who do attempt to tie it to Pentecost (see Blomberg and Morris) do so within the context of individual conversion and not just within the Pentecost event.

⁴⁹Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. James E. Crouch and Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 138.

a metaphor of judgment.”⁵⁰ Therefore, most scholars have moved past the idea that Matthew understands John’s baptism as referring to Pentecost only.⁵¹

Thus, three other views have emerged. Luz and Nolland are representative of those who argue that the baptism with fire and the Spirit are separate baptisms which are realized in the ministry of Jesus. Nolland argues Jesus is the bearer of the Spirit (so thus the baptizer with the Holy Spirit) and the baptism with fire is the Trinitarian baptism mentioned in the Great Commission.⁵² Luz expands on this view placing the baptism of fire within the Matthean Son of Man theology in which Jesus is both “present in the church and at the same time the coming Lord of judgment.”⁵³ Yet, this view is problematic in that it fails to account for the fact that as Dunn notes “the two baptism are to be administered to the same people” and the “fact that the coming one’s baptism is envisioned as a single baptism ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρί.”⁵⁴

Two other views exist on the relation between the words fire and Spirit in Matthew 3:11. C. K Barrett is emblematic of one of these views. Specifically, Barrett argues that the baptism with πνεύματι ἁγίῳ should be translated not as the Holy Spirit, but as a holy wind. This creates a close parallel between verses 11 and 12, with both wind and fire serving as instruments of

⁵⁰Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 52.

⁵¹Dunn notes much the same. Dunn, *Spirit-and-Fire Baptism*, 81. Given the dearth of recent literature supporting this position it is hard to speculate as to a response by those who understand the Baptist to be forecasting Pentecost. Still, it does seem that this position is too quickly dismissed. While yes, the immediate context does deal with judgment (as Blomberg acknowledges, see Blomberg, *Matthew*, 80-81), the assumption that Matthew must understand the fulfillment of this prophecy solely within the Matthean context, is troubling. Specifically, Dunn’s presupposition that Matthew would have been unaware of or uninfluenced by the Pentecost event or that his gospel must be entirely self-contained limits Matthews’s context unnecessarily.

⁵²Nolland, *Matthew*, 147

⁵³ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 138-39.

⁵⁴Dunn, *Spirit-and-Fire Baptism*, 86.

judgment.⁵⁵ Yet this reading is problematic as well. Specifically, such an argument assumes that the Holy Spirit's role is always redemptive and never punitive.⁵⁶ Yet such arguments fail to account for the fact that the Spirit is frequently portrayed as bringing judgment.⁵⁷

The final view under consideration is that of George Beasley-Murray, Grant Osborne, and James Dunn. Dunn explains: "the future baptism is a single baptism, the ev embracing both elements."⁵⁸ Thus, Dunn and others argue that the baptism is to be understood as a "hendiadys (Spirit-fire)... Those who accept the message of the kingdom are purified by the Spirit, while those who reject it face judgment."⁵⁹ Thus, according to this interpretation of Spirit baptism the acceptance and rejection of Spirit baptism occurs with the acceptance and rejection of conversion.

Clearly, there is a lack of consensus regarding the Matthean understanding of John's Spirit-fire baptism. Still, from a Southern Baptist perspective, which largely understands Spirit baptism within the context of either conversion or Pentecost (the final and first views mentioned above for Spirit-fire baptism), a clear relation between water baptism and Spirit-fire baptism

⁵⁵C. K. Barrett, *The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (Eugene, OR Wipf & Stock, 2011), 126ff. Cf. Ernest Best, "Spirit-Baptism," *Novum Testamentum* 4, no. 3 (October 1960): 236-43.

⁵⁶Ernest Best reasons such stating "Moreover while the Q tradition contains within itself an expansion of the phrase 'baptism with fire' there is no similar expansion of the phrase 'baptism with Spirit', the implications of which would be redemptive rather than punitive. Accordingly the reference to the Spirit cannot originally have been present." Thus for Best, while the reference to pneuma is original, it does not refer to the Holy Spirit but instead to a holy wind. Best, "Spirit-Baptism," 237.

⁵⁷Rustin Umstattd, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Judgment" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 110ff, accessed November 25, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

⁵⁸Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 11. George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1972; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 31-42.

⁵⁹Osborne, *Matthew*, 116. Cf. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 11, 191-92.

emerges. Specifically, verse 11 intimately associates water baptism to Spirit-fire baptism.⁶⁰ Since John's baptism foreshadows Christian baptism and is for repentance, it follows for those holding to the Pentecost perspective that baptism should be contemporaneous with repentance as a means of becoming initiated into the Christian community where in Spirit-fire baptism resides. Further, for those holding to Spirit-fire baptism as conversion Robert Stein provides a helpful note on the temporal relation from that perspective. He writes:

The water baptism of John associated with repentance is contrasted with the water baptism of the Christ associated with the coming of the Spirit. Baptism and regeneration, which involves the coming of the Spirit into the life of the believer, are intimately associated in these verses. In the experience of the earliest Christian community this association did not create any major problem because these two aspects of the conversion experience were not separated in time.⁶¹

Regardless of which view one holds, it is clear that within the Matthean account, John's water baptism is contemporaneous with either (or perhaps both) a conversion to the coming one's Spirit-fire baptism or an initiation into the community anticipating the coming Spirit-fire baptism.

John 1:19-34

The Johannine account⁶² of John the Baptist's ministry stands apart from the other three. While there are parallels between the synoptic treatments of the Baptist and the Johannine account, three details unique to this account are relevant for the present study. Specifically, the

⁶⁰Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 6-17.

⁶¹ Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian," 8.

⁶²John is treated prior to Luke so that the Lukan account is tightly connected to Acts in the development of this paper.

Johannine understanding of the relation between water and Spirit baptism, the uniqueness of John's water baptism, and the nature of the Baptist's witness to Jesus' reception of the Spirit are all particularly relevant to this study.

Water Baptism

First, there is the nature of the Johannine witness to John's baptismal practice. The Johannine account introduces John within a different context than the Synoptics. The Synoptics open in the region around the Jordan River. In the Gospel of John, the Baptist's ministry is introduced in the context of first-century Judaism and its leadership in Jerusalem. Specifically, the account opens with priestly officials being sent from Jerusalem to question John's identity. After clarifying that he is the one making the way for the Messiah, the reader is introduced to John as a baptizer not within the context of his actual baptizing work but instead in a rather abrupt fashion through a question about John's baptism from the Pharisees in verse 24.⁶³

As already mentioned,⁶⁴ John's baptismal practice in the wilderness finds parallels within the common ancient religious ritual of ceremonial washing normally associated with conversion from one religion to another. Within Judaism, the *mikva'ot* functioned as such for Gentile converts. Thus, John was seen as one bringing about "a ceremonial removal of all the pollutions [which were] contracted in the Gentile world."⁶⁵ Yet shockingly, John applies such to not just

⁶³Such seems to imply that John the apostle is drawing upon an assumed prior knowledge of the Synoptic accounts of John as the baptizer with water. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 102. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia.: Westminster, 1971), 88, 92 n.4.

⁶⁴See section above on Mark's treatment of John the Baptist.

⁶⁵Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 123

Gentiles, but also to Jews. Even assuming that Jewish leaders understood such in an eschatological sense as being part of the ministry of the Messiah, such behavior is still unexpected as “there is no clear indication in the Hebrew Scriptures that the coming of the Messiah to Israel would be preceded by a baptism of repentance for the Jews.”⁶⁶ Further, John was administering the baptism himself while traditionally such ritual cleansings were practiced alone and done by oneself.⁶⁷ Hence the Pharisees are at best confused as to why John was baptizing in the wilderness.

In response, John draws a contrast between his baptism and the ministry of the one to come. John only baptizes with water, the one coming is far greater. His sandal John is unworthy to untie. “The implication is that this other figure will carry out a far more significant baptism than John’s.”⁶⁸ Yet, as Carson notes, this account presents John’s water baptism as more than just a foil to Christ’s Spirit baptism. It goes farther in that is preparatory for Jesus.⁶⁹

The question still remains, why is *water* baptism John the Baptist’s chosen medium? Indeed, the text later goes on to emphasize that John baptized where there was much water (3:23). Here, Leon Morris helpfully answers “that [the water of] baptism is a figure which stresses abundant supply.”⁷⁰ In choosing a water baptism by immersion, the Baptist foreshadows that the coming Spirit baptism will be one in which the Messiah provides the Spirit in abundant

⁶⁶Kostenberger, *John*, 63. George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 24. Contra Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 88.

⁶⁷As D. A. Carson notes, unlike in Jewish proselyte baptism or in the Qumran community’s ritual cleansings, where “in both instances baptism was *self*-administered. Candidates baptized *themselves*. One of the things that characterized the baptism of John the Baptist is that he himself administered.” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 145.

⁶⁸Ramsey, *Gospel of John*, 103.

⁶⁹Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 146

⁷⁰Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 134

supply. With this in mind, the Johannine account of the Baptist's activity positions Jesus as one who leads people into the divine resource of the Spirit. Thus, Christ is the one who draws on the Old Testament promise that "God would pour out his Spirit on all people in the last days."⁷¹

Spirit and Water Baptism

Second, there is the relation between water and Spirit baptism in the Gospel of John. As has already been noted, in John's Gospel the Baptist's water baptism serves a preparatory function. Still, the full meaning of John's baptism does not become clear until verses 31 and following. There the relation between water and Spirit baptism within the Johannine context becomes clear. John's "Gospel asserts that Jesus is intimately involved in the giving of the Holy Spirit and that unlike John's baptism (which in the Synoptics is a ritual of repentance; cf. Mark 1:4), the baptism of Jesus bestows the Spirit."⁷² While John's baptism serves a preparatory function negatively, that is "it is a cleansing from—...[Jesus's] baptism with the Spirit is positive. It is a bestowal of new life in God."⁷³ Thus, John's water baptism ritualistically prepares for that which Christ's Spirit baptism actually provides: a new life in God.

The Baptism of Jesus

Third, there is the matter of John's testimony to Jesus' reception of the Holy Spirit. John's account of Christ's baptism is different from that of the Synoptics. Specifically, he does

⁷¹Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 71

⁷²Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, The New American Commentary 25A (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 139.

⁷³Ramsey, *Gospel of John*, 103

not directly recount it. Rather, the Evangelist's account assumes Jesus' baptism has already taken place.⁷⁴ Yet up until the incident relayed in vv. 29-34, John did not realize the significance of Jesus' baptism.⁷⁵ John knew that God had sent him baptizing with water so that the way would be prepared for Israel to know that the Messiah is coming (v. 31). The Baptist then explains how he knew Jesus was the greater one whose work his baptism anticipates. Specifically, "he testifies, *I have seen* (the perfect tense reflects a settled conviction) *the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him* (v. 32)."⁷⁶ Therefore, in John's account the descent and reception of the Spirit as a dove serves a two-fold purpose. First, in the Spirit's remaining on Jesus, the evangelist emphasizes "Jesus empowering was permanent"⁷⁷ and as a result "He will be the bearer and dispenser of the Spirit."⁷⁸ Second, the Spirit's descent serves to identify "the Coming One to John the Baptist. He had been told by God himself (*the one who sent me to baptize with water*, v. 33) who the Coming One, the promised Messiah, would be: *The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit* (v. 33)."⁷⁹ Taken

⁷⁴Almost all commentators agree that John draws on the synoptic accounts in description of the relation between water and Spirit baptism in verse 32. As a result, John's testimony of the Spirit's descent like a dove in this account is thought to be equivalent to the Synoptics' testimony of Jesus hearing the voice of the Father and seeing the Spirit's descent like a dove therein (Mt. 3:16-17). While the synoptics emphasize that Jesus witnessed such, the evangelist notes that John recognized the same but did comprehend that Jesus was the Messiah until a later direct revelation of God. For more on this see Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 52-53, 60-62. See also Blochert, *John 1-11*, 137.

⁷⁵John states directly "I didn't know him" in verse 31. As Carson notes of this, this "does not mean that John did not know Jesus at all, but only that he did not know him as the Coming One" Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 151.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Burge, *The Anointed Community*, 55.

⁷⁸In reference to v. 33b, Kostenberger, *John*, 70.

⁷⁹Carson, *John*, 151.

together, these two facts reveal that John's water baptism is of less significance than Jesus' Spirit baptism.⁸⁰

To summarize, the Johannine account stresses that baptism is required of all would-be disciples of the coming baptizer with the Holy Spirit. This baptism prepares (and thus comes before) one actually begins to live a life of repentance as a way of preparing for the coming Spirit-baptizer. This account also serves to stress the superiority and the abundance of the coming the Spirit baptism in relation to the lesser water baptism of John. Still, it does not make explicit the nature of the coming Spirit baptism or how exactly water baptism is inferior to it.

Luke 3:1-22

The most robust treatment of Spirit Baptism is found in Luke-Acts. As a result, how Luke introduces Spirit-baptism within the context of John's ministry is especially informative for the relationship between Spirit and water baptism throughout the rest of his writing. While much of Luke's material on John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus closely parallels the other gospels, his presentation of John's ministry emphasizes his message in ways that the other account do not.

Water Baptism

While all four gospel accounts note an element of repentance to John's call for baptism, only Luke fully explains the Baptist's message. Indeed, Luke stresses "John's message more

⁸⁰Burge, *The Anointed Community*, 61.

than...his baptism.”⁸¹ Thus it is not surprising that John’s message of repentance or conversion⁸² is expressed in a water baptism which signifies “a personal decision to accept that one’s entire past life is under God’s judgment and to wait solely for [God’s] forgiveness.”⁸³ Thus, when one is baptized by John, one is making a commitment to repent. In so doing, John is connected to the “the great prophets of Israel. These called the people back from their alienation from and rebellion against God. They called [the people] to refocus their lives on God and on his will, to trust him unreservedly and to turn away from everything unworthy of him.”⁸⁴ The Baptist’s message has the same effect. He stands as an Old Testament prophet calling the people back to God. As a result, his water baptism pictures this call to repentance.

As the passage unfolds (vv. 7-14), it becomes clear that *the way* one responds to John’s message is through baptism. This is specifically seen in vv. 12-13 in the tax collectors who come to be baptized by John. In so doing, Luke is highlighting that these tax collectors were responsive to John’s message.⁸⁵ They ask John, what should they do? John instead of simply replying “be baptized” instead tells them to conduct their business practices differently.⁸⁶ Specifically they are

⁸¹Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 287.

⁸²Such is the language of both Roman Catholic scholars like Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series 3, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 64 as well as Baptists such as Robert Stein who states “repentance here literally means *a change of mind* but refers more broadly to the human dimension involved in the experience of conversion in contrast to the divine element (regeneration).” Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary 24 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 128.

⁸³François Bovon, *Luke: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 125.

⁸⁴ John Nolland, *Luke 1:1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 35 A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 141.

⁸⁵Bock, *Theology*, 310. Cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 112.

⁸⁶“These were tax-farmers who had purchased for themselves the right to collect various indirect taxes, mainly customs or tolls; they employed subordinate officials to carry out the work. The system abounded with abuses. Consequently the collectors were cordially hated and despised by their fellow-countrymen, and in addition

to collect only “what is required of them.” Baptism serves to inaugurate these tax collectors into a new way of living characterized by a concern for one’s fellow humans.⁸⁷ With such in mind, these toll collectors receive “repentance-baptism and align themselves with God’s purpose.”⁸⁸

Thus, Luke notes the Baptist’s pattern. Baptism, expressing one’s desire for repentance, comes first. The actions and activities of repentance come second. From the Lukan perspective, John the Baptist’s water baptism stands as commitment to live differently and is not the result of already having lived differently. Water-baptism *functions confessionally* of repentance. The validity of one’s repentance is then demonstrated *after* baptism.

Spirit Baptism

In the Markan and Matthean accounts above, the significant debate over the nature of Spirit baptism and its relationship to fire baptism was explored. Between these two passages, seven different understandings of Spirit baptism were mentioned. Of these, views which emphasize either conversion or Pentecost are preferred.⁸⁹ The Lukan account adds one more potential nuance to the Pentecost view. Earle Ellis argues that Luke adds the idea of fire to John’s original baptism in the Spirit. He argues that Luke does this to point towards the tongues of fire at Pentecost.⁹⁰ Others agree with Ellis that while the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire in

their job made them ritually unclean.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 143.

⁸⁷Bock, 287, 310.

⁸⁸Green, *Luke*, 180

⁸⁹See in particular the discussion in Matthew above.

⁹⁰E. Earle Ellis, *Eschatology in Luke*, Facet Books Biblical Series 30 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 90. Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, (*The Gospel of Luke*, 66), who believes the references to both the Holy Spirit and fire are original and refer to Pentecost.

verse 16 does point to Pentecost, there is no reason to reject the originality of both being in the Baptist's original statement.⁹¹ Further, many other Lukan scholars prefer the view that associates this coming Spirit-fire baptism with conversion and judgment.⁹²

One other significant aspect of John's baptism in the Lukan account is its scope. In verse 6, everyone is to see God's salvation, verse 7 notes that crowds came out to be baptized, verses 12 and 14 note that both tax collectors and soldiers, that is those who would often be assumed to be furthest from God, were recipients of John's message and partakers in his baptism, and verse 21 notes that "all the people were baptized." Luke's John presents a far more robust understanding of John's universal expectation of baptism and repentance than do the other gospels. Even in his warnings, Luke's scope is broad. John does not just label the religious leaders "a brood of vipers," as in Matthew 3:5, but instead labels the crowds who are seeking baptism as such. In so doing, he is calling them children of the devil.⁹³ Yet, Luke's account of John is careful to note that even as children of the snake they are not to be written off. Instead, John (and in turn Luke) emphasizes that all need to be baptized and all need to produce fruit consistent with repentance.⁹⁴ While there is obviously an element of hyperbole in the idea that all people responded,⁹⁵ given Luke's attention to the Gentile, it is clear that all need to flee the

⁹¹Marshall 146-47.

⁹²As noted in the section above on Matthew, the idea here is that those who accept the Baptist's message are preparing for the coming Messiah and will be purified by fire through the Spirit-baptism of the coming Messiah. Those who reject his message will be thrown to the wind and ultimately burn. Bock, *Luke*, 321-324. Malcolm O. Tolbert, "Luke" in *Luke-John*, The Broadman Bible Commentary 9, (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 38-39; Stein, *Luke*, 135.

⁹³Bock, *Luke*, 302.

⁹⁴Bovon, *Luke 1*, 122.

⁹⁵Bock notes that Luke 7:30 make it clear that there were some who did not respond, still. Bock, *Luke*, 336.

coming wrath, all need to be baptized and live repentant lives in preparation for the coming greater one who will baptize with the Spirit.⁹⁶

Synthesis on John's Baptism and Its Relations to Spirit Baptism

Through the study offered above of John's baptism and Spirit baptism within the four gospels, the nature of the two baptisms comes into focus. In regards to water baptism, four observations can be made. First, John understands his water baptism as the appropriate response to and confession of repentance (Mark). Therefore, John's water baptism pictures conversion to repentance. Everett Ferguson expresses this relationship well, stating, "repentance is the inward turning and baptism is the outward turning, which is followed by the new life or walking in the opposite direction. Baptism is the act that expresses the rejection of sin and the turning to follow God."⁹⁷

Second, and significantly for the question of the timing of baptism, John's water baptism inaugurates a lifestyle of repentance. It is the confession of a desire to repent. It represents an inward commitment to and conversion towards repentance, but it is not based on discernible evidences of that repentance.⁹⁸ Only after baptism does this repentance manifest itself in acts of service towards others (Luke). While there is the possibility of delay between repentance and water baptism, this delay is only for the purpose of going to where there is water (Matthew).

⁹⁶Ibid., 303.

⁹⁷Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 182

⁹⁸If John's understanding of the purpose of water baptism carries over into the church (as will be argued in the next section) then John's procedure is contra Dever's view of baptism. He argues that "baptism should be forbidden until repentance for sin is evident." Dever, "Baptism," 336.

Water baptism is thus contemporaneous with the confession of repentance. For John, there is no room for someone to say they are willing to repent and then not be baptized (Luke, Mark).

Third, John notably uses water (indeed much water) to baptize. In using water as the medium for his baptism, John points to the coming Messiah's baptism, which will supply the Holy Spirit in abundance (John's Gospel). Thus for the Baptist, baptism is almost certainly by immersion⁹⁹ because in so doing, John stresses the sufficiency of the baptism of the coming Spirit.

Fourth, John's water baptism is for all who desire to flee from the coming wrath. Unlike other first-century cleansing rituals, John's baptism cuts across ethnic lines. No one desiring to confess a new lifestyle of repentance or to prepare for the coming Spirit-baptizer is exempt from the command to be baptized (John's Gospel).

In regards to Spirit baptism and its relation to water baptism, three additional observations emerge. First, John's water baptism foreshadows and anticipates Spirit baptism (Mark) which is more important for John than his own baptism (John). As a result, John's water baptism prepares one for Spirit baptism (John) and functions as a call to conversion to prepare for this Spirit Baptism (Mark).

Second, from a Baptist perspective, Spirit and fire baptism refer to the same event, either being conversion or Pentecost or some combination of the two (Matthew). As result, Christian water baptism, if equivalent to John's water baptism, should be contemporaneous with conversion-initiation (Matthew). Either way, Spirit baptism provides a new life with God (John).

Third, it is at water baptism (specifically contemporaneously following it) that Jesus receives the Spirit (all of the Synoptic Gospels). Yet, John's water baptism is ultimately less

⁹⁹Such is the basic meaning of the Greek word βαπτίζω (baptizo) from which the English word is derived.

important (John). The Spirit baptism to be dispensed by Jesus takes precedence over John's water baptism because Jesus' baptism with the Spirit takes precedence over John's water baptism.

Returning to the original question on the timing of water baptism in relation to Spirit baptism, it is clear that John's water baptism precedes Spirit baptism. John expected that those who desired to respond to his message would in relatively short order be baptized by John. Not to do so would have been disobedience to John's command to repent. If this understanding of the timing of John's water baptism can be applied to Christian water baptism, then Christians should be baptized shortly after expressing a desire to repent and for their sins to be forgiven.

As noted above, many question the appropriateness of baptizing children in part because they argue that baptism does not need to be contemporaneous with salvation or initiation into the local church. Andreas Köstenberger's application of the water baptismal practices of John are therefore particularly relevant. He states:

Believer's baptism is presupposed by John's baptism...This does not mean that fairly young people, say, at the age of seven or eight, should be barred from receiving believer's baptism if they have genuinely understood the implications of Christ's death on their behalf and have repented of their sin and placed their faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁰

Clearly, Köstenberger sees believer's baptism in John's water baptism. Because of John's practice, Köstenberger reasons that children should be baptized if they are believers.

Still, is Köstenberger's assumption here valid? Specifically, does Christian water baptism presuppose John's water baptismal practices? Köstenberger's assumption is contested. For example, James Dunn, whose *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* is one of the most widely known works

¹⁰⁰ Köstenberger, "Baptism in the Gospels," 22.

on Spirit baptism, also examines the four gospels' treatment of John's water baptism. Dunn, upon concluding his study, states:

We may not therefore reach the Christian sacrament by equating it with Spirit-baptism or by fusing the two limbs of the Baptists' antithesis. On the contrary, since, as most agree, Christian water-baptism takes the place of John's water-baptism as a symbol of and contrast with Christ's Spirit baptism... This is certainly far near the truth so far as Luke is concerned.¹⁰¹

In contrast stands Everett Ferguson. Undertaking a similar study of John's baptismal practice he concludes by arguing for what Köstenberger assumes, namely that John's practice precedes the practice of the early church. He explicitly argues that there is a strong connection between John's water baptism and the baptism of the New Testament church.

The baptism administered by John the Baptist was a 'repentance baptism' (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3, Acts 19:4). The people confessed their sins (Matt. 3:6, Mark 1:5), and John gave specific instructions about what repentance required (Luke 3:7-14). That association between repentance and baptism continued in Christian baptism. The people on Pentecost "were cut to the heart" and wanted to know what they should do about their sinful condition (Acts 2:37). Peter told them to "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38).¹⁰²

Ferguson's explicit interaction with Acts and New Testament church practice in comparison to the baptismal practices of John is helpful. Therefore, an examination on the relation between water and Spirit baptism is still in order and offered below.

Spirit and Water Baptism in the New Testament Church

Outside of the ministry of John the Baptist, there are three additional reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Two of these are in the book of Acts while one is in 1 Corinthians. Within the context of Acts, it becomes clear that the baptism of the Holy

¹⁰¹Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 20

¹⁰² Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 182

Spirit is synonymous with the gift,¹⁰³ filling, or reception of the Holy Spirit. The single reference in 1 Corinthians to Spirit baptism makes this clear.

Spirit and Water Baptism in the Book of Acts

Acts 1:5-8

The fifth and sixth overall references to Spirit baptism occur within the book of Acts. The first of these comes in Acts 1:5. Therein, Jesus points back to the baptism of John noting that it is with water. Christ then turns his attention to the fact that in just a few days the disciples will receive a more significant baptism, a baptism with the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴ The disciples then express confusion about such (vv. 6-7). In response, Jesus provides additional context to this reference to Spirit baptism. Specifically, he states that the disciples will “receive power when the Spirit has come on you.” Thus, Spirit baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit refer to the same event. As the events of Acts unfold, it becomes clear that the event in view is Pentecost. As Polhill notes when Jesus speaks of Spirit baptism in Acts 1:5-8 he is speaking of “the unique, unrepeatable event at Pentecost wherein the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples in a visible form like fire.”¹⁰⁵

Acts 1:5 further illuminates the relationship between John’s water baptism and Spirit

¹⁰³Not gifts.

¹⁰⁴Pervo argues that the lack of a reference to fire in this account is problematic and perhaps even indicative that the book of Acts is more closely related to fictional Greco-Roman literature than to an actual historical narrative. Yet, such conclusions are unwarranted. In the context of the passage, the baptism of fire is implied through the allusion to John’s baptism and then realized in the reference to tongues of fire. Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 38-39.

¹⁰⁵ The immediate context of this reference of Spirit baptism demands that it refer to Pentecost at a minimum. Specifically, the statement “not many days from now makes this clear.” John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary 25 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 83.

baptism. Specifically in Lukan literature, John's baptism has serves a preparatory function. It readied those who received it for the Spirit baptism to come. As F. F. Bruce notes, "John's baptism in water not only prepared his repentant hearers for the judgment but also pointed them on to that spiritual baptism of which the prophets had spoken."¹⁰⁶ Just as Jesus' baptism by John resulted in his anointing by and reception of power from the Holy Spirit, so now the disciples' coming baptism in the Holy Spirit will result in their also being anointed by and receiving power from the same Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:1-4, 38-41

The Spirit baptism that Jesus foretold comes to fruition in Acts 2:1-4. Specifically, there was a wind from heaven (v. 2) and the appearance of tongues like flames of fire resting upon the disciples (v. 3). Luke explains of this event that "they all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speak in different languages" (v. 4)." Clearly, "the spiritual baptism foretold by John and promised afresh by the Lord is now an accomplished fact."¹⁰⁷

The Spirit baptism the disciples experience results in the disciples speaking in other languages (v. 7) resulting in crowds hearing the disciples proclaim "the magnificent acts of God" in their own languages (v. 11). Peter than proclaims the gospel of Jesus to the crowds, showing how Jesus fulfills the Jewish messianic expectation (vv. 14-36). Many in the crowds desire to

¹⁰⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 35.

¹⁰⁷Bruce, *Acts*, 51. Hamilton is also helpful at this point. Like Bruce, Hamilton indicates that Spirit-baptism takes place at Pentecost. Yet he is more cautious. He notes that since the verb βαπτίζω only occurs twice in the context of Spirit-baptism in Acts (1:5, 11:6), Luke could regard "it as a unique experience." Luke emphasis on Spirit-baptism taking place after Jesus's ascension is to be understood in light of Ezekiel's prophecies (Acts 2:11). Thus Spirit-baptism in Luke is to be understood as "Ezekiel's prophecy... being (at least initially) fulfilled" in the Pentecost event. James M. Hamilton, "Rushing Wind and Organ Music: Toward Luke's Theology of the Spirit in Acts," *Reformed Theological Review* 65, no. 1 (April, 2006): 18-19.

respond to Peter's message. Peter therefore instructs the crowds to "repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38). The result of such was that "those who accepted his message were baptized" (v. 41).

So, the result of the disciples' Spirit baptism is that they exhorted others to repentance and water baptism. The water baptism of those others is contemporaneous with their reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:38 is particularly illuminating for the relationship between John's water baptism and Jesus' Spirit baptism as administered by Peter. Both John and Peter baptize in water. Both position baptism as a response to their message and as an inaugural sign of repentance. Both are with the hope of forgiveness of sin. Clearly, John's baptismal practice is not wrong. Every part of it is being carried over into the baptism at Pentecost. Instead of being set in opposition to the baptism of John, the baptism of the Holy Spirit as inaugurated at Pentecost represents a higher level of baptism than the water baptism of John.¹⁰⁸ John's baptismal practice lacks the confession of Jesus as Lord, which was central to Peter's baptism.¹⁰⁹ Therefore the reception of the Holy Spirit is present only in the post-Pentecost baptism because post-Pentecost baptism centers on a confession of Jesus.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸Cross argues that what is in view here is not a contrast, but a form of "step-parallelism." Thus the baptism of Jesus is just like the baptism of John, but with one additional step, namely the reception of the Holy Spirit. A. R. Cross, "Spirit- and Water-Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13," in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series 234 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 131-32. Contra James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 450-51.

¹⁰⁹Note Peter's exhortation in Acts 2:38 to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

¹¹⁰Joel Green rightly argues that this confession is one of belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Joel B. Green, "From John's Baptism to Baptism in the Name of the Lord Jesus": The Significance of Baptism in Luke Acts," in *Baptism, the New Testament, and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R. E. O. White*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 168.

It is important to note at this point that Luke is not offering a theology of baptism. The precise distinction between water and Spirit baptism is not in view.¹¹¹ Rather he is describing the practice and experience of baptism in the early church.¹¹² As a result, when Luke speaks of baptism (either water or Spirit) he presents the conversion-initiation¹¹³ experience of the early Christian.¹¹⁴

Acts 8:4-17, 10:44-48, 11:16-17, 19:1-7

Following Pentecost, there are four other encounters in Acts relating to the reception of the Holy Spirit with water baptism. The first of these is found in Acts 8:4-17. There, the account is mentioned of the apostles' message expanding through the proclamation of Philip to the Samaritans. In this account, the Samaritans hear the message of Philip, believe his account, and are baptized. When the apostles in Jerusalem hear of this, they send Peter and John to Samaria. They pray for the Samaritans and lay hands on them resulting in the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit subsequent to their water baptism. Unlike in Acts 2, tongues are not present.

The next reference to Spirit baptism is to the gift of the Holy Spirit by the God-fearing Gentiles in Acts 10:44-48. There, Peter was preaching. As he preached, "the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message" (v. 44). The Gentiles begin to speak in languages,

¹¹¹See Cross, "Spirit and Water Baptism," 130.

¹¹²Stein, "Luke-Acts," 26

¹¹³The language of conversion-initiation is meant to be inclusive of both those who argue that Spirit baptism occurs at each individual's conversion and those who argue that it occurs only once, at Pentecost which individuals then become part of through initiation. From the perspective of Luke within the context of Acts, conversion and initiation into the faith community are contemporaneous.

¹¹⁴Stein, "Luke-Acts," 26

with Peter responding that they “have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (v. 47). The Gentiles then experience water baptism almost immediately after their Spirit baptism.

This account of Gentile conversion is particularly unsettling to a group of the Jewish believers throughout Judea who argue that the disciples of Jesus need circumcision.¹¹⁵ As a result, Peter engages in a dialogue with this group. Toward the end of this dialogue, Peter states, “Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” Therefore, if God gave them the same gift that He also gave to us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?” (11:16-17).

A final account of the reception of the Holy Spirit in Acts occurs in Acts 19:1-7. There, Luke reports of a Pauline encounter with a group of disciples of John the Baptists. These disciples had not received the Holy Spirit (v. 2), instead, they had only been baptized “with John’s baptism” (v. 3). Paul points these disciples to the fact that John’s baptism foreshadowed Christ. As a result, they are re-baptized (v. 5), have hands laid upon them, receive the Spirit, and speak in tongues.

The Case for the Contemporaneous Nature of Spirit and Water Baptism in Acts

Robert Stein’s essay, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” helpfully summarizes several key observations on both the nature of Spirit and water baptism in these passages as well as the

¹¹⁵As Polhill notes “Evidently they represented a strongly Jewish perspective and felt that any Gentile who became a Christian would have to do so by converting to Judaism and undergoing full Jewish proselyte procedure, which included circumcision. Hence they were known as the circumcision group, since they would require it of all Gentile converts. They may well have been the same group as those believers mentioned in 15:5 who belonged to the Pharisees and required Gentiles to be circumcised and to live by the Mosaic law. Their perspective is understandable, given that at this point Christianity was still seen as a movement within Judaism. It followed that if Gentiles became Christians they also became Jews by so doing and should thus undergo the normal procedure for converts to Judaism. Needless to say, if this line had been adopted, there never would have been an effective Gentile mission. Most Gentiles had real problems with some of the more “external” aspects of the Jewish law, such as circumcision and the food laws. Such factors doubtless had kept many Gentiles like Cornelius, who believed in the God of the Jews, from becoming full proselytes.” Polhill, *Acts*, 266.

relationship between the two baptisms.¹¹⁶ First, he explores the nature of water baptism. Within Acts, there is a clear connection between repentance and water baptism such that both are assumed as inseparable in the conversion experience to the Christian faith.¹¹⁷ A similar relationship exists between faith and water baptism,¹¹⁸ with them being “integrally related, and each assumes the other.”¹¹⁹

Second, in regards to Spirit baptism, Stein notes that within the context of Acts it also is closely related to repentance with it at points even seems to be synonymous with it.¹²⁰ In a similar fashion, belief seems to precede immediately the gift of the Spirit.¹²¹ As with water

¹¹⁶Stein opinion is significant given his context. He is a recently retired professor of New Testament at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As a result, his direct argument for the contemporaneous nature of Spirit and water baptism is rooted within a present-day Southern Baptist context.

¹¹⁷Stein notes that within these passages in Acts repentance is clearly a condition for baptism. In Acts 2:37 Peter commands the crowds to repent and be baptized, in Acts 11:17, 19 the Gentiles are to be water baptized in part because God grants them repentance, in Acts 19:3-4, the need for repentance “whether preached by John the Baptist or the Christian church along with Christian baptism is assumed as necessary and inseparable in the experience of conversion to the Christian faith.” Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 25-26.

¹¹⁸Stein notes several passages. There is Acts 8:12-13, where Samaritans believe and are baptized, and Acts 10:43-48a, where the God-fearing Gentiles are exhorted to believe, the Spirit comes, and then they are baptized. In Acts 16:31-34 the Philippian jailor is exhorted to believe in the Lord Jesus and subsequently he and his household are baptized the very hour upon which they hear the word. Crispus’s and many of the Corinthians’ belief in Jesus in Acts 18:8 results in their water baptism. While some might object to Stein’s conclusion because the account of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35-39) does not mention belief, Stein notes that the Ethiopian eunuch’s “request to be baptized implies that he believed in Jesus.” Ibid., 28-29

¹¹⁹Stein, “Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament,” 7.

¹²⁰In Acts 2:38 the hearers who are “cut to the heart” are told to “repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Stein notes, “Two necessary human responses are mentioned for receiving these two divine benefits: repentance and baptism. The connection between repentance and receiving the gift of the Spirit is clear.” In Acts 10:1-11, 18, which is the account of the Gentile Cornelius’ Spirit and water baptism and the Jewish reaction to such. At first there is great hesitation about the possibility of a Gentile being accepted within the church without circumcision. Upon “hearing that the Spirit had come upon believing Gentiles, the Jerusalem church concluded that, since God had given his Spirit to the Gentile Cornelius and his house, God had accepted them, i.e., he had granted ‘repentance that leads to life’ (11:18) to Gentiles as well as Jews.” Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 31-32.

¹²¹Acts 10:43-46 states that those who believe receive forgiveness and receive the gift of the Spirit. In Acts 19:2 Paul expects people to receive the Holy Spirit when they believe. In 19:4 Paul shows that John’s ministry was anticipatory of faith in Christ. As a result, these disciples of John are baptized in Jesus’ name and receive the Holy Spirit. Ibid., 32.

baptism, so to with Spirit baptism, repentance and faith exist contemporaneously (or perhaps simultaneously) with both baptisms.

Third is the relationship between water and Spirit baptism in Acts. Within the account of Cornelius in Acts 10:44-48, the two are closely related. The Spirit comes down on the Gentiles and Peter's response is to say that the Gentiles should be baptized. The coming of the Spirit in that account legitimizes and even seems to demand water baptism.¹²² Still, in Acts 2:38, Peter commands the crowds to repent and be baptized and then they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹²³ Acts 19:5-6 follows the same order with baptism and then the Holy Spirit coming. Yet in all of these accounts clearly the events are contemporaneous.

The events of Acts 8 are more confusing and present a possible objection to the two baptisms being contemporaneous. Apparently some delay exists between the water baptism of the Samaritans and their reception of the Spirit. Yet, even Luke seems to note that this incident is unusual, as in verses 17-18 he emphasizes the need for the apostles to come and pray since the Spirit had not yet come down on the Samaritans.¹²⁴ Stein helpfully summarize the biblical data in Acts on the relation between Spirit and water baptism:

What is clear is that, except in the unusual instance of the Samaritan Christians in Acts 8, the gift of the Spirit and baptism occurred together and were both part of becoming a Christian. To this must be added that this was preceded by repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ, as well as confessing Christ or "calling on his name."¹²⁵

¹²²Paul's conversion seems to indicate the same as he was filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:17) and then was baptized (9:18). Ibid., 35

¹²³"Whatever the relationship between baptism and the gift of the Spirit elsewhere in Acts, there appears to be no doubt as to the intention of Acts 2:38; the penitent believer baptized in the name of Jesus Christ may expect to receive at once the Holy Spirit, even as he is assured of the immediate forgiveness of his sins." Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 108, cf., 273.

¹²⁴Stein, "Baptism in Luke-Acts," 37.

¹²⁵Ibid.

Stein's primary point "“then comes into focus. Spirit baptism or the gift of the Holy Spirit occurs with repentance and faith, and as he goes on to later show the forgiveness of sins.”¹²⁶ Water baptism also occurs in the same context as faith, repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Further, water and Spirit baptism both exist within this exact same Scriptural context. Stein rightly recognizes that these are not different ways of obtaining God's forgiveness for sin. Rather, “all these are interrelated and integral components in the experience of conversion in becoming a Christian, and all take place in Acts on the same day.”¹²⁷ Collectively then, faith, repentance, the forgiveness of sins, Spirit baptism and water baptism make up an entire process of conversion-initiation into the faith community.¹²⁸

An Objection to Water Baptism as Contemporaneous with Spirit Baptism

Clearly there is a close connection between water and Spirit baptism in Luke-Acts. Still, as noted in the introduction, there are credobaptists who argue that water and Spirit baptism are not contemporaneous. Indeed the book of Acts stands central to such an argument. John Hammett of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary argues such:

While there are instances of instantaneous baptism [within Acts] there are other instances where the time factor is not clear (Acts 18:7-8) and where conversions are reported without any mention of an immediate baptism (4:4, 13:48); in fact, conversions are spoken of as a daily occurrence, but not baptisms (2:47, 16:5). There is some deliberate

¹²⁶Ibid., 37-41.

¹²⁷Ibid., 42

¹²⁸Some might contend that this implies a sacramental understanding of baptism in which water baptism brings about Spirit-baptism. In response to this objection, Stein in a different article writes “Although the New Testament indicates that there is an intimate relationship between baptism and regeneration, this does not mean that this relationship is causal in nature. At Pentecost the Spirit came upon the early church independently of baptism (Ac 2:1-4; cf. also Jn 20:19-22), which was also the case in Samaria (Ac 8:14-17). Cornelius received the Spirit before baptism. In fact, Cornelius' baptism was dependent upon his prior experience of having received the Holy Spirit (Ac 10:44-48). Paul understood that baptism did not guarantee salvation (1 Co 10:1-5) and that the reception of the Spirit came *via* faith (Gal 3:2-5). Normally, however, baptism and regeneration were intimately associated together because they occurred together in time.” Stein, “Baptism and Becoming a Christian,” 9.

openness as to the timing of baptism. The case for believer's baptism is much stronger than that for immediate baptism, and if the purpose for delay is to ascertain as much as possible that those to be baptized are believers, the delay seems commendable, rather than questionable.¹²⁹

In light of the discussion above on the relation between Spirit and water baptism in Acts, Hammett's argument fails for four reasons. First, Hammett's assumption that the absence of a specific reference to water baptism in 2:47, 4:4, 13:48, and 16:5 indicates a "deliberate openness to the timing of baptism" is unfounded.¹³⁰ While much could be said in response to each of the passages individually,¹³¹ ultimately, Hammett's thesis fails to account for the usage of baptism throughout Lukan literature. Specifically, Hammett fails to interact with the Lukan concept of baptism as it relates to faith, repentance, confession of sins and Spirit baptism. The omission of any one of these elements from a specific passage does not imply that the specific element was not part of the conversion-initiation process, nor does it indicate that there were separate ways to experience the forgiveness of sins and right standing with God within the New Testament church. Rather all parts of the conversion-initiation process are implied even when not all elements are listed. As Stein states,

¹²⁹Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 273.

¹³⁰Additionally, his assertion that the time factor in Acts 18:7-8 is unclear is highly disputable. The verses read, "So [Paul] left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed the Lord, along with his whole household. Many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized." A plain reading of the text seems to indicate not vagueness as to the timing of baptism but rather that hearing and believing result in baptism. A temporal delay between belief on the one hand and baptism on the other is nowhere implied in the text. Indeed, Stein notes that these verses indicate that "Christian baptism and personal faith are intimately associated." Stein, "Baptism in Luke-Acts," 29. Unfortunately, Hammett provides no exegetical support for his assertion that this passage indicates "an unclear time-factor."

¹³¹For example, Hammett assumption that Acts 2:47 implies ambiguity as to the timing of baptism is particularly egregious. The verse falls within the context of Acts 2:38-47 and the response to Peter's sermon on Pentecost. In verse 38 those who sought to follow Christ were commanded to be baptized. The narrative next states that those who were baptized were "added to them" (v. 41). Those Hammett identifies who were being saved are identified by the same phrase as being those who were "added to them."¹³¹ Hammett's assertion of baptismal silence in verse 47 lacks merit. Indeed, Hammett fails to interact with commentators who echo his conclusion that passage indicate ambiguity on the timing of baptism

The interconnectedness of repentance, faith, and baptism is witnessed to by the fact that they all lead to the forgiveness of sins. It would certainly be wrong to think that Luke believed these were three separate ways of receiving forgiveness: the “repentance” way, the “faith” way, and the “baptism” way. On the contrary, he understood them as all part of the experience of becoming a Christian. This is even more evident on the occasions where these components are paired together in Acts as bringing about the forgiveness of sins. In 2:38 repentance and baptism are placed side by side (“repent and be baptized”) as resulting in the forgiveness of sins, and in 26:18 repentance and faith (“turn from darkness to light ... by faith in me”) are associated together as the necessary response(s) for receiving the forgiveness of sins (“that they may receive forgiveness of sins”). Compare also 5:31–32 where repentance and the forgiveness of sins are mentioned together in 5:31 and the gift of the Holy Spirit and obedience/faith are mentioned together in 5:32. For Luke “repentance” is an example of synecdoche in which “repentance” refers to “repentance-faith-baptism.” Similarly, “faith” refers to “faith-repentance-baptism” and “baptism” refers to “baptism-repentance-faith,” i.e., a baptism preceded by repentance and faith. Thus one can refer to becoming a Christian as “the day they repented,” “the day they believed,” “the day they were baptized,” “the day they confessed Christ,” and “the day they received the Spirit,” or to use Johannine terminology “the day they were born again.”¹³²

It seems that George Beasley-Murray’s critique then applies to Hammett.¹³³ Specifically, the interrelating of faith, repentance, forgiveness of sins, water baptism, and the reception of the Holy Spirit “appears never to have come within the horizon of” Hammett.¹³⁴

Second, while Hammett asserts there is “a deliberate openness” as to the timing of baptism, he fails to provide a single actual example of a passage that is clearly open as to the timing of baptism. Indeed, among the four passages he cites, this author is unable to locate an example of a single commentator who joins him in noting that these passages imply openness to

¹³²Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 41–42.

¹³³Beasley Murray’s thought on the interrelatedness of baptism to faith, conversion, and repentance closely parallels that of Stein’s with the exception that Beasley-Murray’s sees this within the Pauline epistles and Stein sees it within Acts. See Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, chapter 5.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 168.

the timing of baptism.¹³⁵ Given that Hammett fails to interact with the idea of baptism as part of the conversion-initiation process, or to provide a single commentator who interprets the references he provides in Acts to imply a deliberate openness as to the timing of baptism, his argument for baptismal delay lacks exegetical merit.

Third, Hammett also notes “that there is nothing resembling a command to baptize immediately.”¹³⁶ This of course is true. In like fashion, there is no explicit command to baptize only believers. Rather, for Baptists, such is apparent from both the stated practice of the early church as well as from the nature of baptism. The same arguments that lead credobaptists to believer’s baptism also applies to contemporaneous baptism. Specifically, every New Testament text that deals with the timing of water baptism indicates that it is occurring the same day as Spirit baptism.¹³⁷ Indeed, the nature of the book of Acts implies, as Stein notes, a synecdoche.¹³⁸ Therefore, in his argument that the ambiguity of timing allows for baptismal delay, Hammett’s argument more closely parallels those of paedobaptists, who note the ambiguity of who was baptized in the household baptism in Acts,¹³⁹ than those of a credobaptist who argue that the clear practice of the New Testament was believer’s baptism.

Fourth, if Christian water baptism finds its origins in the baptismal practices of John, then Hammett’s desire to ascertain if those who are baptized as believers are already living as

¹³⁵For example in regards to Acts 2:47 see Pervo, *Acts*, 94-95; Smith, *Acts*, 37; Bruce *Acts*, 74-75; Johnson, *Acts*, 60; Polhill, 121-122. In regards to 4:4 see Pervo, *Acts*, 112. Smith, *Acts*, 30-31; Bruce *Acts*, 90; Johnson, *Acts*, 76; Polhill, 140.

¹³⁶Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 273.

¹³⁷With the exception of Acts 8, which, as was noted above, even Luke himself finds strange.

¹³⁸Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 42.

¹³⁹Compare Hammett’s argument to that of Pratt in his argument for the baptism of infants. Richard L. Pratt, “Reformed View: Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant,” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, ed. John H. Armstrong, Counterpoints Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 70-71.

believers misses the point of baptism. Water baptism for John was not granted because one was already living and behaving as a disciple. Rather it stood as confession of one's intent to live as a disciple from that point forward. Indeed, as has been shown, the act itself inaugurated and stood as a confession of such an intent. In seeking to discern if one's life establishes a person as a believer, Hammett robs water baptism of part of its confessional nature. More troubling, if baptism stands as a first act of obedience in inaugurating the Christian life, then in arguing that churches should delay the baptism of confessing converts, Hammett potentially argues for biblical disobedience.

Spirit and Water Baptism in Pauline Literature and 1 Corinthians 12:13

Within Pauline literature, only 1 Corinthians 12:13 directly addresses Spirit baptism.¹⁴⁰ A favorite passage among Pentecostals, 1 Corinthians 12:13 stands as the final direct reference to Spirit baptism. Therein, the Apostle Paul states “for we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” The nature of the baptism in this passage is contested. Many argue that both water and Spirit baptism are in view. More recently, however, others have argued that since the context of

¹⁴⁰Although the language of Titus 3:5 implies it, this passage does not directly mention baptism.

this passage is that of the relation of spiritual gifts to the body of Christ, this passage does not deal with water baptism at all.¹⁴¹ Instead, it deals exclusively with Spirit baptism.¹⁴²

Arguments for the passage referring only to Spirit Baptism

Fee, for example, notes that the baptism does not stand alone in this passage, which would imply water, but rather is modified in that it is a baptism “in one Spirit.”¹⁴³ The reference to the Spirit in the first part of the verse combined with the reference to drinking of the Spirit in the second part acts as a “piece of Semitic parallelism where both clauses make essentially the same point.”¹⁴⁴ As a result, only Spirit baptism is in view in Fee’s mind.

Dunn furthers the argument that this passage refers to Spirit baptism alone. He does so by attacking the assumption that the passage refers to water baptism. He notes that such an assumption rests on the presupposition that water and Spirit baptism are to be equated. He argues that this assumption is flawed because it implies that “Paul did not distinguish [between] the outward right and the spiritual reality. [This assumption] completely ignores the fact that such a distinction lies at the heart of biblical piety from the prophets onwards, a distinction of which

¹⁴¹Mark Taylor has recently assumed as much, stating, “The baptism here should not be equated with water baptism, although water baptism depicts what Paul describes. Paul’s emphasis on baptism into one body in one Spirit strongly emphasizes the unity of the body.” Mark Edward Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary 28 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2014), location 8775-77, Kindle.

¹⁴²James D. G. Dunn, “Baptized as Metaphor” in *Baptism, the New Testament, and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R. E. O. White*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 294-310.

¹⁴³Translation Fee’s. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 179.

¹⁴⁴Fee notes that verses 15-16, 17, 21, and 22-23 all function in much the same way. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 605.

Paul was very well aware (Rom. 2:28f).¹⁴⁵ The Spirit, not water baptism, provides the basis of their unity. The Spirit not water baptism provides them with their spiritual gifts.¹⁴⁶ Thus 1 Corinthians 12:13 is metaphorical for Dunn. The baptism of this passage speak of the metaphorical immersion into the community of the Spirit and not of a literal water baptism.¹⁴⁷

Arguments for the Passage referring to both water and Spirit Baptism

While the arguments of Thisleton, Dunn, Fee, and Taylor on this passage are strong, they are not overwhelming. Douglas Moo, George Beasley-Murray, Raymond Brown, and Thomas Schreiner argue that Paul sees a strong connection between water and Spirit baptism within this passage. Thus, they understand Paul to be referencing a relationship between the two baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13.¹⁴⁸ All three take a more holistic approach to Paul's theology of baptism in regards to this passage. As a result, a brief examination of other Pauline teachings on baptism is necessary in order to appreciate their argument. Moo argues for this connection well in his commentary on Romans 6:1-4.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 129-130. See also Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1000.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁴⁷James D. G. Dunn, "Baptized as Metaphor," 298.

¹⁴⁸Raymond Bryan Brown, "1 Corinthians," in *Acts-1 Corinthians*, The Broadman Bible Commentary 10 (Nashville, TN.: Broadman, 1971), 365-66

¹⁴⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 361ff

Romans 6 stands as one of the most significant texts on the meaning of water baptism in the New Testament.¹⁵⁰ While Paul's primary purpose in the text is to argue against antinomian living and in favor of the Christian's death to sin (vv. 1-2), he does so (in part) through an explanation of the nature of baptism. Christians in baptism are confessing a union with Christ in both his life and his death (v. 3).¹⁵¹ Baptism at a minimum then pictures "our dying, being buried, and being resurrected with Christ" which was accomplished "on Good Friday and Easter" and at "the conversion of every believer."¹⁵² Yet, this does not mean that baptism then affects this change as the means of grace itself. Indeed, there is an "obvious centrality in Paul of faith as the means by which our relationship to Christ is appropriated."¹⁵³ Rather, the early church conceived of "faith, the gift of the Spirit and water baptism as components of one unified experience, called conversion-initiation."¹⁵⁴ This is of course parallel to what was shown about the relation between water and Spirit baptism in Acts.¹⁵⁵ Faith then within the Pauline context always leads to baptism just as baptism always assumes faith. Thus, according to Moo, Paul's question to the Christian who has not been baptized would be "why hasn't he been baptized?"¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰While there are those who argue that this text is not about water-baptism, among credobaptists this argument has not gained traction. Still, Moo ably responds to such objections. Ibid., 365.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 360.

¹⁵²Ibid., 365.

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 366. Of course, this language of conversion-initiation is drawn from the Dunn himself. Dunn insistence on such a strong division between ritual and reality in which the Spirit and water baptism are almost antithetical to one another in Pauline thought unfortunately seems to blind him to the possibility that one part of the conversion-initiation process implies all the other parts. Compare Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 129-30 with Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 144-145 with Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 228-229.

¹⁵⁵Namely that conversion-initiation is made up of repentance, faith, forgiveness of sin, water baptism, and Spirit baptism. All of these occur together within the context of Luke-Acts. See the discussion in the section on Spirit and water baptism in Acts above.

¹⁵⁶Moo, *Romans*, 366.

Beasley-Murray draws heavily on this argument from Romans 6 (as well as several other Pauline passages¹⁵⁷ in which he argues much the same about the relation between Spirit and water baptism) in his treatment of 1 Corinthians 12:13. Within 1 Corinthians 12:13, Beasley-Murray first notes the context of baptism within the passage as an initiatory rite into the local church at Corinth.¹⁵⁸ Building on this foundation of faith, the gift of the Spirit, and baptism all being part of a unified conversion-initiation experience, Beasley-Murray argues that 1 Corinthians 12:13 refers to both Spirit and water baptism. Clearly it refers to Spirit baptism. This baptism also refers to water baptism because of the close parallels in language to 1 Corinthians 6:11,¹⁵⁹ because of the relation between Spirit and water-baptism in the ministry of John the Baptist and in the events that took place in Acts, and because of the connection between water baptism in Christ and incorporation into the body of Christ in Gal. 3:27-29. Water baptism then complements Spirit baptism¹⁶⁰ in that both are part of the individual Christian's incorporation into the church.

Schreiner also argues for a strong connection between water and Spirit baptism. He explicitly rejects the metaphorical dichotomy assumed by James Dunn. He argues, "We should not separate Spirit baptism from water baptism as if Paul were attempting to segregate the one from the other. Conceptually they may be distinguished, but Paul himself was not interested in

¹⁵⁷Galatians 3:26f, Col. 2:11f,

¹⁵⁸The phrase "into one body" clearly has in view the local church context given Paul's body analogy in verses 14-26.

¹⁵⁹There Paul states that water baptism is done in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God. The language between the two passages is so close that Beasley-Murray contends that taken together they indicate that Christ, by His Spirit, consecrates the believer at baptism "i.e., constituting him as a member of the consecrated people." Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 169.

¹⁶⁰Although such is not automatic. Ibid., 170. Contra Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina Series 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 454-55, 458, 462-63

distinguishing them from one another in this verse since both are associated with the transition from the old life to the new.”¹⁶¹

Why this passage refers to both water and Spirit baptism

Jason Hall’s recent dissertation from Southeastern Seminary notes that Beasley-Murray’s (and correspondingly, Schreiner’s and Moo’s) understanding of the passage is preferable.

Specifically, Dunn’s assumption that Paul’s use of baptism is metaphorical since metaphor exists within the gospels is clearly and unmistakably flawed. Hall states:

Dunn refers to Luke 13:32, where Jesus calls Herod a fox. The metaphorical use in that case is clear, because no one would actually mistake Herod for a fox. But in the case of baptism, the metaphor and its referent are so closely connected that it begs the question why it would be metaphorical in the first place; what is gained from this understanding? It seems there is a difference in hermeneutical presupposition at work here. Those, like Beasley-Murray, who take the reference to baptism as literal assume a literal understanding at work in the Scripture unless they see warrant for metaphor. Dunn seems to do exactly the opposite. The problem is that when everything is metaphor, subjectivism runs rampant.¹⁶²

As a result, Dunn and Fee drive a wedge into the thought of Paul in this passage.

Nowhere in Pauline literature (and indeed nowhere in the New Testament) does one find the idea of either Spirit or water baptism apart from at least one of the other elements of the conversion-initiation process. Therefore, Schreiner is correct to state, “Paul himself was not interested in distinguishing them from one another.”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹Thomas R. Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner, Shawn D. Wright, and E Ray Clendenen, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 62

¹⁶²Jason Hall, “A Trinitarian Theology of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Exploring the Trinitarian Shape of the Sacraments and Knowing God through them” (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 97.

¹⁶³Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles,” 62.

Further, why should one expect anything less than a literal baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13? Even conceding Dunn's position of water baptism being metaphorical in this passage, Cross notes that "if the metaphor originates from the rite of water-baptism it is difficult to conceive how Paul's use of the Spirit-baptism metaphor would not have called to the Corinthians' minds the water-baptism which 'regularly' coincided with the reception of the Spirit."¹⁶⁴ Thus, the argument for the passage referring to both forms of baptism is exegetically preferable.¹⁶⁵

Given that such is the case, it follows that both water and Spirit baptism are normative for all Christians. Schreiner makes this point well when he argues from this passage that "Jesus' baptism with the Spirit is not restricted to only some believers. Paul emphatically teaches that all believers have been baptized regardless of their ethnic background or social status. Baptism in water and the Spirit is the signature event for Christians, marking them out as members of the people of God."¹⁶⁶

Therefore, since 1 Corinthians 12:13 references both water baptism and Spirit baptism, for Baptists, water baptism serves to incorporate the believer into Spirit-baptized community. The idea of a believer who is not incorporated into the community would be foreign within the context of this passage. Paul emphasizes within this verse "all" (twice repeated) are now one in Christ. Since all are incorporated into the oneness at baptism, and all has in view all believers, then within the Pauline

¹⁶⁴Cross, "Spirit and Water Baptism," 129.

¹⁶⁵Again, this does not mean that water baptism brings about Spirit baptism or vice versa, rather from the perspective of the New Testament, individual believers are assumed to have both because both occur at approximately the same time.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

construct, all Christians are water and Spirit baptized.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, there is not room within the Pauline context for believers who are delaying water baptism.

Conclusion

From the New Testament perspective, water and Spirit baptism are temporally linked. There are no examples in Scripture of water baptism being separated in time from Spirit baptism. Indeed, Spirit baptism is not presented in the New Testament apart from water baptism.¹⁶⁸ Water baptism is normally presented as the appropriate response to Spirit baptism.¹⁶⁹ Nowhere is there a long delay recommended between water and Spirit baptism.

Both water and Spirit baptism are elements in a larger process of conversion-initiation to the church. John the Baptist's water baptism foreshadowed this fact in that it anticipated Spirit baptism, served as an initial confession of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and occurred contemporaneously with (or perhaps as) an individual's confession of sin. In Acts, Spirit and water baptism are tightly connected as well. Following the arguments of Robert Stein, repentance, faith, confession of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit (which is synonymous with the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts), and water baptism all occur at roughly the same time. Normally these events all occur on the same day. All elements are presented as temporally linked in Acts such that the absence of any one element from the others calls into question the legitimacy of one's conversion and initiation into the faith community.

¹⁶⁷Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 171.

¹⁶⁸As has been noted, some do argue that 1 Corinthians 12:13 does not directly refer to water baptism.

¹⁶⁹With the exception of the Samaritan Christians in Acts 8 who are first baptized with water and then receive the Holy Spirit.

In the Pauline writings, Spirit baptism, be it defined as becoming part of the faith community or as conversion or both, is again closely connected with water baptism. Indeed, the distinction between the two baptisms, while existing logically, is such that the presence of water baptism implies Spirit baptism and vice versa.¹⁷⁰ Thus within the New Testament writings as a whole, the idea of a temporal separation of water baptism for the Spirit-baptized individual (if such refers to conversion) or for the convert seeking to become part of the Spirit-baptized community is simply foreign.

Returning to the situation that prompted this study, should churches delay baptism of those claiming to be saved in order to ascertain if those making this claim actually possess saving faith, as Dever argues?¹⁷¹ In response, this chapter has argued in the negative. It has noted that such a practice would have been foreign to the baptism of John, the baptism of the early church in Acts, and to Paul's theology of baptism. Ultimately, all three understandings of water baptism (John's, Luke's and Paul's) present water baptism as *sine qua non* of those who have received the Holy Spirit. In light of this, if children can become Christians, they should be baptized. It is to the question of whether they can become Christians that we now turn.

¹⁷⁰Although not in a causal sense.

¹⁷¹Mark Dever, "Baptism in the local church context," 345

CHAPTER TWO: CHILDREN AND CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

Introduction

Can a child understand the gospel message and respond to it? Is there a specific age at which children are first able to comprehend this message? Is it appropriate to share the gospel with children? Over the course of the last 50 years, these questions have been a source of significant debate within the credobaptist¹ community. Some have argued that children are incapable of comprehending the gospel message and responding in the way demanded by Scripture. This view therefore advocates the delay of conversion.² In extreme forms, advocates of this view equate the evangelism of children with child abuse.³ Others have argued that even young children are fully capable of responding to the gospel and should be evangelized aggressively.⁴ Those within paedobaptistic communities have emphasized the nurture of children within the Christian community over and against conversion of children. Such children through confirmation end up Christian without a distinct conversion experience.⁵ Each of these views

¹In opposition to the paedobaptist position (the baptism of infants), this chapter assumes the credobaptist perspective (baptism only of those confessing Christian salvation). This position is closely connected to the idea of a regenerate church membership (see chapter 4). This paper will assume much of the credobaptist argument over and against the paedobaptist argument, yet it will at points still attempt to engage paedobaptistic understandings of nurture and conversion.

²See for example, Lewis Craig Ratliff, "Discipleship, Church Membership, and Children among Southern Baptist: An Investigation of the Place of Children in a Baptist church in View of Christ's teaching on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963), chapters 8-10.

³Phillip Cohen, "Is Child Evangelism A Form Of Child Abuse?" *Anabaptist: To The Glory Of God And The Edification Of People Everywhere*, accessed April 1, 2011, <http://www.anabaptists.org/writings/child-e.html>.

⁴James Estep mentions this as a common view among evangelicals. See James Riley Estep, Jr, "Childhood Transformation: Toward an Educational Theology of Childhood Conversion and Spiritual Formation," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 187-90.

⁵Bushnell stands at the fountainhead of this view. Indeed, among both theological liberals and even most conservative paedobaptists, Horace Bushnell's work, *The Nurture of Children*, is seminal in explaining the nurture perspective. Therein, Bushnell argues "that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself otherwise." As a result, children should not grow up in sin, with a need for conversion, but rather should live his entire life as a

claims Biblical, theological and ecclesiastical groundings, yet each view emphasizes these grounds differently. Credobaptists, almost by definition, emphasize conversion often at the expense of approaches that emphasize nurture.⁶

Still, both of these views have biblical merit. Therefore, a more balanced approach is needed to apply the biblical data within the present context of credobaptism and the conversion of children. This chapter will develop a biblical theology of the conversion of children that seeks to account for both those passages which emphasize faith development as well as those passages which emphasize conversion. In so doing, it will demonstrate that from a Baptist perspective it is appropriate to share the gospel with children from infancy forward, that children become accountable for sin as they become cognitively aware of the fact that they are sinners, that it is possible for a child to respond to the gospel at a young age, and that children play an active part in the community of faith.

Children in the Old Testament

Neither the Old nor New Testaments offer a direct treatment of the soteriological status of children. Further, both Testaments clearly primarily address adults and not children. Therefore, the status of children and their respective roles in the faith community has to be

child of the kingdom of God. See Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (1861; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 10.

⁶Both Withers and Ratliff in their respective dissertations strongly emphasize the conversion approach of a child initiation to the faith community. As a result, both argue against the baptism of children under the age of twelve because from their perspectives, children are not cognitively or volitionally ready for conversion. See Ratliff, "Children among Southern Baptists," chapter 7. John Warren Withers. "Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 58-77, 206-208.

determined through secondary references to children. Within the Old Testament economy this occurs within the context of discipleship, responsibility, and initiation.

Children and Discipleship

In the Old Testament, children are consistently seen as valid recipients of training and instruction. The Old Testament outlines the nature of how children are to be discipled, the role of parents in the discipleship process, and the cognitive-volitional result of the discipleship process on children.

The Process of Child Discipleship

While references to the discipleship of children can be found throughout the Old Testament, passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy provide an explicit process for discipling children. Within the narrative of the death of the firstborn (Exodus 12:24-27 and Exodus 13),⁷ God instructs Israel about taking the Passover ritual and the Seder meal.⁸ It is anticipated that subsequent generations of children watching this ritual take place will ask their parents or guardians “what does this ritual mean to you?” In response, the parent is to instruct the child

⁷It is noteworthy that within the flow of the biblical narrative this teaching occurs prior to the tenth plague and therefore *before* Israel exists as an independent political entity. By implication, it follows that the instruction of children and the passing on of one’s faith is of a paramount importance, even as foundational for the existence of Israel itself as a nation-state.

⁸In addition to the Seder meal, the reference could also imply that lambs blood was to be applied to the doorpost every year in perpetuity. Yet the emphasis of the passage, more than being on the ritual is upon instruction. As John Durham notes “The instruction that the Israelites are to “abide by this command...in perpetuity” would seem, by its location, to apply to the ritual of Israel’s protection involving the Passover blood. In such a case, the smearing of the blood would be continued year after year, beyond any need for the protection it symbolized, as a means of confession to successive generations. In fact, the wording of the response to the inquiry of the children concerning the meaning of this worship (v. 27a) gives the instruction a wider application, to the tenth mighty act [plague] as a whole. The statement ‘It is the Passover sacrifice’ brings to mind both Israel protected and Egypt smitten.” John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 163.

about “the importance of appropriating the Exodus story of oppression and deliverance into one’s own life.”⁹ The ritual of the Seder through its yearly repetition then teaches children as a “‘representation’ or ‘actualization’ [of the tenth plague]. Quite simply, it amounts to an attempt to make the past present, to teach through a repetition that aims to create experience rather than simply transmit information.”¹⁰ Further, this instruction occurs through “children[’s natural] desire to learn the reasons for the practices they grow up observing. It was therefore to be expected that in their natural inquisitiveness, Israelite children would ask their parents the meaning of the consecration/redemption of the firstborn.”¹¹

The most substantive treatment of children in the Old Testament occurs within the book of Deuteronomy. Within this context, while children are brought into the faith community at birth,¹² it is clear that people of faith are expected to educate their children in their faith. What they are to learn is what the adults are to learn: namely “the whole of the statutes and ordinances presented in the book of Deuteronomy.”¹³

These statutes and ordinances make up the constitution and polity of Israel.¹⁴ As Moses

⁹Claire. R Mathews McGinnis, “Exodus as a Text of Terror for Children,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: William, 2008), 40.

¹⁰Durham, *Exodus*, 163.

¹¹Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 318.

¹²George Conrad points out that “passages relating to circumcision (Gen. 17:9 ff.; 34:14-16) and to the dedication of the first-born son at infancy (Ex. 22:29b-30; 34:19-20) illustrate” that by virtue of birth, children are part of the faith community. George G. Konrad, “The Conversion of Children,” *Direction* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1980): 24-25.

¹³Patrick D. Miller, “That the Children May Know: Children in Deuteronomy,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: William, 2008), 48-49.

¹⁴For sake of expediency, the term “polity” will be used interchangeably with the idea of the commands statutes and ordinance throughout this section. See Miller, “That the Children May Know,” 49-50.

presents this polity to the Jewish people (from Dt. 4:1ff), he at points makes special application to the instruction of children. In particular, Moses instructs the community to tell their children about the Lord's appearance at Sinai (Dt. 4:9-10) and to recite or read to the children all the statutes and ordinances at regular intervals (Dt. 31:12-13).

Yet the children do not just learn the rules, they also learn the reason for and the story behind the rules. This is especially evident within the context of the Shema. The Shema (Dt. 6:4-9) stands as one of (if not) the central faith statement of Israel and the summation of who God is to the Hebrew people.¹⁵ It emphasizes the repetition of both the Decalogue¹⁶ broadly and the confession of the uniqueness¹⁷ of Yahweh particularly to one's children (vv. 7-9). The result of such recitations is that children will ask questions about their meaning. Specifically the text notes

¹⁵R. W.L. Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. C. Seitz and K. Green-McCreigh (Grand Rapids, MI: Eedermans, 1999).

¹⁶Verse 7 emphasizes that the "these words are to be repeated." A debate exists within scholarship as to what words specifically are in view. Some argue that just verse 4 is in view while others argue that the entirety of the Decalogue (which has just been recounted in chapters 4 and 5 of Deuteronomy) is in view. The consensus of scholarship has moved towards the later interpretation. For an overview of this debate see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* Anchor Bible 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 340.

¹⁷The confession of verse 4 "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone" has been translated in a variety of ways, most commonly as "The Lord Our God, the Lord is One." The proper translation of this verse is widely debated among scholars of the Old Testament. Specifically, the two Hebrew words at the end of the verse, יהוה אחד, could be understood to mean that the Lord is one and thus stand as declaration of his ontology most likely, contra fifth-century Babylonian Zoastrianism, or it could be understood as a condemnation of syncretism. The second of these interpretations is preferable even though many commentators argue that this verse emphasizes the oneness of the Lord (or Yahweh). Such an interpretation fails to account for the larger context of the passages. As McBride notes the best reading of the passage takes into account the larger context which presents "Yahweh as a jealous God who demands exclusive allegiance from those he has created to be his people (4:23-24; 5:7-9) [and therefore]... Israel must be as vigorous in protecting from potential threat to the covenant as Yahweh will be in guarding his exclusive claim upon Israel's loyalty." Therefore, translating the phrase as Yahweh alone is preferable. To review the argument surrounding the proper translation of these passages see R. W. L. Moberly, "Yahweh is One: The Translation of the Shema," in *Studies in the Pentateuch*, ed. J. A. Emerson (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 528-41; J. Gerald Janzen, "Yahweh Our God, Yahweh is One," *Encounter* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 53; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 331; Cyrus Gordon, "His Name is One," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 1970): 198-99; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary 4 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 162-166; K. Kohler, "Shema Yisroel," *Journal of Jewish Lore and Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (October 1919): 255; J. Tigay, J. "Excursus 10: The Shema," *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 438-444; S. Dean McBride, "The Yoke of the Kingdom," *Interpretation* 27, no. 3 (July 1987): 294.

that children will ask about the meaning of the decrees, statutes, and ordinance (v. 20). In response, parents are to tell their people's story, "the account of God's deliverance of Israel from slavery and the bringing them into the land."¹⁸ In so doing, the polity of Israel is explicitly rooted in God's deliverance, which in turn provides "implicit motivation for obedience by identifying the good that accomplishes."¹⁹

In addition to the rituals surrounding both the Passover and the Shema, children are also mentioned in other Old Testament rituals. The erecting of stone monuments after entering the Promised Land (Josh 4:6-7, 21-24) is meant to lead children to ask questions. With each of these rites, it is explicitly stated that as children ask questions, the parents' response of the story of God's deliverance and redemption provides the basis for the answer.²⁰ Thus, the education and discipleship of the children is in "response to the child's curiosity. [It] even waits for the strategic moments, the receptivity implied in the [child's] question."²¹ Such teaching brings about fear for the Lord, obedience to the Law, and a good and abundant life blessed by the God.²²

Assuming such practices can be applied to a Christian context,²³ it follows from these passages that children growing up with Christian parents or in Christian homes should be

¹⁸Miller, "That they May Know," 50.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Patrick D. Miller, "Teaching the Faith," in *Theology Today: Reflections on the Bible and Contemporary Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 24-25.

²¹Miller, "That they May Know," 51.

²²See Dt. 4:10, 6:1-2, 14:23, 17:19, 31:12-13, 5:1, 31, 4:1, 6:24, 8:1, and 11:9. Ibid, 53.

²³A thorough discussion of the relationship between Israel and the church is outside the context of this study. Still, there seems to be little reason from Scripture to understand the anthropological nature of childhood as significantly different between the Testaments. Therefore, if Hebrew children were understood as valid candidates for discipleship, the same should follow for Christian children as well.

understood as valid recipients of Christian instruction. This occurs as children naturally observe the practices of the Christian faith and ask questions about it. The age of the child is not actually in view within in these passages.²⁴ Rather, these passages speak to the fact that as children inquire about the nature of their parent's faith, parents should be instructing and indoctrinating their children in that faith. Such discipleship is without age limits.

The Role of Parents in the Discipleship Process

Parents play a key role in the discipleship process within the Old Testament. The whole orientation of Deuteronomy is toward the teaching of the story of Israel and its resulting polity within the familial context (Dt. 4:7-10). Parents recite the commands and statutes regularly to their children (Dt. 6:7-9). They are to bring their children to the festivals and religious services of Israel (Dt. 16:11, 14, 31:10-13) so that they can teach their children to “learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess” (Dt. 31:13). As with the Passover, the erecting of the stone monuments, and the Shema, the tithe is another example of a religious festival which incorporates the whole family (Dt. 14:23). Indeed, as Miller notes, “in regard to virtually all religious festivals the text in one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, prescribes a family gathering across generations.”²⁵

²⁴The most common word for child used in these passages is בְּנִים. This term conveys a broad spectrum of meanings ranging from descendent, to son, to a one year old child, to children in a general sense. In the references in Exodus, it almost certainly refers to children in a general sense. As a result, age is not in view but rather the recipients of this instruction are any children at the Seder meal who are asking questions about the nature of the Seder meal. Other more specific terms for children are used throughout the Old Testament containing a range of meanings. Specifically, five other terms (which are normally more age specific) are used in the Hebrew Old Testament for children. They include עֵלִיל and מֵלֵךְ both meaning infant, גִּמְלָה meaning a weaned child, בֶּן־אִימָה meaning a child of or son of (normally found within genealogies) and נָעִם for little ones. For an extensive treatment of the uses of see G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, rev. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:145-59. Cf. James A. Murphy, “Children in Deuteronomy: The Partisan Nature of Divine Justice,” *Biblical Interpretation* 20, no. 1-2 (May 2012): 4.

²⁵Miller, “That they May Know,” 56.

In Proverbs, parents discipline their children in order to edify and instill wisdom. Anger²⁶ in the parental process of discipleship and discipline is explicitly prohibited (Prov. 19:18-19). Such parenting “denotes disruption of order and loss of control.”²⁷ Instead, the child is to be disciplined by his parents in such a way as to bring about wisdom defined within the context of divine knowledge (Prov. 1-9). Thus, the child’s primary religious experience was within the context of the home. While, the child would attend corporate religious gatherings at the temple or in Bethel or Shiloh on occasion, normally, “religious experience existed within the framework of the home.”²⁸

Cognitive-Volitional Results of the Discipleship Process

As a result of this discipleship process, the Old Testament expectation of children is remarkably similar to its expectation of adults. Both are regularly to encounter the polity of Israel through its oral recitation (Dt. 4:9-10, 31:10-13) in order that both young and old will learn of and not forget the divine instruction.²⁹ This instruction results in both children and adults

²⁶Proverbs 19:18-20 deals with the limits of parental discipline. The proverb itself is rather stark. It specifically, states “Discipline your son while there is hope; don’t be intent on killing him. A person with great anger bears the penalty; if you rescue him, you’ll have to do it again. Listen to counsel and receive instruction so that you may be wise later in life.” According to Murphy, the three verses are normally taken together and should be viewed in the familial context. Within this context, Murphy notes that verse 19 deals with parental anger. He states “A wrathful person, perhaps the father, should not try to settle a drastic situation. Wrath never pays. Indeed it brings more trouble for oneself. The meaning of v 19b is that even if one succeeds in changing the son, the same situation will only reappear.” Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary 22b (Dallas: Word, , 1998), 145.

²⁷William P. Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction: The Multifaceted Profile of the Child in Proverbs,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 71-72.

²⁸Roy L. Honeycutt, “The Child within the Old Testament Community” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 33.

²⁹Miller, “That they May Know,” 55.

learning to fear the Lord, to observe the law, and to live long and prosperous lives.³⁰ Thus, both adults and children are accountable to know (the commandments/polity of Israel), to be (fearing the Lord), and to do (keeping the commands)³¹ the same things based on the same motivation (a long, prosperous life).

Additionally, within Proverbs both children and adults are to pursue wisdom.³² This wisdom is manifested in an appreciation for and application of discipline to one's life. Specifically, that which is "cultivated in the child, namely a love for discipline, is carried into adulthood as a disposition for learning."³³ The discipline is something even the wise welcome (Prov. 9:8, 10:17, 12:1, 17:10), indicating that discipline is part of a lifelong learning process.³⁴

This brief study about the Old Testament nature of children and discipleship reveals several truths about the nature of children which can in turn be applied to the Christian context.³⁵ First, within the Old Testament economy children are valid candidates for discipleship.³⁶ The

³⁰Miller provides all the relevant Scripture citations as well as more robust explanation of these results. Ibid., 53.

³¹This is the classic model within education theory as to what education should accomplish. See, for example, Max E. Anders, *Brave New Discipleship: Cultivating Scripture-Driven Christians in a Culture-Driven World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 119. See also William R. Yount, ed., *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008), 3-16.

³²Proverbs 1-9, esp. 1:5a, cf. Brown, "To Discipline," 75-79, 81.

³³Ibid., 73

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Again, this dissertation does not deal with the relation between the testaments or Israel and the church. In general most of the debates over these intertestamental relationships are applied to the areas of ecclesiology and eschatology. As, this chapter deals with primarily an anthropological question and its relation to soteriology, specifically are children valid candidates for conversion, the relevance of this distinction seem minimal.

³⁶For Southern Baptists this fact is particularly noteworthy. Southern Baptists have sought to link themselves closely with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20. Southern Baptist have restructured themselves according to a resolution entitled the "Great Commission Resurgence" and adopted the Great Commission Baptist Convention as an alternative name. The Great Commission itself emphasizes the significance of making disciples by both baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as teaching them to observe all that

same should follow for children in the life of the church. Within a credobaptistic context, this is particularly relevant. As Beasley-Murray noted fifty years ago, there is a tendency within Baptist life to make “Christ’s church a church of adults,” in which children are excluded from communion, church business meetings and even worship services.³⁷ Such tendencies (as Beasley-Murray goes on to note) run counter to biblical idea of children as valid candidates for discipleship.

Second, while exposure to this discipleship process begins from the earliest age, children become part of this discipleship process as they ask questions about the reasons for the rituals and polity of Israel to which this discipleship process orients them. As a result, within the Old Testament context children self-identify as to when they come to know and understand the significance of the religious rituals of the community. Applying this to New Testament conversion, as children are exposed to the teaching of the gospel and witness the rituals associated with it (such as the Supper and baptism), they will ask questions as to their meaning. Such questions and the corresponding comprehension of such by children would be indicative of a child’s receptivity to the gospel message and conversion.

Third, within the Old Testament context, parents played a crucial role. Specifically, parents were to instruct their children in the polity of Israel. Only as the child is continually exposed to the teaching and rituals of Israel does a child then begin to ask questions about such. It follows then, that the pagan child or the child whose parent(s) convert to the religion of ancient Israel would first need a time of exposure to these rituals before they would begin to ask

Christ has commanded. For more on the significance of the Great Commission to Southern Baptists, see Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), chapter 1.

³⁷G. R. Beasley Murray, “The Child and the Church,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 128.

questions about such. Applying such to conversionist perspective, the more exposure a child has to the faith at home, the more likely that child is to convert to the faith at a young age.³⁸

Fourth, the cognitive and volitional requirements placed upon disciples, be they children or adults, in the Old Testament are remarkably similar. Both pursue wisdom, both welcome discipline, both recite the law in order to remember its significance, and both are continually learning to fear the Lord. Applying this to the church, while many have voiced hesitancies about adults' ability to discern the genuineness of a child's commitment to discipleship and faith and have thus argued for delaying the baptism of children,³⁹ such arguments are incompatible with the anthropological nature of children in the Old Testament. Specifically, since children are cognitively and volitionally as capable of being discipled as adults, a child can be as cognitively and volitionally ready for conversion and baptism as an adult.

Children and Accountability

Directly related to a discussion of the conversion of children is the question of what actions children are accountable for and at what age this occurs. The idea of an age of accountability emerges from this question. Within their faith statement, Southern Baptists note that children "as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are

³⁸The study from Dennis Horton on the age of conversion for ministry students, which is analyzed in detail in chapter 4, provides significant empirical substantiation of this assertion. Dennis Horton, "Ministry Student Ages and Implications for Child Evangelism and Baptism Practices," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 30-51.

³⁹Mark Dever voices such hesitancies, stating, "Parents should not presume to be certain of their children's faith but should pray for them and teach them. There are good reasons to delay the baptism of children... True conversion manifests itself over time. Children are childlike and trusting for a reason. To ask a pastor to try to separate out the tightly knit strands of affection for parents and for God, and to discern which is primary in a child is to ask more than may be best for the child. Time allows the child's faith to mature and evidence itself consistently." Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," 339.

under condemnation.”⁴⁰ While there is not a direct reference to the age of accountability within the Old Testament,⁴¹ often times Old Testament references are used to support this concept. A discussion of the age of the accountability revolves around two questions: first, does God hold people accountable for their sins alone or does he also hold them accountable for the sins of their forefathers? And second, what role does cognition of sin play in accountability for sin?

Individual or Generational Accountability?

Some of the most significant scriptural passages pertaining to this idea are found in Jeremiah 31:29-34 and Ezekiel 18. Both passages speak of the fact that God does not hold children accountable for the sins of their fathers. Rather, Jeremiah notes that a person dies “for his own wrongdoing” (Jer 31:30), while Ezekiel reiterates this idea stating that “the person who sins is the one who will die” (Ez. 18:4) because “the righteousness of the righteous person will be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be on him” (18:20). Both passages take place within the context of the divine punishment of the Jewish people occurring through the Babylonian exile. While the people in exile and under persecution lamented that they were being punished for the sins of their fathers,⁴² both prophets emphasize God’s punishment is for those sins people actually commit.

From the Jeremiah passage, commentators note that “Jeremiah rejected their theology that God punishes one person for the sins of another and insisted on individual responsibility for

⁴⁰Baptist Faith and Message 2000 Edition, Article III.

⁴¹Honeycutt, “The Child within the Old Testament,” 26-27.

⁴²Cf. Lm. 5:7

sin.”⁴³ Thus, “each person counts and will be held accountable.”⁴⁴ From Ezekiel, commentators note much the same. Leslie Allen notes that Ezekiel 18 reveals that “no child could hide behind its parent’s skirts, whether willfully or as if of no account”⁴⁵ which echoes the comments of Keil and Delitzsch from a century ago who pointed out that Ezekiel 18 “clearly sets forth the truth that every man bears the guilt and punishment of his own sins.”⁴⁶

In light of the clear message of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18, it is not surprising that theologians and pastors often turn to these passages in any discussion of the accountability of children. John MacArthur in light of Ezekiel 18:30 states

A child may be conceived out of wedlock. A fetus may be aborted by an ungodly mother. A child may be beaten to death by an ungodly father. But before God, that child does not bear culpability for the sins of the parents. The children were considered ‘innocent’ of sin. They had not rebelled; they had no ‘say’ regarding the Israelite’s rebellion and unbelief. In a profound way, God blessed their innocence.⁴⁷

So while these passages free children from guilt for parental sin, they also make clear that children will be held accountable for their own sin. As a result, Steve Lemke notes that these passages are foundational to any argument for the age of accountability, stating that these

⁴³F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, The New American Commentary 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 279. Thompson states of the passage, “only the man who sinned could be expected to suffer for his sins...[This passage] established the principle of individual responsibility [as] far more fundamental than a principle of collective responsibility.” Within the context “men were to make their individual choice of commitment to Yahweh.” J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary On the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 578-79. Feinberg notes basically the same, stating, “that in the suffering of Israel individual responsibility is clear.” Charles Lee Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” *Isaiah-Ezekiel, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: With the New International Version of the Holy Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 6:573.

⁴⁴Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against the Wind and Tide*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1987), 110.

⁴⁵Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, Word Biblical Commentary 28 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 272.

⁴⁶Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1866; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 9:142.

⁴⁷John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 45.

passages “make clear that we are only accountable under the new covenant for our own sins, not those of our parents.”⁴⁸

Cognition as a Requirement for Accountability

Despite the clear consensus that emerges from these passages—that children are accountable before God for their own sins—these references do not reveal *when* a child (or any person for that matter) becomes responsible for such. Adam Harwood, in his recently published dissertation, argues that infants are unaccountable agents for their own sins because of their lack of cognition. Specifically, he argues that while infants “inherit a sinful nature, [they only] later acquire their own guilt after they know the difference between right and wrong but knowingly choose to do wrong.”⁴⁹ Harwood argues that most Baptists view infants as unaccountable for their actions⁵⁰ because of their understandings of Scripture references which indicate that the cognition of sins is required for individual accountability.

Several Old Testament passages are used to justify Harwood’s contention that cognition⁵¹ plays an important role in determining when one becomes accountable for sin. In Jonah 4:11,

⁴⁸Steve Lemke, “The Age of Accountability is a Foundational Belief,” *Baptist Message*, January 11, 2010.

⁴⁹Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 9.

⁵⁰Harwood provides a comprehensive overview of Baptist understandings of infants, sin, and guilt and shows that the vast majority of Baptists understand all infants to be safe from damnation. *Ibid.*, chapters 3-10, 16-17.

⁵¹James Leo Garrett notes that several passages in Leviticus that could prove problematic for this view. Garrett notes that, “the Old Testament law differentiates between sinning ‘unwittingly’ (RSV), or sin of inadvertence (Lev. 4: 2, 22, 27; 5:18; [sic.; it should be 5:17] Num. 15:22-29), and the sin ‘with a high hand’ (Num. 15:30).” Yet all of these references still require cognition in order for the sin to be rendered to the guilty. Each passage deals with an obliviousness as to what the law prescribe not an inability to comprehend the law. In each case, the offender of the sin is to offer a sacrifice to make atonement for the sin as soon as he becomes aware of his guilt, which is communicated to him by others or by reading the law. Thus, the offender is both cognizant of what he did and also able to understand that it is wrong. Therefore, while such a person is unwitting, it does not follow that

God indicates that part of the reason he does not desire to crush Nineveh is because of the 120,000 persons who do not their right hand from their left. Such was “an idiomatic expression for a lack of knowledge, and/or innocence.”⁵² Keil and Delitzsch provide the classic interpretation of this idiom:

Not to be able to distinguish between the right hand and the left is a sign of mental infancy. This is not to be restricted, however, to the very earliest years, say the first three, but must be extended to the age of seven years, in which children first learn to distinguish with certainty between right and left...Children who cannot distinguish between right and left, cannot distinguish good from evil, and are not yet accountable. The allusion to the multitude of unaccountable children contains a fresh reason for sparing the city: God would have been obliged to destroy so many thousand innocent ones along with the guilty.⁵³

While Keil and Delitzsch’s interpretation has been challenged by more recent interpreters,⁵⁴ regardless of interpretation, agreement exists that passage indicates that knowledge and understanding of God’s standards bring moral accountability.⁵⁵ Conversely, the lack of a cognitive understanding of one’s actions frees one from moral responsibility.

The narrative surrounding the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 is also relevant here. Therein, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Several interpretations have been offered for the meaning of the knowledge of

these passages apply to infants. James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, 2006), 14.

⁵² Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Dallas: Word, 2002), 507.

⁵³ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1886; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 10:281–282.

⁵⁴For example, Smith and Page argue that adults not children are in view noting that one can “argue reasonably that the word for ‘people’ (*’ādām*) rules out the specification of children. Thus the number 120,000 probably stands for the entire population [of Nineveh].” Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, The New American Commentary 19B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 283.

⁵⁵Smith and Page state of their interpretation that Nineveh was an “entire city of morally and ethically naive, though not morally innocent, individuals.” Ibid., 283.

good and evil,⁵⁶ but what is clear is that “the ‘knowledge’ gained was in some way related to human maturity.”⁵⁷ Thus, both passages indicate the culpability before God is connected to maturing knowledge and a growing cognitive abilities.

Building on Genesis 3, some have noted the significance of Deuteronomy 1:39 as a possible key to understanding at what age one becomes accountable for a knowledge of good and evil. For example, Patrick Miller, building on the work of Jeffery Tigay, argues that the discussion of children and young children in Deuteronomy encompasses all those under the age of 20. He does this through an examination of Deuteronomy 1:39. In the context of this passage, the adult Israelites were fearful of entering the Promised Land and therefore were forbidden from taking it. Yet, it is both their “little children” and their “children who don’t know good from evil” who will be given the land. Miller notes that these phrases clearly have in view “those who in some sense are not responsible, too young to have been involved in the decision to rebel against the divine command, not yet at the age of moral discretion, or...vulnerable to being enemy spoil, which clearly does not mean mature males.”⁵⁸ This passage taken together with the context of Numbers 14:29 and 32:11 clearly indicates that “what is meant by children here is

⁵⁶Gordon Wenham notes five major interpretations. The knowledge of good and evil could refer to the consequences of obedience and disobedience, moral discernment between right and wrong, sexual knowledge, omniscience, or wisdom. The last of these Wenham argues is best, noting that it means not just a wisdom in general but rather “a professed self-sufficiency of knowledge.” Such knowledge is “then, that [which] man is forbidden [because] ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and bad’ as such implies a rejection of faith in God.” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 63-64.

⁵⁷ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 205.

⁵⁸Patrick D. Miller, “That the Children May Know,” 48.

those under twenty years of age.”⁵⁹ As a result, “rabbinic tradition also places the age of accountability at twenty.”⁶⁰

Yet, applying this passage to Christian age of accountability debates, as the rabbis have done it to Jewish concepts of the age accountability, is problematic on several levels.⁶¹ First, the passage does not deal directly with accountability before God for one’s own sins. Rather, it deals with corporate accountability within the faith community. Applying this passage to an individual child’s ability to respond to the gospel and be converted goes beyond the scope of this passage. Cognition, not physical maturation, stands as a far clearer measure of one’s scriptural readiness to convert to the Christian message. Second, the reason persons over the age of 20 are held

⁵⁹Ibid., 49. Cf. Jeffery Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 20.

⁶⁰Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–21:9*, Word Biblical Commentary 6A (Dallas: Word, , 2001), 32. Cf. Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, “*Let the Little Children Come to Me*”: *Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 9-14, 18.

⁶¹At first glance it is surprising that none of those arguing for baptismal delay cite this passage as it could be understood as compatible with their view. The fact that Jewish children under twenty were not accountable for the community’s action is particularly complementary to the arguments of Mark Dever. He argues that delaying baptism until late-adolescent or early adulthood is wise. Specifically, he argues that children should not be baptized until they are able to “assume adult responsibilities (sometime in late high school with driving, employment, non-Christian friends, voting, legality of marriage).”

Hendricks, Moody, Hammett, Dever, Withers, Ratliff, and Clark all ignore this passage despite their arguments that the baptism of children should be delayed. William Hendricks, “The Age of Accountability,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 84-97; Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: a Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 461-63; John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 266-77; Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, 2, (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 344-50; Lewis Craig Ratliff, “Discipleship, Church Membership, and Children among Southern Baptists: An Investigation of the Place of Children in a Baptist Church in View of Christ’s Teaching on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963); John Warren Withers. “Social Forces Affecting the age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969); and esp. Dever, “Baptism in the Local Church,” 341.

accountable is not because they have reached a point of cognitive reasoning. Rather, in light of Numbers 14:29–30, it is because at the age of 20 they become eligible for military service. Cole, in his commentary on Numbers, notes that in light of “several subsequent texts the extent of the punishment of Israel in the wilderness was specified in terms of that entire generation of fighting men.”⁶² Thus, it is the volitional disobedience of this collective group that leads to God holding these individuals accountable. Children are not held to account in Deuteronomy 1:39, not because they cannot comprehend sin or because they could not sin, but rather because they were not physically able to obey or disobey. Accountability is connected more closely to cognitive and volitional choices to obey or disobey than it is to a specific age. In regards to the larger question of the accountability of children and their relationship to the faith community as a whole, this passage has limited application.⁶³

Isaiah 7 also draws upon the Genesis 3 language of “the knowledge of good and evil” in reference to a specific timeframe. Therein Isaiah brings a word of prophecy to King Ahaz of Judah. Judah is on the brink of war with Israel and Syria. Added to this, Assyria threatens all three nations. Within this context, Isaiah tells Ahaz that a child named Immanuel will be born from a virgin (Is. 7:14).⁶⁴ Isaiah then prophesizes that “before this child learns to reject what is

⁶²He specifically cites Num 26:63–65; Deut 2:14–16; Josh 5:1–6. R. See Dennis R. Cole, *Numbers*, New American Commentary 3B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 236.

⁶³At most this passage could be used to justify limiting the rights and privileges of church membership to children. Under such a scenario, children who convert and are baptized at a younger age could be slowly oriented and trained to take over some responsibilities and privileges of church membership without being given certain responsibilities of church membership (such as voting, committee memberships, etc.) until reaching a certain point of maturation.

⁶⁴The meaning of the words in verse 14 is greatly contested. The more traditional rendering is offered above. For more on the discussion of how to properly translate verse 14, see John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1986), 209–13. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 65–66.

bad and choose what is good, he will be eating butter and honey. For before the boy knows to reject what is bad and choose what is good” the two kings will fall to Assyria (7:15–16).

Broadly, two interpretations have been offered as to the age at which Isaiah’s promised Immanuel “knows to reject what is bad and choose what is good.”⁶⁵ Oswalt argues that an official age of accountability is in view at this passage and that the age is older. He argues that the phrase refers to an age of “moral discrimination (as in Gen. 2:17; 3:5; Deut. 1:39; 1 Ki. 3:9; Isa. 5:20) and, in that light, suggests an elapsed time of twelve to twenty years” because there is an “evident connection of the phrase with moral discernment at several points” in the larger context of the passage.⁶⁶ Thus, Oswalt places the fulfillment of the prophecy as occurring within twelve to twenty years.

In contrast, Watts, Young, and Childs argue that an age of moral discretion is younger.⁶⁷ This view argues that the prophecy is fulfilled in a relatively short period of time of three to five years. Watts states:

By the time the child is old enough to make decisions, the land of the two opposing kings will be devastated. The sign is simple. It has to do with a period by which time the present crisis will no longer be acute or relevant . . . [this is a] short period [of time, and] accords

⁶⁵The idea of a virgin conceiving obviously takes on significant NT application in the Gospel of Matthew. Christological applications while clearly coming out of verse 14 do not normally apply to verse 15. Therefore, only the initial fulfillment of the prophecy within the context of Ahaz and Isaiah’s lifetimes is relevant to the discussion pertaining to the age at which a person becomes aware of the knowledge of good and evil. See Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, New American Commentary 15A (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 201–5.

⁶⁶Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 213–14.

⁶⁷The problem with Oswalt’s (ibid., 214) argument for a young age is that he assumes that passages such as Gen. 2:17; 3:5; Deut. 1:39; 1 Kgs. 3:9; and Isa. 5:20 clearly indicate the age of moral discretion is older. Smith make a similar assumption to Oswalt stating that the age is “probably less than twenty years based on Num 14:29; Deut 1:39.” Yet there is no consensus regarding his assumption, thus arguing for an older age as he does is problematic. See also Smith, *Isaiah*, 215.

with history. Tiglath-Pileser's reactions to Rezin and the son of Remaliah came in 733 B.C. when he reduced most of Israel to the status of an Assyrian province.⁶⁸

Thus, Young concludes that the age "when a boy (*na'ar*) knows the difference between good and evil . . . may be very young. The word is also used of the baby Moses (Exod. 2:6). Even before such a time shall have arrived, the threat will have come to an end."⁶⁹

While dogmatism regarding the timeframe of the prophecy's fulfillment should be avoided, a stronger case exists for a quick fulfillment. Oswalt and Smith assume a longer fulfillment because they understand the age of moral discretion to occur at an older age. They thus try to expand the prophecy beyond the immediate fall of the kings to the time it takes for their lands to lay desolate.⁷⁰ Yet, Assyria will have conquered both nations within the shorter timeframe. As a result, a younger understanding of the age at which a child reaches the knowledge of good and evil is preferable in the context of Isaiah 7.

Ultimately, the Old Testament does not clearly delineate an age at which children become aware of sin. All that can be discerned from the Old Testament passages about accountability is that children are responsible for their own sins once they become aware of such and choose to disobey. Individual responsibility then exists within the context of a cognitive ability to understand that one's actions are sinful.

⁶⁸John D W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary 24 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 97.

⁶⁹Edward J. Young, *Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 291–92. Cf. Childs, *Isaiah*, 66ff.

⁷⁰Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah*, 214) argues such. He concedes that Damascus and Israel fell and lay plundered within three years but then goes on to argue for twelve years as the proper interpretation because "it was not until some twelve or thirteen years later that Samaria was destroyed and Israel ceased to exist." This distinction between the fall of the two threatening nations and their ceasing to exist is difficult to substantiate.

Children and Initiation into the Faith Community

Within the context of the Old Testament, children are first initiated into Jewish life at circumcision. Southern Baptists reject the validity of any equivalence between circumcision and baptism. Arguments *prima facie* countering such an interpretation are numerous and need not be restated here.⁷¹

More significantly for the purposes of this dissertation, some Southern Baptists have argued that the Jewish practice of the bar mitzvah constitutes a better parallel to the New Testament practice of baptism and initiation into the faith community. John Withers notes the parallels between water baptism and the Jewish bar mitzvah. He argues for delaying baptism, in part, because “only much later [in life], usually in adolescence, do children have conceptions of religious belonging that include non-observable qualities such as faith or belief.”⁷² Withers then reasons that since Judaism delays such until age 13, and that for Baptists, “the primary rite of passage is baptism,” and it is important for the rite of passage to occur “at a time that is appropriate in the life of maturing children,” with the implication being that thirteen would constitute such an age.⁷³

⁷¹See, for example, three articles on such in the relatively recent book from B & H Academic, *Believer's Baptism*, all of which at points argue against the validity of circumcision being applied to baptism. Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 87-152; Shawn D. Wright, “Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists,” in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 197-246; Duane A. Garrett, “Meredith Kline on Suzerainty, Circumcision and Baptism,” in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology 2, (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 247-274.

⁷²Withers, “Social Forces,” 126.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 127.

Former Southwestern Baptist Seminary professor William Hendricks notes much the same. He points out that for many Baptists, baptism can be delayed until adolescence because the bar mitzvah did not occur until the age of 13. Such reasoning provides a source of comfort regarding the spiritual status of their children. “Just as the children of the children of Israel were under the covenant mercies of God until such time as each confirmed the covenant for himself (Bar-Mitzvah), so our children are under God’s covenant mercies until their own willful acts of sin require a conversion.”⁷⁴

Ratliff’s dissertation provides the most explicit and comprehensive case for aligning the timing of baptism with the age of the bar mitzvah. He notes, “the Old Testament had...a certain age [at which] the child ‘owned the covenant’ as his own.”⁷⁵ The child was innocent before God, “up until the acceptance of the covenant.”⁷⁶ By the time of Jesus, the ceremony had moved into the realm of being a genuine Jewish tradition as evidenced by his going to the temple at the age of twelve.⁷⁷ Ratliff then concludes: “The point of this discussion is that early adolescence or puberty was the time the Jews of the Old Testament and Jesus’ era considered a child to be religiously responsible. This would suggest to the writer that one should be expected to assume the responsibilities of the Covenant of Grace at the same age.”⁷⁸

Yet, these arguments seeking to apply the bar mitzvah to credobaptism are highly problematic. First, there are no references to this ceremony in the Old Testament. Second, there

⁷⁴William L Hendricks, “Baptists and Children: The Beginnings of Grace,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 51.

⁷⁵Ratliff, “Discipleship, Church Membership, and the Place of Children among Southern Baptists,” 185.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁷ Luke 2:41-52.

⁷⁸Ratliff, “Discipleship, Church Membership, and the Place of Children among Southern Baptists,” 187.

are no references to any such ceremony occurring at the age of 13 within the Old Testament.

Third, the earliest references to any such legal or religious standing occurring at the age of 13 are not found until the second century A.D.⁷⁹ Fourth, the first actual reference to the bar mitzvah ceremony as bringing “religious responsibility” does not actually occur until the thirteenth century A.D., with many thus arguing that the ceremony actually originates then.⁸⁰ To conclude, as Ratliff does directly, that the bar mitzvah provides an Old Testament dating for the age of accountability is simply without biblical or historical support. Therefore, the reference to Jesus as a 12 year-old in Luke’s Gospel does not refer to Jesus’ bar mitzvah,⁸¹ but rather serves to emphasize Jesus gradual transition towards more adult-like responsibilities.⁸² Thus, neither this reference nor the Jewish practice of the bar mitzvah provide support for credobaptists delaying

⁷⁹The Encyclopedia Judaica provides a basic overview of the history of the bar mitzvah ceremony. It states, “Although the term occurs in the Talmud for one who is subject to the law (BM 96a), its usage to denote the occasion of assuming religious and legal obligations does not appear before the 15th century (*Seder Ziyon* of R. Menahem Ziyoni to Gen. 1: 5). A special celebration for a girl, the bat mitzvah, is not found mentioned before *Bell Ish hai*, the legal code by Joseph Hayyim b. Elijah (19th cent.). While the occasion of becoming bar/ bat mitzvah was thus formalized only in later times, it is obvious from various sources that the status of obligation for boys of 13 was assumed in early times. According to Eleazar b. Simeon (second century C.E.), a father was responsible for the deeds of his son until the age of 13.” Norma Baumel Joseph, “Bar Mitzvah,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 3:166.

⁸⁰Pilch states it as a known fact that “the institution of the Bar Mitzvah as it is known today, originated in the 13th century, when the statement in Pirke Abot (5:24) (Ethics of the Fathers) to the effect that ‘at five a child is brought to study of the Bible, at ten to the Mishnah, at thirteen to the Commandments’ was interpreted as the age of religious maturity, when the child assumes full responsibility in religious matters. Ever since that time, Bar Mitzvah marks the occasion in a boy’s life when he is officially inducted into the Jewish fellowship.” Judah Pilch, “The Proper Age for a Deceleration of Faith,” *Religious Education* 58, no. 5 (1963): 417.

⁸¹Note as well that the text states that this was an annual occurrence for Jesus’ family, not a trip for a specific religious ritual. Specifically, as I Howard Marshall states “Jesus’ parents had the pious habit of going to Jerusalem annually for the feast of the Passover.” I Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 126.

⁸²Seeing in this passage the bar mitzvah is also problematic because “more often the onset of responsibilities is linked with the thirteenth birthday,” while this text notes Jesus as 12 year-old. John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 35A (Dallas: Word, 2002), 129.

the baptism of their children until the age of 12 or 13. To use either to justify delaying the baptism of children is to go beyond the teaching of Old Testament.

Children in the New Testament

A continuity exists between how the Old Testament and the New Testament view children. While neither Testament directly addresses when children are ready for salvation, both Testaments indicate that children are valid recipients of discipleship. Both Testaments recognize that accountability is tied to knowledge without specifying an exact point at which that accountability occurs. Neither Testaments offer a clear picture of when children are fully incorporated into the faith community, although both Testaments assume that children are present within the rituals and meeting times of the faith community. In one area, there is a distinction by way of expansion. While in the Old Testament the idea of conversion takes on a less prominent role as persons are born into the faith community and naturally grow into it, within the New Testament, conversion takes a more prominent position (especially from a Baptist perspective). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the New Testament builds on the Old in that it presents a more complete (although not total) picture of the child in relation to conversion and the faith community.

Children and Discipleship

As in the Old Testament, so also within the New Testament, the idea of proper raising of children within the faith community is again emphasized. Ephesians 6:1-4 and its parallel

passage in Colossians 3:20-21 are particularly relevant.⁸³ Here, Paul⁸⁴ explicitly defines the parent-child relationship within the early Christian faith community. Children are to obey their parents based on the Old Testament command of parental honor and its corresponding promise of a long and blessed life. Fathers (and correspondingly parents) are commanded to bring their children “up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” At the same time, fathers are to avoid stirring up anger in their children.

Four significant applications for this study follow from these passages. First, as in the Old Testament, so also in the New, fathers (and perhaps parents more generally) are made responsible for the discipleship of their children. This father-led discipleship is a two-fold process. Negatively, fathers are to be careful not to provoke their children to anger (Eph 6:4) or to embitter them (Col 3.21). The purpose of such is to encourage the faith of the children. Dunn’s commentary is helpful at this point. He notes that the Gentile children in the church would have faced extreme societal pressure to renounce their faith because Christianity at that time “was a

⁸³A second passage which speaks to ramifications of the proper discipleship of children is 2 Timothy 3:15. Therein, Paul states that the Scriptures were known to Timothy since his childhood thus indicating that he was taught them from young age (most likely the age of five given that, as Knight notes, “The Mishnah tractate *Pirke Aboth* (5:21), from the end of the first century A.D., gives five years of age as the time that a Jewish child is fit for scripture.”) Taken together with 2 Timothy 1:5, it is clear that Timothy’s mother and grandmother instructed him in the Scriptures from a young age. As Mounce notes, “In light of the fact that *τίνων*, “whom,” is plural, that Paul has already made reference to Timothy’s spiritual heritage that includes his mother and grandmother (1:5), and that Paul will next refer to Timothy’s childhood (3:15), it may be assumed that among these teachers are his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois.” George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 443. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Dallas: Word, , 2000), 563.

⁸⁴A discussion of the authorship of Ephesians is outside the scope of this dissertation. For the sake of simplicity, Pauline authorship is assumed. While an intense debate rages over whether either Ephesians or Colossians is genuinely Pauline, even those who dispute their Pauline origin acknowledge their Pauline quality. Thus, they are often seen as a product of the Pauline community when Pauline authorship is denied. Direct statements about children within the undisputed Pauline epistles are rare, therefore these passages provide one of the most comprehensive statements of Pauline thought regarding the way children were understood within the Pauline context. See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Finding a Place for Children in the Letters of Paul” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 233-48 and Margret Y. McDonald, “A Place of Belonging: Perspectives on Children from Colossians and Ephesians,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 278-79.

strange sect, a religion without a cult center, without priest and sacrifice.”⁸⁵ The father, as the primary disciplinarian within that cultural context needed to take extreme care to see to it that his children would not “become discouraged” through overly harsh discipline and as a result, give up on the Christian faith. Paul’s point is that “without strong parental encouragement they could easily become ‘discouraged.’ The psychological sensitivity displayed here is remarkably modern.”⁸⁶ Such sensitivity also provides a glimpse into Pauline anthropology of children. “Behind this curbing of a father’s authority is the clear recognition that children, while they are expected to obey their parents in the Lord, are persons in their own right who are not to be manipulated, exploited, or crushed.”⁸⁷

Not only is there a negative command against bringing the children to anger or embitterment, but also fathers are given a positive command. Specifically, they are to teach and instruct their children in the ways of the Lord (Eph. 6:4b). Within the Pauline context, such a statement is significant. Specifically, it is noteworthy that Paul’s primary ministry is one of teaching and instruction/admonition. “In 1 Cor 4:14 Paul states that he is writing to admonish the Corinthians as his beloved children, and in Col 1:28 admonishing and teaching are seen as central to his ministry.”⁸⁸ Further, Paul instructs believers that their primary ministry is to be the teaching and instruction of one another (Rms. 15:14; Col. 3:16). Thus, the teaching and instruction which elsewhere Paul claims is what adult believers are to receive, Paul now says

⁸⁵James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 252.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 446. See also John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 246.

⁸⁸Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 407.

children are to receive as well within the context of the father-child relationship. In all cases, the same two terms are used. Thus, Paul's positive command also speaks of Paul's anthropology of children. Specifically, it indicates that Paul views children as valid as the same type of instruction that adults receive.

Second, there is the age of the children in these passages. While the term for child in these passages (Gr. τέκνα) is a generic term indicating relationship more than age, the larger context of the passage makes it clear that even young children are in view in this passage.⁸⁹

Richard Melick argues,

Paul apparently was addressing young children here. Two factors inform this interpretation. First, the use of the term "children" rather than "young men" (or equivalent) shows Paul was addressing younger children. Second, in Eph 6:4 fathers were told to "bring them up," [indicative of their young age]. The training process involved teaching children how to obey, and those who heard these words would respond properly. Nothing in the text suggest a specific age however.⁹⁰

An exhortation addressed directly to young children within this letter is particularly noteworthy given that this statement is made not just to Jews in a Jewish context,⁹¹ but also to Gentiles who were part of the larger Greco-Roman world. While, as has already been noted, children were of little to no value in the Greco-Roman world, lacking legal standing and existing in a state of absolute dependency on the parents for their very right to live, this passage indicates that even young children had value within the Christian community. Indeed, as Dunn notes,

⁸⁹Contra Andrew T. Lincoln, who thinks that teenagers are in view because this exhortation "could only refer to older children (perhaps what we should call teenagers) who were of an age to make a personal commitment to Christ, but still young enough to be living at home with their parents." Such arguments fail for two reasons. First, they assume the cognitive inability of children. Second, they fail to account for the language of Ephesians 6:4 as explained above. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 403.

⁹⁰ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 314.

⁹¹Jews, as shown above, had a higher view of children than their pagan neighbors.

“responsibility in Christian relationships is not to be determined by legal standing.”⁹² Rather, despite their lack of legal standing, “they [children] are thought of as both present in the Christian meeting where the letter would be read out and as responsible agents despite their youth.”⁹³

Third, clearly arising from the fact that children are viewed as responsible agents within the churches in Ephesus and Colossae, is the fact that these children are part of the faith community. Such is obvious not only from the fact that an exhortation is addressed to the children but also their membership within the faith community forms the basis for why the children are to obey parents. Specifically, children obey because the children are “in the Lord.” Lincoln notes as a result of such, “these children are seen as fully part of the Christian community, able to exercise their Christian obedience in this way and to view their conduct as determined not just by social convention but in the light of their Lord’s will.”⁹⁴

Fourth, there is a striking parallel in the motivation driving each parties actions in the household codes (Eph 5:21-6:9, Col 3:18-4:1) as a whole. Children obey their parents, fathers restrain their discipline of their children, wives submit to their husbands, husbands love their wives, slaves obey their masters, and masters do what is right and provide for their slaves all as a result of a “mutual submission of [each] groups in the fear of Christ.”⁹⁵ These commands to each party then are motivated by “Christian reasons, ‘as unto the Lord.’ None of the other [Greco-Roman household code] lists were motivated in this way, nor was their ultimate goal the glory of

⁹²Dunn, *Colossians*, 250.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 403.

⁹⁵Ibid., 402.

the Lord.”⁹⁶ Thus, the motivation for children’s submission to parents is exactly the same as the motivation of adults in their various functions: submission to God. For Paul, children are capable of grasping the exact same truth that adults are (God’s glory) and then applying it to their lives in much the same way adults do (submission to others).

To summarize, several key applications to this study arise out of the parallel household code teachings in Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21. First, Paul views children as persons in an equivalent sense to how he views adults as persons. Second, Paul views children as appropriate recipients of the same type of instruction as adults. Third, Paul views even young children as responsible agents. Fourth, children were members of the Christian communities in Ephesus and Colossae who were to obey their parents because they were Christians. Fifth, children are motivated to volitional obedience by the exact same motivation adult’s experience: submission to God and a corresponding elevation of the needs of others.

Children and Conversion

Few issues spark greater debate than the issue of the conversion of children in the New Testament. As noted above, debate rages between credo- and paedobaptists as to whether such a concept is even in view within the New Testament. As a result of this debate, several scholars have argued that the biblical data is unclear as to the conversion of children. The data can be taken to advocate positions of nurture, early conversion, or delayed conversion. For example, James Estep argues that the biblical data on the conversion of children proves nothing. He points to the fact that Acts 13:33, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21, and 2 Timothy 3:15 are used by those

⁹⁶ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 308.

advocating the conversion of children and by those opposing their conversion to justify their respective viewpoints. Therefore, he concludes, “the Scriptural references regarding children are relatively inconclusive on the subject of childhood transformation”⁹⁷ Several Baptists have asserted that the Scriptures do not address the issue of the conversion of children. Ken Chafin argues that the New Testament is mostly silent as to the conversion of children.⁹⁸ Likewise, Drew Gunnells asserts that while parents are responsible for the religious nurture of their children, Scripture does not directly address how children become part of the kingdom of heaven.⁹⁹ Others have argued that the inconclusiveness of Scripture at this point should lead to an understanding of childhood conversion that is derived from psychology as opposed to theology or Scripture.¹⁰⁰

While a case can be made that the passages Estep mentions are inconclusive, two of the longest passages dealing with the treatment of children do address the issue of conversion and children. Specifically, Matthew 18:1-14 and 19:13-15 (along with its parallel passages in Mark 9, 10 and Luke 9, 17, and 18) directly address the relationship of children to God.

Matthew 18:1-14

In the Matthew 18:1-14 passage (along with its parallels in Mark 9:33-37, 42-43; Luke 9:46-48; 17:1-4) Jesus responds to a question from his disciples about greatness in the kingdom

⁹⁷Estep, “Childhood Transformation,” 190.

⁹⁸Ken Chafin, *Tell All the Little Children* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1974), 4.

⁹⁹Drew J. Gunnells, Jr, “Counseling Children about Conversion,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 33, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 36.

¹⁰⁰William L. Hendricks, “Theology and Children: Remarks on Relationships between Christian Theology and Childhood Developmental Psychology,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 2, no. 20 (Spring 1978): 65.

of heaven. Jesus answers by calling a child to himself, and stating “unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (v. 3) Jesus then adds that childlike humility is central to entrance and greatness in God’s economy (v. 4), that the welcoming of children is equivalent to welcoming Jesus (v. 5), that the one who causes a child to stumble will be punished (vv. 6-7), and that God does not desire children to perish (vv. 10-14).

Scholars often question if this passage actually speaks of little children (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5) and little ones (vv. 6, 10, 14) as children, or if this is meant simply to picture adult disciples. Hagner argues such, stating, “the first main part of chap. 18 (vv 1-14) is about disciples, not children. Even the reference to the παιδίον, “little child,” in vv 1-4 is only for the purpose of encouraging childlikeness in the disciples.”¹⁰¹ The context of Jesus’ teaching is used to support this position. He is using the child as an object lesson. He is explaining greatness to his adult disciples who are following him. Jesus’ exhortation then is not about children but instead is an exhortation for the disciples to recognize that they need to be humble through a recognition of their absolute dependence upon God just as a child is fully dependent upon others for his very well-being.¹⁰²

While few present day scholars dispute that Jesus’ teaching about greatness is meant to at least in part be applied to adult disciples, to limit Jesus’ teaching just to adults is problematic on a number of levels. First, as Leon Morris notes of verse 6, “we should notice that Jesus does not here speak of children generally, but of one little one *who believes in me*.”¹⁰³ While such can be

¹⁰¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Dallas: Word, 1998), 521.

¹⁰² Hagner picks up on this idea and goes so far as to describe discipleship as “to be without status and in this sense unself-conscious like a little child.” Ibid., 522.

¹⁰³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 462.

understood to include weaker brethren, it also most immediately includes children.¹⁰⁴ Thus Horn and Martens rightly argue of the Markan account, “Mark presents the child, and thereby all children, as a welcome arrival in the kingdom, not simply as a metaphor for an adult, who has broken through to a new stage of spiritual growth.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, to make this passage only about adults and to attempt to say that it has no application to children is to go beyond the plainest meaning of the text.¹⁰⁶

Having established that this passage addresses both adults and children as disciples, several truths emerge about Jesus’ view of children and how they relate to conversion. First, in verses 1-4, conversion involves an orientation towards childlikeness as seen most clearly in humility. Such childlikeness is not found in the actions or attitude of children for “children rarely *act* humble, but rather in their objective state (children do depend almost entirely on the adult world for their protection and provision).”¹⁰⁷ Disciples (be they children or adults) are all like children in that they exist in a state of humility and dependence upon God in order to enter God’s kingdom (vv. 3-4). Christ’s interest then is “a form of self-denial that has its counterpart in the taking up the cross of 16:24. The challenge is to replace the assertion of one’s own importance with a deliberately chosen posture of subordination.”¹⁰⁸ Children exist this way in their natural

¹⁰⁴Given that Jesus is holding a child in his arms at the time he is saying this. Indeed, while commentators are careful to emphasize that the weaker brother is also view, they still concede that literal children are also in view. Morris states “Most commentators agree that the “little ones” include not only small children but all lowly believers.” *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁰⁵Horn and Martens, “*Let the Little Children Come*,” 255.

¹⁰⁶Contra William B. Coble “New Testament Passages about Children” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 45-46.

¹⁰⁷ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 273.

¹⁰⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 732.

state, as Jesus assumes. Adults do not. The point of verses 1-4 then is that Jesus requires this acknowledgement of complete dependence in order for one to enter the kingdom of heaven.

While Jesus is clearly calling for his disciples to acknowledge such dependency upon God, arguments which state that children by their very nature cannot acknowledge such dependency run counter to Jesus' explicit point, specifically that children obviously exist in a humble state.

Second, verses 5-9 speak of the need to welcome little children or little ones while not causing them to stumble.¹⁰⁹ Reading this passage in the context of what immediately precedes it, it is clear that Jesus' first concern is that adults not hinder the discipleship of children.¹¹⁰ They are to welcome even just one child "in His name." As Osborne notes, this means welcoming them "as part of his community and under his authority."¹¹¹

Jesus here not only addresses the welcoming of children, but also its antithesis, that is causing them to stumble. "Jesus initial thrust was to emphasize that one was not to hinder

¹⁰⁹A debate exists as to whether verse 5 more closely belongs with verse 1-4 or verses 6-9. Grant Osborne offers three reasons for seeing verse 5 as going with verses 6-9. "(1) v4 has already concluded the [preceding] paragraph by framing it with issues of 'greatness'; (2) the whoever opening of vv5-6 parallel each other and (3) vv5-6 form a natural promise-warning proverb. The "little child" is now a fellow follower of Christ and not just a little follower per se." Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 674. For an opposing argument, see Nolland, *Matthew*, 733.

¹¹⁰As already noted, many commentators emphasize this passages application to disciples. They thus see this section as a warning to not cause fellow disciples to stumble. France argues such, stating of verse 6, "the seriousness of the charge lies in that these little ones have put their trust in Jesus but someone else (a fellow disciple) has damaged that trust." R. T. France, *Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 681. Yet, even conceding such, one cannot escape how Matthew has arranged the material. Specifically, the pulling aside of a small child as well as the references to little children and little ones means that while a valid application can be made to disciples, the passage also applies to children.

¹¹¹Osborne, *Matthew*, 674. Still there is room to read it either way. As Hagner notes "The verb σκανδαλίζειν, which occurs here and in vv 8 and 9 (cf. the cognate noun σκάνδαλον in v. 7), obviously is to be understood in the serious sense of causing someone to stumble or fall into sin, or perhaps even to lose their faith in Jesus and the gospel." Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 522. For a contrasting view, see D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995-1996), 2:400ff

children in their discipleship or lead them astray.”¹¹² Most specifically, what is in view is not just causing one to sin, but more seriously, “causing one to lose their faith.”¹¹³ According to Jesus, the results of such to the disciples most immediately, and to Christian adults who cause children to stumble more generally, are terrifying. While the consequence are not spelled out, Jesus makes it clear that a quick drowning would be preferable.¹¹⁴

These verses taken together indicate that children are to be welcomed into Jesus’ fellowship and thus into the disciple-making process. Failure to do so results in judgment. In contrast, obedience through welcoming children in to the disciple-making process is equivalent to welcoming Christ himself.

Matthew presents a third element of Jesus’ teaching on children in verses 10-14. There Jesus first exhorts to be careful not to despise the little ones (v. 11). Despising the little ones means “to treat as of no real significance the loss to the Christian community of one of them who has been led astray.”¹¹⁵ Because God is aware and concerned about what happens in the lives of the little ones,¹¹⁶ believers “should humble [them]selves and never cause [them] to sin because God never despises his people but rather is always concerned to go to great lengths to preserve

¹¹²Horn and Martens, *“Let the Little Children Come,”* 257.

¹¹³France, *Matthew*, 681.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 682.

¹¹⁵Nolland, *Matthew*, 741.

¹¹⁶The exact references in the passage, that “in heaven their angels continually view the face of My Father in heaven” is cryptic. Commentators debate as to whether this is a reference to guardian angels, spirits of the little ones after death or perhaps even national angels. Morris, while uncertain as to the actual identity of these angels, helpfully provides a consensus position as to the passages meaning. He states “The whole expression is surely a way of saying that these angels have immediate access to God; indeed, some translations concentrate on this (as *GNB*, “are always in the presence of my Father”); any act to the detriment of the little ones would not go unnoticed in the highest place of all. The little ones matter to God.” Morris, *Matthew*, 465.

them.”¹¹⁷

This idea of God seeking after the little ones is developed in the parable of the lost sheep (v. 12-13). Christians are to go after the little ones as a shepherd goes after just a singular lost sheep. When the lost one is found, the shepherd rejoices. It is the will of God that none go astray (v. 14). It is thus God’s will that “the individual disciple is expected to take the necessary remedial actions (vv. 15-17) to ensure that God’s pastoral concern is implemented among his people. To be lost is the potential end result of the sheep’s wandering away.”¹¹⁸

Applying such to children and the church, it becomes clear that God desires the church to keep its children. Children naturally exist in a lowly and humble state. It is this state which Christ explicitly identifies as being essential for conversion. Disciples should then prioritize the lowly child within the life of the church. Conversely, excluding the lowly from discipleship and from the life of the church results in God’s condemnation.

In a lecture given at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, noted Southern Baptist evangelism professor Roy Fish examined this passage and noted several important applications of it for the conversion of children. First, it is important to note that Jesus addresses young children as indicated by the words παιδίον, meaning a young child, and to μικρόν, indicating their small stature. These are not adolescents, but rather small children. This indicates that conversion occurs at the level of a little child, not at the level of adults. Second, conversion requires child-like humility. Unlike adults who often grow proud with age and accomplishments, children are dependent on others. Third, little children can believe in Jesus. They can be in the words of the text converted or literally turn around. Fourth, little children like a lost sheep are to

¹¹⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 276.

¹¹⁸ France, *Matthew*, 688-689.

be sought for God. Finally, it is the desire of God for every child to be saved and therefore, according to Fish, should be sought for Jesus.¹¹⁹ While Fish will go on to nuance this view and assert that baptism should be delayed, he shows that there is a much stronger biblical case for the conversion of young children than for the impossibility of the conversion of children.

Mark 10:13-16

The other significant passage on the conversion of children is found in Mark 10:13-16, as well as in parallel passages in Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-17. The Markan reference is the most developed of the three.¹²⁰ In this account, people are bringing children to Jesus so that “He might touch them,” yet his disciples hinder such. Jesus becomes indignant with his disciples and rebukes them by noting that the kingdom of God (or “heaven” in Matthew) belongs to “such as these.” Jesus then takes the children in his arms, and blesses them.

As in the first passage, so also in this one, there is a significant dispute as to whether this passage deals with children at all.¹²¹ As Brooks states, “the main concern of the account, however, is not children as such but the kind of people who may enter the kingdom of God.”¹²² While the passage undoubtedly applies to adults, one cannot move past the fact that the passage’s application is found in welcoming “the kingdom of God like a little child (Mk 10:15).”¹²³ Thus,

¹¹⁹Roy Fish. “Introducing Children to Christ” (lecture, Roberts Library, Fort Worth, TX).

¹²⁰As William Coble notes, “Mark’s account is the fullest.” Coble “New Testament Passages about Children,” 40.

¹²¹No one disputes that these are actual children who are being brought to Jesus. The age range of the children in view is normally seen as being between as early as infancy and as late as twelve. Harwood, *Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 69-73.

¹²²James A. Brooks, *Mark*, The New American Commentary 23 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 159.

¹²³This is the HCSB translation of the phrase ὡς παιδίον. The HCSB, NIV, ESV, NASB, NRV, NKJV and KJV all render this translation as a nominative. It is possible to render the phrase as an accusative however, in which

while the passage does have implications for adults, the idea that the kingdom of heaven belongs to “such as these” (v. 14)¹²⁴ indicates at a minimum “that children have a share in the kingdom of God.”¹²⁵

Yet, what does it mean to welcome the kingdom as a little child? Broadly, two options have been offered. First, some argue that to receive the kingdom as a child is to receive it through the lens of some supposed childlike characteristic. Brooks argues along these lines, noting that some have suggested innocence, humility, lack of self-consciousness, receptivity, and trustfulness as possible characteristics of a child.¹²⁶ A similar argument is made by Craig Evans when he argues that obedience is in view, stating “Jesus’ point is that one should accept the kingdom and be obedient to its summons in the same way children will without question obey adults and do what they are told.”¹²⁷

case it would be translated “as one receives a child.” R. T. France provides helpful commentary on why the normative translation is to be preferred. He states: “There seems no basis for preferring either on syntactical or stylistic grounds. The fact that 9:37 has spoken specifically about ‘receiving a child’ perhaps favours the accusative interpretation, but it is not easy to see how ‘receiving’ a concrete person relates to ‘receiving’ an abstract idea such as the kingdom of God.¹⁸ The nominative interpretation, on the other hand, would offer a Marcan equivalent to Matthew’s language about ‘becoming like children’ (Mt. 18:3), a note which is otherwise surprisingly not explicit in either Mk. 9:36–37 or the present pericope, though it is probably implied by the fact that Jesus’ choice of the child as a model in 9:36 is in the context of a dispute about greatness. The context must decide between the two options, and the sequence from v. 14b supports the nominative: there is a parallel between God’s kingdom belonging to people like children, and entry to it being reserved for those who receive it as children do.”

R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 397-98

¹²⁴Even those who question if this passage is about children primarily are forced to concede such. For example, France indicates that while this passage is primarily concerned with those who share the child’s status as insignificant to children, the Greek phrase τῶν τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ “will of course include, but not be confined to children.” France, *Mark*, 397.

¹²⁵Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2007), 169

¹²⁶Brooks himself believes that the natural state of the child, and not a list of outward characteristics is in view. Specifically, “the main point of comparison probably is the insignificance, weakness, helplessness, and dependency shared by children in ancient society and those who enter the kingdom at any time.” Brooks, *Mark*, 160.

¹²⁷ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 34B (Dallas: Word, 2001), 94.

In opposition to seeing the passage as a list of outward characteristics to be emulated, others have argued that the children are welcomed because of “their actual outward situation: a condition of weakness, helplessness or even worthlessness in the eyes of those around them.”¹²⁸ Marcia Burge advances this argument stating, “Why does the kingdom belong to children? Apparently just because they need it. Need is the reason for Jesus welcoming at his table tax collectors and sinners... Jesus responds to his critics ‘those who are well have no *need* for a physician’... It is those who recognize their need by coming to Jesus who benefit from his ministry.”¹²⁹

The second of these interpretations is preferable. The first interpretation fails because nothing in the text indicates which characteristics of children are to be emulated. Further, there are no universally agreed upon outward characteristics of children (except for small stature and youth, neither of which is possible of emulation by adults). Not all children are humble, or obedient, or weak, etc. Thus, the childlike characteristics to be emulated are left up to the subjective whims of the individual interpreter. Instead, given that within the Greco-Roman world children were of little to no value,¹³⁰ the idea that children are those who most needed the coming kingdom of God fits the text as whole better as to why Jesus would identify the kingdom as belonging to him.

¹²⁸Coble, “Children in the New Testament,” 43.

¹²⁹Judith M. Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark with Special Attention to Jesus’ Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 151. Ernest Best argues along these same lines, stating “A child trusts adults; he has confidence in them; he receives from them what they offer. So the disciple is to trust God and receive the Kingdom.” Ernest Best, “Mk 10:13-16: The Child as Model Recipient,” in *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 93-96.

¹³⁰As Evans notes, “parents [even] had the power of life and death over the very young. For example, one Roman politician wrote to his wife, ‘If you bear a child: if it is a boy, keep it; if it is a girl, throw it out.’ Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 94.

Applying such to the passage as whole, it becomes clear that “the reason the disciples were unable to appreciate the significance of children in relation to the kingdom of God is that they themselves have not yet learned to ‘receive’ it like children. Their ‘grown-up’ sense of values prevents them from being in tune with God’s value scale.”¹³¹

This account of Jesus blessing the children then reveals that Jesus expected adults to depend upon him in the same way that children are naturally dependent. Such dependence is critical for a proper reception of Christ. Adults struggle with such as evidenced by the immediate context of Mark 10:13-16, which is followed by the account of the rich man who lacks eternal life because he refuses to sell all that he has to follow Christ (10:17-30). While children naturally follow, adults have entire systems built up preventing such.

In regards to the larger question of the salvation of children, while this passage does not directly teach that children can be converted, it does show that children’s natural state makes them more ready recipients of the kingdom than adults. Still, to draw from this passage the idea that infants are fit for baptism is to impose a meaning upon the text that is simply foreign to it.¹³²

¹³¹France, *Gospel of Mark*, 398.

¹³²Harwood’s discussion at this point is helpful. He states, “Joachim Jeremias, for example, argues that infants of believers and infants in the community were baptized by AD 70. Jeremias argues that Jesus referred in John 3:5 to water baptism and that—read along with Mark 10:13–16 and two statements from Justin—early Christians made the connection to infant baptism. As further evidence, Jeremias writes that *kōluein* (“to hinder”) is a technical term connected to water baptism (Acts 11:17). Kurt Aland directly refutes the two major arguments of Jeremias, which are that Mark 10:13–16 depends on John 3:5 and that *kōluein* is a technical term related to water baptism. On the first argument, Aland admits that there is an “external parallel” of the “truly, truly” statements, but the phrase occurs so often in the gospels that there is no special significance to the use of the phrase in both texts. Also, the idea of being born again (John 3:5) is not the same as the concept in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) of receiving the kingdom of God like a child (Mark 10:15). Further evidence against dependence of Mark 10:13–16 on John 3:5 is that Nicodemus was an old man, but Jesus spoke in Mark 10 about children. Against the notion that *kōluein* is a technical term related to water baptism, Aland notes that this verb is used twenty-three times in the New Testament and “rarely” refers to baptism. He adds that the word should only be understood as a technical term related to baptism when the context is clearly a situation of water baptism, which is not the case in Mark 10:13–16. Aland seems to have rendered the arguments of Jeremias for infant baptism to be untenable. Consider also the following common-sense observation about the parallel passage Matt 19:13–15 by Fred Malone: “In fact, if any passage in Scripture teaches the fallacy of paedobaptism this one does. Neither Jesus nor His disciples baptized these children even though they had a perfect opportunity to do so. Instead, Jesus and the disciples only blessed them.” Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants*. 71-72’ Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize*

Children and Accountability

As in the Old Testament, so also in the New, a person's accountability before God is directly linked to a person's cognition of the gospel. While the New Testament also lacks any developed treatment of the age of accountability,¹³³ several passages connect one's guilt for sins to one's cognition of those sins.

First, in Hebrews 10:26-29 unbelief or rebellion is defined as deliberate sinning after receiving a knowledge of the truth. While commentators widely debate the application of this passage to apostasy, they agree about the implications of this passage in regards to accountability. Specifically, regardless of if the passage is saying that a person loses their salvation¹³⁴ or their rewards,¹³⁵ it clearly states that the reason these persons are punished is because "the sin in view denotes a deliberate act of covenant unfaithfulness."¹³⁶ They are then "conscious[ly] express[ing] an attitude that displays contempt for God."¹³⁷

A second significant passage linking cognitive ability and culpability is Luke 12:41-48. In this passage Jesus presents a parable of three slaves and their faithfulness or lack thereof to their master. The first slave does his master's will and is rewarded. The second knows his

Infants? (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 96-99; Joachim Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), 68.

¹³³As James Leo Garrett has noted "specific New Testament teaching about 'the age of accountability,' exegetically derived, is virtually nonexistent." Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, page 1:10.

¹³⁴ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 532ff.

¹³⁵David Lewis Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary 35, (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2010), 520ff.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 522.

¹³⁷William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47B (Dallas: Word, 1998), 292.

master's will, but instead engages in debauchery and abuse. This slave is condemned in the harshest possible language.¹³⁸ The third slave does not know his master's will and does not do it. This servant while judged, is judged far less harshly than the second servant.¹³⁹ While this passage primarily addresses levels of judgment, it also addresses the fact that cognition plays a significant role in the type of punishment a person receives. When read alongside Hebrews 10:26-29, these two passages show that a high level of knowledge of God's expectation while failing to meet such expectations leads to an extremely harsh judgment. In contrast, a limited knowledge of God's expectations leads to a lighter judgment.

A third noteworthy passage is John 1:12-13. Therein, the apostle John states the children of God are those "to all who did receive him, He gave them the right to be the children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." The passage is situated as the climactic statement of the Johannine prologue.¹⁴⁰ In regards to accountability, it claims that those who believe are those who have received Jesus, that is entrusted themselves to Jesus by "acknowledging his claims and confessing him."¹⁴¹ Therefore, according to this passage, "a person who has been born of God

¹³⁸Luke 12:46 describes this punishment in this way: "That slave's master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers." Adrian Rogers, looking at this slave said, "friend I would not want to be in your shoes at the judgment. Jesus said when you preach, when you testify if somebody will not hear you, Jesus said 'shake the dust off your shoes' for that dust will be used against you in the Day of Judgment. It will be a testimony against you." Adrian Rogers, "The Final Judgment of the Unserved Dead," (speech, Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, TN).

¹³⁹This third slave is not completely ignorant. However, he still "did thing deserving of blows" (v. 46). Rather than being cognitively unaware (an infant), his knowledge is limited. Hershel Hobbs provides a baptistic explanation of this passage, stating, "he does not live up to the light that he had. Paul in Romans 1:3 shows that...he does not live up to the law of God written in his conscience and heart." Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1966), 211

¹⁴⁰Köstenberger, *John*, 38.

¹⁴¹Carson, *John*, 125-126.

has received Jesus and believed in him... Thus one must *knowingly* receive and believe in Jesus”¹⁴² in order to be a child of God. Clearly, from a conversionist perspective, salvation is directly linked to cognition.

Fourth, Romans 14:12 is often noted as relevant to discussion of the age of accountability. Therein Paul states that every person will give an account of himself to God. As the Mennonite John Unger notes, this passage “comes closest to conveying the concept of accountability, though no reference to age is implied.”¹⁴³ In context, Paul’s statement comes at the close of his explanation of why neither the weaker nor the stronger brother should judge the other. The rationale for restraining judgment is provided in verses 10c-11. Specifically, there is a public judgment coming (the judgment seat of God language of v. 10c) of every single person (v. 11). Those who “contest the supreme and final authority of the one God will in the end-time judgment bow and acknowledge that there is no other God than Yahweh.”¹⁴⁴ Verse 12 stands as a summary statement of this idea emphasizing the application of the coming judgment to the believer. Each individual will give an account “of their behavior before the sovereign all-knowing judge of history.”¹⁴⁵ It follows, then, that since God holds people accountable for their actions, an awareness of what a person is doing is implied within this passage. (Indeed, why would Paul exhort the Romans otherwise if he did not expect them to understand his message?)

¹⁴²Harwood, *Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 25

¹⁴³Emphasis mine. John Unger, “Can a Child Be Converted,” in *Conversion, Doorway to Discipleship*, ed. Henry J. Schmidt (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1980), 63.

¹⁴⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word, 1998), 809.

¹⁴⁵Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 848.

Therefore, Harwood reasons from this passages that “the Scriptures indicate that God judges people for their sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions.”¹⁴⁶

While these passages taken together do not provide an explicit dating of the age of accountability, they do show that accountability for sins within the New Testament is linked to a cognition of the sins being committed. The greater one’s knowledge of sin, the more responsible that person is for having committed the sin in question. Applying this to children, the more aware a child becomes of his sins, the more likely it is he under condemnation of God for such. Thus, Harwood rightly argues that Baptists need to encourage their children from “the youngest possible age to make a personal decision to repent of and confess their sin to God, follow him by submitting to believer’s baptism, and commit to living daily for Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁷

Children and Initiation into the Faith Community

Amongst both credo- and paedobaptists, baptism is generally understood as the initiatory ritual into the community of faith. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Baptists do not baptize infants because of their contention that baptism is to be reserved for believers alone. They argue that infants are cognitively incapable of being converted. Many paedobaptists reject such reasoning. While they would (normally) agree that an infant cannot cognitively consent to conversion, they would argue that infants should be baptized because of the New Testament practice of entire households either believing or being baptized. Six such incidents are recorded in the New Testament.

¹⁴⁶Harwood, *Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 159.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 164.

The first of these occurs in John 4:46-53, in which a nobleman in Capernaum hears of his son's healing by Jesus. After hearing, "then he himself believed, and his whole household." The second concerns Cornelius, whose household is mentioned several times in Acts. He is described as one "who feared God along with his whole household" (10:2). After hearing the message from Peter, his entire household (11:14) is saved and baptized (vv. 15-16).¹⁴⁸ While some see infant baptism here, it is significant that in context those who are saved and baptized are those who "in 10:48 and 11:17 are described as: having heard the word (10:44); having received the Holy Spirit (10:44-47; 11:15-17); having spoken in tongues (10:46) as at Pentecost (11:15); believers (implied in 11:17); and having repented (11:18)."¹⁴⁹ The third pertains to Lydia, who in Acts 16:14-15 convinced Paul, Timothy, and Luke that she was a believer leading them to stay with her "after she and her household were baptized." The fourth reference occurs later in Acts 16 with the account of the Philippian jailer. Inquiring of Paul and Silas as to what he needed to do to be saved, "he and all his family were baptized...because he had believed God with his entire household" (Acts 16:34-35). Again, belief is emphasized as contemporaneous with the households' water baptism.¹⁵⁰ The fifth is the Corinthian leader Crispus, who "believed the Lord along with his whole household. Many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized." The final reference is to Stephanas, whose entire household Paul baptized (1 Co. 1:16). Paul also notes that Stephanas's household were the first converts in Achaia (1 Co. 16:15)

¹⁴⁸William B. Coble "Problems Related to New Testament Teachings" in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 65-66.

¹⁴⁹Robert H. Stein, "Baptism in Luke-Acts" in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 52.

¹⁵⁰See chapter 1 of this dissertation for more on the timing of baptism in Acts.

While some have concluded that the cognitive requirements mentioned in the context of household baptisms means that only adults were baptized in these contexts,¹⁵¹ such conclusions are unwarranted. While Baptists (rightly) reject infant baptism because of the cognitive and volitional requirements the New Testament places on conversion, nowhere does the New Testament define children in such a way as to indicate they are incapable of cognitive and volitional decisions. To decide that the references to household baptism in Acts and 1 Corinthians mean that only adults were baptized because only adults can believe, hear, be converted, or receive the Spirit is to read an anthropology upon Scripture that is foreign to it.

Normally, the works of Beasley-Murray and Kurt Aland are noted as offering the classic defenses of these household baptism being baptisms of just adults.¹⁵² While Aland makes this argument, Beasley-Murray does not. Indeed, he acknowledges that household baptism implies that the gospel was preached and believed by not only adults, but also children. Beasley-Murray writes on the conversion of households in Acts that “It is not the will of the husband that can make his wife believing, nor the command of the father his children Christians. Only God’s grace that moves a man inwardly can cause these natural relationships to be fruitful also for the religious goal of man. Christianity acts, however, in faith that He who created the natural fellowship also fills it with his grace.”¹⁵³ Thus, for Beasley-Murray, children in the households

¹⁵¹Among Southern Baptists, Coble has argued such. He states “five of the six households are described as having a kind of experience such as the New Testament attributes to adults.” Only the incident with Lydia is inconclusive. Coble, “Problems related to New Testament Baptism,” 66. Among exegetes as a whole, Kurt Aland’s *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* offers the most substantial argument for the idea that only adults were baptized. Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*, 87-94.

¹⁵²Joel B. Green, “Tell Me A Story: Perspectives on Children From Acts of the Apostles” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Burge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 217-18.

¹⁵³George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1972; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 320. See also G. R. Beasley-Murray, “The Child and the Church” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 320.

heard the gospel and potentially experienced salvation because this is how God has created to the household to work.

In contrast, Aland does argue that only adults are in view in the household baptism passages. He does this by denying that an actual household baptism or conversion has taken place in some of the passages (Stephanas and Crispus) instead arguing that these passages are better translated as indicating that only those individuals were converted. In regards to Lydia, Aland argues that she could not have had children in her house. Aland believes the baptism of Cornelius's household explicitly only included adults, while the nature of the Philippian jailer's household is at best unclear in regards to children.¹⁵⁴ Instead of including children, these households included slaves and those who been invited by the noted person (Cornelius, the jailer, or Lydia, respectively) according to Aland.

Aland, in his zealously to rule out infant baptism, overstates his case against the possibility of children having been in these households. In regards to Lydia, he fails to account for the possibility that she could have been a widow and was therefore associated with her profession as opposed to her husband. Therefore, children could have been present. Concerning Stephanas and Crispus, no modern translations agree with his translation of the household phrase in these contexts. He concedes that makeup of the jailer's household is unclear.

The most substantial argument Aland offers in favor of the household salvation/baptism formula referring to adults only is in the context of the household baptism of Cornelius. Aland argues that Cornelius's household was composed of those adults visiting his house to hear the teaching of Peter (Acts 10:24). They are his household because they were present when Peter

¹⁵⁴Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*, 87-94.

preached at Cornelius's house.¹⁵⁵ Yet, a significant problem exists with this interpretation: it fails to account for the fact that in 10:1, Cornelius's entire household is identified as God-fearing. In 10:1, no one has been invited to Cornelius's house and, as such, his household cannot just mean Cornelius's adult guests. Further, even if one were to concede his point that the household is composed of those persons Cornelius invited to hear the preaching of Peter, it does not follow that there would not have been any children present. Adults could have brought their children with them. Cornelius himself might have had children. While within the context of Cornelius's household baptism cognition and volition were clearly assumed as part of the baptism taking place, it does not follow from such, or from any of Aland's other arguments that children were not present at all. Therefore, even accepting Aland's (highly questionable) argument that Cornelius's household baptism was a baptism of those guest invited to his house, it does not follow that children were not present. Taken together then, Aland's assertion that only adults were baptized lacks exegetical merit. At most, all that Aland can conclude is that the household salvation/baptism passages are silent as to the presence of children in these incidents. Perhaps this is why Coble, who agrees with Aland's conclusion that only adults were baptized, ignores Aland's exegesis and is forced to argue that children are cognitively and volitionally unable to consent to the requirements of salvation and lordship.¹⁵⁶

From the above discussion of household salvations and baptisms, it becomes clear that advocates of infant baptism fail to account for the numerous references to the cognitive and volitional actions of the members of the households who were baptized. Advocates of adults-only baptism also err in that they often falsely assume the cognitive and volitional inability of

¹⁵⁵Ibid, 90-91.

¹⁵⁶Coble, "Problems Related to New Testament Teachings," 65-69.

children. Setting aside the poor exegesis of paedobaptists and the false assumptions of the adults-only baptists and interacting with the passages on their own terms, of the six references to household baptism/salvation, the possibility exists within each of the passages for children to have been present and to have been baptized. To argue that children were not present at any of the baptisms (as Aland does) is akin to arguing that children were not welcome in the teaching times of the early church. Such contradicts both Jesus explicit exhortations as well as the explicit discipleship patterns of both Testaments.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that children were present at these household baptisms and that if they heard the gospel message, believed it, were converted, and received the Spirit, they would have been baptized and initiated into the faith community.¹⁵⁸

Conclusions and Application

This chapter has established that throughout the Bible, children are understood as valid candidates for discipleship. They are to be continually exposed to the discipleship process through both their faith community and their parents. This process of discipleship takes place throughout the child's life. While children are exposed to this process early on, they do go through a process of orienting themselves to being active disciple instead of simply passive recipients of information. In the Old Testament, they do this through asking questions. Applying such to the present-day, it follows that children who are regularly exposed to the faith community (i.e., children of Christian parents) will ask questions about the nature of faith and in

¹⁵⁷See the sections above on Children and Conversion, Children and Discipleship in the Old Testament and Children and Discipleship in the New Testament.

¹⁵⁸See the treatment of Spirit and water baptism in Acts in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

turn come to a cognitive understanding of faith at a younger age than those who are not exposed to it. Further, since both the content of the discipleship process in the Old Testament (pursuing wisdom, welcoming discipline, reciting the law in order to remember its significance, and continually learning to fear the Lord) and the lifestyle resulting from the discipleship process in the New Testament (one of submission to Jesus as Lord) are the same for both children and adults, identifying only adults as disciples and converts is untenable.

This chapter has also shown that within the narrative of Scripture, individuals are accountable for their own actions. This accountability is closely tied to a person's cognitive and volitional abilities. Specifically, a person level of accountability for sin in the Old Testament is directly connected to their knowledge of sin. From a Baptist understanding of the relevant passages, infants are seen as not morally culpable. A maturing knowledge of sin brings about greater culpability for sin, yet the Scriptures are silent as to a specific age or even cognitive level when such occurs. As a result, it follows that the gospel should be shared with children throughout their lives and that children should be encouraged to repent and believe the gospel from the earliest possible age. Given that this fact arises from the reality that cognition brings accountability, a child's ability to cognitively express repentance and belief in his own words must also be a prerequisite for viewing a child as converted.

The relationship of children to initiation into the faith community is less clear. Within the Old Testament narratives, children are clearly not held fully responsible for the actions of the community of faith as a whole. While several Baptists have attempted to apply the bar mitzvah to Christian baptism, such applications fail to account for the lack of historical references to this practice prior to the fourteenth century. As a result, children stand as a partial but not total members of the community of faith in the Old Testament. Within the New Testament, the

practice of household baptisms makes it possible that children were fully incorporated into the faith community, but does not make such explicit. Paul's addressing of children within the context of the household code passages implies that children were members of the faith community, but does not make explicit how these children were initiated into the faith community.

Finally, within the New Testament, Jesus' teaching on children has several applications regarding the conversion of children. First, conversion occurs through an acknowledgement of child-like dependence upon God. Since children exist in this state naturally, they can be converted. Second, the church has responsibility to seek for children to be converted. Third, God desires for the church to keep its children. Those persons who cause children to fall away from the Christian faith shall be severely punished.

In conclusion, from a Baptist perspective, children are to be disciplined from infancy forward and therefore it is appropriate to share the gospel with children from infancy forward. Further, since accountability for sins is tied to cognition of those sins, it follows that children become accountable for sin as they become cognitively aware that they are sinning. Additionally, since Jesus states that conversion occurs on the level of a young child, it is possible for a child to respond to the gospel at a young age. Finally, because children are addressed as members of the community of faith within the household codes they should play active part in the community of faith.

CHAPTER THREE: THE HISTORY OF SOUTHERN BAPTISTS, BAPTISM, AND THE AGE OF INITIATION

Introduction

The first two chapters of this dissertation have established that, biblically, baptism is contemporaneous with conversion and that children are valid candidates for conversion. As a result, it follows that children, when converted, should be baptized. This thesis, while allegedly gaining in popularity in the pews, has fallen on hard times in the academy and among many denominational leaders for several reasons.¹ One of the most substantial objections to the assertion of this dissertation that it is appropriate to baptize children is that this is a historically novel practice for Southern Baptist.² Mark Dever levels this, criticism arguing in part that

¹This dissertation can be divided into two sections. The first half of this dissertation makes a case for the baptism of even young children who confess Christ asserting that even young children can be converted and that baptism should be contemporaneous to conversion. The second half of this dissertation deals with a series of objections raised to the baptism of children. This chapter deals with the historical objection, the next chapter deals with objections relating to church membership and to the baptism of young children.

²This historical objection is not just limited to the practice of Southern Baptists but also to the practices of Baptists globally. Mark Dever makes this assertion stating “this practice of delaying for maturity—is common around the world today.” Dever goes on to note the practice of Spurgeon of urging young children to be converted while at the same time apparently delaying the baptism of his own children. In a footnote, he notes that delaying the baptism of children is common practice amongst British Baptists.

G. R. Beasley Murray substantiate this assertion as it relates to British Baptists in the 1970s, stating, “British Baptists would never consider allowing children to participate in the communion service, and they would be surprised to hear it suggested that children should even be permitted to attend the monthly church business meetings.” Yet as Beasley-Murray goes on to note, the Scriptures do not allow for a stark severing of children from the church. He argues “the responsibility of the unfolding spiritual potential of children therefore rest alike on the parents and the church” As a result of such, he goes on to lament the British practice of delaying baptism until the age of eleven or thirteen. Instead, he states that his preference is for the baptism and incorporation of even young believers into the life of the church. “I am increasingly of the opinion that we should do all that is legitimate and right to mark the importance of a conversion of confession of faith and baptism for the life of the young believer. Since the New Testament teaches that baptism is for Christ and the church, we should make that explicit by welcoming the baptized into the membership of the church at baptism.”

Thus, while Dever has a point that the baptism of children is presently rare amongst credobaptists in other parts of the world (specifically Britain), his assumption that such is a totally novel practice for Baptists globally needs greater substantiation. While this dissertation is dealing with the question of the baptismal practices of Southern Baptists specifically, and thus the question of baptismal practices relating to age globally amongst Baptists (and even Christians as a whole) are outside the scope of its research question, such would be an appropriate area for additional research as a follow-up to this dissertation. G. R. Beasley-Murray, “The Child and the Church” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 128, 133, 139. Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed.

baptizing young children contradicts historic Baptist understanding of credobaptism.³ Thus, some have alleged that there is a rising tide of young baptisms in the Southern Baptists

Convention which is both historically novel and ecclesiological lamentable.⁴

Yet, assertions that such practices are historically novel are difficult to prove.⁵

Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, *NAC Studies in Bible & Theology 2* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 335 n. 23.

³Mark Dever has made this assertion stating “This practice of delaying for maturity—similar to other delays commanded in Scripture (e.g., marriage, responsibility in OT Israel, service in the army in the OT... was formerly common in the United States. Baptisms of children eight or nine years of age, or even younger, were either unheard of or very rare.” Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” 334.

⁴Ed Stetzer, head of LifeWay research, reports that “from 2004 to 2005, every baptism category, by age, went down—except one. The one category that went up? Preschoolers—those under five years of age.” In 2005, the most recent year for which data was available when Stetzer made this claim, Southern Baptists baptized 4,272 children under the age of five, which is 1.15% of all Southern Baptists baptisms. Stetzer thus declares that these results “make me nervous. Though I am not one to say that a five year old cannot trust Christ, it’s hard to see the march toward infant baptism as good news.” More recently, the North American Mission Board’s Pastors Task Force on SBC Evangelistic Impact and Declining Baptism, which reported to the 2014 Southern Baptist Convention has reiterated this claim. Therein, the taskforce asserted that as of the 2012 Annual Church Profile data, “the only consistently growing age group is age five and under.” Ed Stetzer, “Disturbing Trends in Baptisms,” *Center for Missional Research Insights Newsletter*, October 10 2006, accessed November 16, 2008, <http://www.namb.net/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=9qKILUOzEpH&b=2027651&ct=3198417/>. Andy Addis, et al., *Pastors’ Task Force on SBC Evangelistic Impact* (Alpharetta, GA: Baptist Press, 2014), 1, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.namb.net/baptismtaskforce/>.

⁵For example, Dever’s assertion that the baptism of individuals of the age of even eight or nine is a novel practice based on the age of baptisms of some notable Baptist figures is extremely problematic. Specifically, as evidence for this assertion he offers the following list of ages at which some notable Baptists figures were baptized: “John Gill was brought up in a Baptist home and was baptized at age 19, in 1716 (just 3 weeks shy of his 20th birthday). Samuel Medley was brought up in a Baptist home and was baptized at age 22, in December 1760. Richard Furman was brought up in a non-Christian home and was baptized at age 17, in 1772. John Dagg was baptized in Middleburg, Virginia at age 18 in the spring of 1812. J. Newton Brown was baptized in Hudson, New York at age 14 in 1817. J. M. Pendleton was baptized near Pembroke, Kentucky, at age 18 in 1829. P. H. Mell was brought up in a strong Christian home and was baptized at age 18, in 1832 (according to his biography by his son). J. R. Graves was brought up in a strong Christian home and was baptized at age 15 in 1835 (according to Hailey’s biography). Sylvanus Dryden Phelps (author of the hymn “Something for Thee”) was brought up in a Christian home and was baptized at age 22, in 1838 (according to William Cathcart’s Baptist Encyclopedia). [Pastored 1st Baptist, New Haven, CT 1846–1874] John A. Broadus was brought up in a strong Christian home and was baptized at age 16 in 1843 (according to A. T. Robertson, *Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus*). Charles Fenton James was baptized in 1864 at age 20 in the trenches near Petersburg, VA, while he was a Confederate soldier. (George B. Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 38) C. H. Spurgeon baptized his two sons when they were 18. (Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985], 141). John R. Sampey was brought up in a Christian home and was baptized at age 13 in 1877 (according to his *Memoirs*, 7). [worked on his dad’s farm] E. Y. Mullins was brought up in the home of a Baptist minister in Texas and was baptized at age 20 in 1880. Bear in mind that adult responsibilities to contribute to household income came earlier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So, for example, the above all had jobs by the time they were baptized. H. Wheeler Robinson was brought up by a Christian mother in Northampton, England and was baptized at age 16 in 1888. Frank Staggs was baptized at 11 in 1922 in southwest Louisiana. Dale Moody was baptized at 12 in 1927 in Grapevine, Texas.”

Specifically, two problems exist for anyone wanting to trace the development of an age of initiation as it relates to baptism within Southern Baptist life. First, the terms “infant” and “child” are often used interchangeably in older Southern Baptist books. Further, the term “adolescent” is foreign to many older texts.⁶ Together, these factors create a great deal of confusion as to what age someone becomes an appropriate candidate for initiation into the church from a credobaptist perspective. Second, clear statements dealing with the relation of to age to initiation within the church are rare. Unlike today, when systematic theologies set aside sections to deal with the subject,⁷ earlier Baptists seem to mention the issue at best as an aside or at worst only as an implication of the relationship between baptism and church membership or obedience. Despite these difficulties, a study is warranted that examines the relationship between baptism and age and how this relationship has developed within the history of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Therefore, this chapter offers such a study. Given that this dissertation has made two assertions up to this point: that children can be converted and that baptism should be contemporaneous with conversion, this chapter will show that neither of these assertions is novel for Southern Baptists. It will note several significant Southern Baptists figure who directly

Yet, while his research at this point is impressive, offering this list as evidence that the practice of young baptism is novel fails because this list is largely antidotal. Southern Baptists baptized millions of people over the course of their early history. To assert that because a list of select early Baptists figures were baptized at a later age, that Baptists in America as a whole rarely to never baptized young children ignores the obvious fact that a select list of leaders does not make up the whole of denominational life. Indeed, a recent article appearing on the online “Southern Baptist News and Analysis” website, *SBCToday*, by Dr. Tim Barnette has provided an alternative list noting the young age of conversion of several significant historical Baptist figures. Therefore, this chapter is needed to offer a far more comprehensive picture of Baptistic practices and views regarding the baptism of children among early Southern Baptists. Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” 334. Tim Barnette, “About Baptizing Children,” *SBCToday* March 3, 2015, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://sbctoday.com/about-baptizing-children-dr-tim-barnette/#>.

⁶For example, see Richard Fuller, *Baptism and the Terms of Communion* (1854; repr., Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc, 2006), 138-139. See also the discussion on Hiscox in the 1850-1900 section below.

⁷For example, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 982. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 654-655.

argued that children could be converted and when this occurred, that they should be baptized. It will also examine historic demographic trends as best as they can be observed in relation to the conversion and baptism of young children. As a result of this study, this chapter will assert that while there has always been a diversity of opinion among Southern Baptists as to the appropriateness of baptizing children, the assertion of historically unusualness or novelty regarding Southern Baptist's child baptism is false.

Early Views of Baptists in America on the Conversion and Baptism of Children

Baptists first came to America in the late seventeenth century. Yet, it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that their numbers began to swell. While early Baptists in the colonies existed without any sort of official ties, as the eighteenth century progressed, they began to form schools, associations, and informal missions' societies. By the early nineteenth century, pressing international missions' needs brought together Baptists from across the country in the first meeting of the triennial convention in 1814 in Philadelphia.⁸ As Baptists continued to meet every three years, they soon formed a publication society for the purpose of distributing literature. Some of this literature was used for the education of children. Other publications served to defend the Baptist distinctive of believer's baptism by immersion. This literature provides a window into the views of early Baptists about both children and baptism.

⁸Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1987), 200-51, 34.

The Views of Early Baptists Regarding Children and Baptism

Given that Baptists were still in a formative stage as a denomination in the eighteenth century, it is unsurprising that direct references to the age at which children were baptized during this era are scarce. As Hugh Wamble notes, the emphasis of the Baptist literature of this era is “on repentance from sin and faith towards God, both expressed voluntarily and publicly, as indispensable qualifications [for baptism]. Literature is silent about age.”⁹

The Charleston Baptists Association’s *A Summary of Church Discipline* was a relatively influential document among churches in the south in the eighteenth century. It is also silent as to the age of baptism and as to the role of children in the faith community. The document does note that “baptism is by immersion *upon* a profession of their faith, agreeable to the ancient practice of John the Baptist and the apostles of our Lord.”¹⁰ While not explicit, such does indicate that the association understood there to be a temporal link between baptism and a profession of faith. The document also affirms the need for “an entire change of nature” and to restrict church membership so that the “unconverted, unbelievers, and graceless persons” are not able to usurp control of the church. From such, Wamble implies that children may have been excluded, yet still concedes that Baptists have been more interested in defining the qualifications for admission into a church than in setting an age at which such could occur.¹¹

⁹Hugh. Wamble, “Historic Practices Regarding Children,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle, (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 82.

¹⁰Charleston Baptist Association, *A Summary of Church Discipline: Shewing the Qualifications and Duties of the Officers and Members of a Gospel Church* (Charleston: Markland, M’Iver, & Company, 1794), 122-25, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://founders.org/library/index-5-2/charles/>.

¹¹Wamble, “Historic Practices Regarding Children,” 82.

In 1840 Andreas Winberg, a Baptist minister and author, addressed the issue of the baptism of children within the context of believer's baptism in relation to the subject of household baptism. Against the claim of paedobaptists that Baptists do not practice household baptism, Winberg claims, "It is by no means uncommon for Baptist missionaries and preachers to actually baptize whole households, as may be abundantly seen in the journals of the denomination."¹² He goes on to explain his understanding of these household baptisms with a specific clarification in regards to children. He notes that "if there were children in the families mentioned in Acts and 1 Corinthians who were incapable of attaining to a perception of faith by means of instruction...they were excluded from baptism which the other members of the house received."¹³ Given the dearth of direct references to children during this era, Winberg's clarification at this point is helpful. Children who are "incapable of attaining to a perception of the faith by means of instruction" were not baptized in Acts. As a result, such children are not included in the household baptisms mentioned in the Baptist journals he was reading. By specifying that it is only those children who are cognitively incapable of grasping salvation who should be excluded from baptism, Winberg acknowledges that there were also children who could grasp salvation. It is these who in the pattern of Acts and 1 Corinthians were to be baptized. It is the same type of children who Winberg would argue should be baptized in his own day. For Winberg then, children are addressed on a case-by-case basis as to their cognitive readiness for conversion and baptism. Rather than ruling out the possibility of child baptism, Winberg's book endorses it.

¹²Andreas Winberg, *Winberg on Baptism* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1840), 103.

¹³ Ibid., 104-105

One of the primary areas children are explicitly addressed in the writings of early American Baptists is within the educational literature of that era. The histories of various Baptist conventions provides documentation of this. These histories note that the religious education of children was closely tied to the religious education of adults. For example, according to one historian of early South Carolina Baptists, the “instruction of children in the principles of religion does not seem to have received general attention as distinct from adults.”¹⁴ In similar fashion early Tennessee Baptists’ “children were taught religion, morals and work.”¹⁵ From these accounts it is clear that children were religiously schooled from an early age and were instructed in the same materials as adults. Such is consistent with the patterns of the discipleship of children argued for in chapter 2 of this dissertation. It follows from the instructional processes of early Baptists in the south that these early Baptists believed that their children from an early age were capable of understanding religious instruction and the concepts relating to salvation. Still, determining a direct age at which early Baptists of the south understood baptism to occur is not possible.

Age-Related Demographic Trends amongst Early Baptists

Some contend that the average age of baptism has steadily dropped among Baptists for a long period of time. The theory is the average age of baptism was much higher in early Southern Baptist Churches and in their forerunners than it is today.¹⁶ In reality, there is little reliable

¹⁴ The dates of these early Baptist range from the 1760s to 1800, as noted in Joe M. King, *History of South Carolina Baptist* (Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan, 1964), 148.

¹⁵ O. W. Taylor, *Early Tennessee Baptists 1769-1832* (Nashville: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1957), 89.

¹⁶ For example, Sam Southard contends “there has been a steady drop in the chronological age at which churches will accept a child’s accountability for sin.” Samuel Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman,

research conveying the ages of baptism within Baptist churches prior to 1966.¹⁷ Further, prior to 1899, there are no specific age related studies of conversion or baptism in America regardless of denominational perspective.¹⁸ Indeed, the only potential readily available sources for discerning the age of baptism of Baptist individuals prior to 1899 in America come from books containing biographical sketches of early Baptist pastors. Yet these are a flawed source for trying to determine any broad trends as the age of conversion and baptism. The records are often incomplete or vaguely worded resulting in the age of the child at the time of baptism being difficult to discern precisely. Further, the sampling is isolated in such a way as to be inconclusive as to larger baptismal trends as they relate to age. Still, a brief survey of several of these histories does reveal a few patterns, but these patterns must be viewed critically. First, most pastors within these volumes were baptized between the ages of 15 and 25.¹⁹ However, exceptions to this pattern do exist. One such example is Robert Franklin Babb a Missouri Baptist pastor who in 1823 “felt that he was converted at the age of seven.” If it is true that the age of baptism was

1962), 86. Mark Dever recently claimed that, “Whatever the appropriate age for baptism is, the average age of actual baptisms among Baptists has definitely been declining during the last century.” Dever, “Baptism in the local church,” 336. See also Gary T. Deane, “An Investigation of the Child’s Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development” (EdD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 6-7.

¹⁷The first year that Southern Baptist tracked baptism by age was 1966. Prior to 1967, no record can be found within the denominational *Quarterly Review* journal which summarized the findings of the annual church profile from 1941-1991. The first report of baptism by age is found in “Distribution of Baptism by Age and Location,” 1967 *Southern Baptist Handbook Quarterly Review* (July August September 1967): 44. Others have attempted to apply other metrics outside of the denomination own to this question. The appropriateness of using these other metrics is examined in each of the demographic section below.

¹⁸Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), chapter 2.

¹⁹ For examples of this, see three works: L. S Foster, *Mississippi Baptist Preachers* (St. Louis, MI: National Baptist, 1895); J. C. Maple and R. P. Rider, eds., *Missouri Baptist Biography: A Series of Life-Sketches Indicating the Growth and Prosperity of the Baptist Churches as Represented in the Lives and Labors of Eminent Men and Women in Missouri* (Liberty, MO: The Missouri Baptist Historical Society, 1919); J. J. Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee Pioneer Baptist Preachers* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce, 1919).

significantly older during this time period, then his reaction to conversion makes sense as he “did not have confidence enough to be united with any church until he was twenty seven years of age.”²⁰

As evidenced by Winberg, it seems during these early pioneer days of Baptist life that there was some openness to children attaining a perception of faith. For Winberg, such children were to be baptized. Further children were valued, and religious education was considered a priority. Despite this somewhat high view of children’s religious understanding, the little evidence that does exist seem to indicate most Baptist children were not baptized until their late teens.

Southern Baptists and the Baptism of Children: 1845-1900

In 1845 in Augusta, Georgia the Southern Baptist Convention was formed as a result of northern Baptists prohibiting southern Baptist slave owners from engaging in mission work.²¹ As this new convention grew, it relied less upon the literature and publications of an increasingly liberal Northern Baptist Convention. Instead, the convention formed its own seminary, mission boards, and publication society. The pastors, theologians, and denominational employees of this new convention quickly set to work producing literature, much of which was geared toward the doctrine of baptism and its appropriate candidates. While, once again, direct treatments of the status of children are rare, there are more direct references that are noteworthy.

²⁰ Maple, *Missouri Baptist Biography*, 34

²¹ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 386-391.

The Views of Southern Baptists Regarding Children and Baptism

Perhaps the most significant direct treatment regarding the baptism of young children comes from Richard Fuller. Fuller was a well-known Baptist pastor in Baltimore and author of an influential treatise on baptism, *Baptism and the Terms of Communion*, which was originally published by the Southern Baptist Publication Society. In it, Fuller explicitly argues that young children can be baptized and included in church membership. Commenting on when infants should be baptized, Fuller states “when old enough, it would still be the duty of the child to believe and be baptized in obedience to the commission”²² Fuller clarifies what he means by “when old enough” in the context of his debate with Dr. Kurtz, a paedobaptist. Kurtz has apparently argued from Acts 16:33 for paedobaptism, saying, “young children themselves of four or five years of age rejoice” in their knowledge of the gospel and salvation. To this assertion Fuller responds that “babes [that] are old enough to know spiritual joy, and to utter praises to God! Such infants as these I shall be happy to baptize everyday of my life.”²³ Thus, Fuller asserts that he would baptize a four or five year old who utters praises to God. For Fuller then children can be converted and if and when this occurs, they should be baptized.

Still, Fuller is cautious. He warns against manipulating children into conversion saying “worlds could not tempt me to act in [securing God’s blessing for] my child, unless I had God’s clear warrant for it.”²⁴ He also further clarifies his view of infants stating that “to talk about

²²Richard Fuller, *Baptism, and the Terms of Communion: an Argument*, The Baptist Distinctives Series 9, 3rd ed. (1854; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 112.

²³ Ibid., 139

²⁴Ibid., 109

preaching the gospel to infants is to use the language of insanity.”²⁵ Thus, for Fuller, infants cannot grasp the gospel. Despite his hesitancy as to the salvation of infants in a generic sense, Fuller distinguishes between four- and five-year-old “infants” who can have a saving faith, and those infants who cannot hear the gospel and thus cannot be saved.

John A. Broadus, who was the second president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, also argued for the conversion of young children. He states: “We hold that the Christian Church ought to consist only of persons making a credible profession of conversion, of faith in Christ. These *may include children, even comparatively young children*, for God be thanked that these do often give credible evidence of faith in Christ! But in the very nature of the case, they cannot include infants.”²⁶

Baptist pastor, theologian, and President of Mercer University, J. L. Dagg makes some of the most direct comments dealing with an age of initiation. Expounding upon Ephesians 6:1, Dagg argues for the full membership of children within the church stating

The probability is that the children whom Paul addressed were members of the church. The command, “Obey your parents in the Lord,” Eph. 6: 1. is so expressed, as apparently to imply that the obligation was to be felt and acknowledged by them, because of their relation to the Lord. The children to whom Paul addressed this command must have possessed intelligence to apprehend its meaning, and piety to feel the force of the motive presented in these words, “For this is well pleasing unto the Lord.”... 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*. The argument that the children were so young as to need the care and discipline of their parents to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, does not prove that they were destitute of personal piety.²⁷

Dagg’s argument that young children can not only be saved, but also should be afforded the

²⁵Ibid., 117

²⁶John Broadus, *The Duty of Baptists to Teach Their Distinctive Views*, (1880; repr., Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2011), Kindle, location 54-57.

²⁷John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Nashville: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857), 9 :1-2.

rights of church membership that are granted only through baptism because of Ephesians 6:1-4 closely parallels the arguments of this dissertation in chapter 2 in its treatment of this passage.

Therefore, for Dagg, young children who exhibit “personal piety” are not only to be baptized, but also are to be part of a regenerate church.

Northern Baptist theologian and seminary president Augustus H. Strong also provides a fuller picture of Baptists’ views of children and baptism in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an 1865 sermon, Strong argues that “the age of possible conversion begins from the first moment of moral consciousness,” which varies from child to child with for some it being “five, seven, ten or twelve. If he is old enough to sin consciously and deliberately, he is old enough to be an assured partaker in the benefits of Christ’s salvation.” He continues, noting that “the natural possibilities for good are greatest at the moment of first unfolding of moral consciousness and are less every moment thereafter.” Therefore, he argues that it imperative for parents to disciple their children from their earliest days. As soon as children come to faith “but as soon as the child claims credible evidence of such faith, his right to admission to Christ’s church is indisputable.” In response to arguments that Scripture is silent as to the conversion of children, he notes the early piety of Joseph, Samuel, Abijah, Josiah, Daniel, John the Baptist and Timothy.²⁸ Clearly, Strong believes children are valid candidates for conversion and baptism.

To this early sermon, Strong offers a more developed treatment of the development of children in his *Systematic Theology*. Writing decades after the above-noted sermon and just after the turn of the twentieth century, Strong gives three clear divisions in the development of children within the context of the legal status of children. He states

Minority is legally divided into three separate tenets.

1. From the first to the seventh year, the age of complete irresponsibility, in which the child

²⁸Augustus Strong, “The Conversion of Children,” *The Watchman Examiner* (September 23, 1965): 584-85.

cannot commit a crime.

2. From the seventh to the fourteenth year, the age of partial responsibility, in which intelligent consciousness of the consequences of actions is not assumed to exist, but may be proved in individual instances.

3. From the fourteenth to the twenty-first year is the age of discretion. This is the age in which the person is responsible for criminal action, may choose a guardian, make a will, marry with consent of parents, make business contracts not wholly void. This person is not yet permitted fully to assume the free man's position in the State. The church however is not bound by these hard and fast rules. Wherever it has evidence of conversion and of Christian character, it may admit to baptism and church membership, even at a very tender age.²⁹

Early in his life, Strong clearly, passionately argues for the possibility of the conversion of children even young children. Here at a later point in his life, his views have become more nuanced. Clearly, his primary concern in the above-mentioned quote is the accountability of the child before the legal system. Still, Strong has not abandoned his earlier position. The church is not the state and as a result, once it has evidence that a child is a Christian, he is to be admitted into its membership.

James Petigru Boyce, the founding president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, addresses children in an appendix to his *Abstracts of Theology*. While his direct treatment of baptism is brief, he does, however, make several points about the relationship of children to the church. First, Boyce indicates that children have always had the ability to learn about God, stating “belief in God has been handed down from parent to child throughout all past generations...this is the natural manner in which every child among us learns about God.”³⁰ Thus, for Boyce, children are valid candidates for discipleship.

²⁹While Strong is not a Southern Baptist, he does have a strong influence upon Southern Baptists, especially within the reformed strain of Southern Baptist life. The above quote is found in Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace Book Designed for the use of Theological Students*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 321-22.

³⁰James Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), chapter 2, 5-6.

As a result, it is unsurprising that Boyce desires to help parents and churches in the conversion and discipleship of their children. Specifically, he wants to make sure that that children ages 10-12 are theologically grounded. Therefore, he provides a new catechism as an appendix to the *Abstract*. Therein, he notes that “Keach’s Catechism...is scarcely used at all... [because] it is too difficult for children. In the present work...my aim has been to bring the truth taught within the comprehension of children of ten to twelve years old and upwards.”³¹ While this argument of this dissertation is that children younger than ten can be converted, Boyce’s preface to his catechism is still significant. Specifically, if one accepts the hard to prove assertion that the average of baptism during this era was somewhere between 15 and 20, then Boyce is arguing that younger children are able to be saved and baptized.

While Fuller, Broadus, Dagg, Strong, and, to a lesser extent, Boyce all directly address the theological status of children, other influential Baptists leaders of the era views on either children or the immediacy of baptism are less clear. Still, their views imply a positive view as to the possibility of child conversion and baptism. For example, influential Baptist pastor and newspaper editor J. R. Graves does not deal directly with a child’s relation to the church, but instead indirectly addresses the issues raised by this dissertation in his theology of baptism. He states that baptism “is a visible expression or declaration that faith exists, it simply expresses or professes...faith.”³² He continues, stating that “our baptism authenticates our faith, [and] declares us as believers.”³³ Ultimately, “salvation is essential to baptism,”³⁴ and if a saved person

³¹Boyce, *Abstract*, chapter 43, 1

³²J. R Graves, *The Relation of Baptism to Salvation* (Texarkana, TX: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1881), 41.

³³Ibid., 43

³⁴J. R Graves, *Christian Baptism* (Texarkana, TX: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1881), 35.

chooses not to be baptized they are ashamed of Christ and are acting in disobedience.³⁵

Graves does briefly treat the baptism of children while addressing paedobaptism. He states, “to place baptism upon...an unconscious infant is to pervert the ordinance and to teach a falsehood, which if the...child so baptized should believe, would insure the loss of the soul.”³⁶ Graves elaborates on this idea explaining that children baptized as infants will develop a false sense of security at a young age. Dependence upon such theology damns the child early in life.³⁷ Given that children can gain a false assurance and be damned from such at an early age, according to Graves, it follows that for Graves (although he does not directly state this) that accountability occurs at an early age. Taking his assumption of early accountability together with his instance that a refusal by a believer to be baptized is a sign of disobedience, it follows logically that children can become Christians at an early age (since they can be damned at an early age) and if and when they do so, they should be baptized.

Another influential theologian whose views on the baptism of children can only be ascertained through incidental references is B. H. Carroll, a Texas pastor and founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Carroll states clearly his church’s baptismal requirements. He “requires...converts applying for baptism evidence...that he is a child of God by regeneration, is a consistent believer, pardoned, saved. Without this evidence we will not baptize him.”³⁸ Carroll, like all Baptists, insists that baptism occurs after salvation. Carroll also tells of a Methodist minister who “baptized a bright and promising young boy.” Carroll, while

³⁵Ibid., 36

³⁶Graves, *The Relation of Baptism to Salvation*, 44

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸B. H. Carroll, B.H, *Defending the Faith and Practice of Baptist*, comp. J. W. Crowder (Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Seminary, 1957), 75-76.

not condoning Methodist baptism, nevertheless seems to indicate that such a boy is an appropriate candidate for baptism.³⁹

Edmund Hiscox also shows a similar openness to the baptism of children. In addressing the paedobaptist argument that household baptisms included children, Hiscox states:

If in those households any children were baptized, they were old enough to receive the gospel and to believe on Christ, and were thus suitable subjects for the ordinance, and for church fellowship. For it is said, “They believed, and gladly received the word.” There are thousands of Baptist churches into whose fellowship whole households have been baptized parents and children, and perhaps others connected with them. But all were old enough to believe and to make profession of their faith. So evidently it was in these households.⁴⁰

While Hiscox does not specify the age of these children,⁴¹ his claim that “There are thousands of Baptist churches into whose fellowship whole households have been baptized parents and children” indicates that many late nineteenth century Baptists understood household baptism to include children.

In contrast to the theologians and scholars mentioned above, Southern Baptist pastor and graduate of the Southern Baptist Seminary, Henry R. McClendon, explicitly stands against the baptism of children. He looks to the church father Tertullian. McClendon states that “the earliest

³⁹B. H. Carroll, B.H. *The Ten Dollar Gold Piece and the Baptized Boy*, comp. J. W. Crowder (Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Seminary, 1957), 104-107.

⁴⁰Edward Hiscox, *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1903), 137-38.

⁴¹Determining the age Hiscox has in view for children is particularly challenging. In his discussion of the historical rise of paedobaptism, he uses the terms infant and child interchangeably. Therein he notes a quote from Tertullian about the rise of infant baptism in the early third century A.D. as the first possible allusion to its practice. Such was lamentable for Tertullian, from whom Hiscox argues that infant baptism was at best rare at the start of the third century and was thus a historical innovation. Yet, Hiscox then shifts his focus regarding Tertullian’s quote and calls into question if Tertullian had actual infant in view in his baptismal lament. He states, “When the baptism of children began, it was not that of unconscious infants at all, as is now practiced, but, as Bunsen declares, of ‘little growing children, from six to ten years old.’” It is unclear whether Hiscox views the baptism of six to ten year olds that potentially originates in Tertullian’s day as an acceptable practice or not. Still, such children are contrasted by Hiscox with “unconscious infants” indicating that Hiscox views children as young as six as self-aware and thus potentially as appropriate candidates for conversion and baptism. Hiscox, *The Standard Manual*, 132-33.

known allusion to the baptism of ‘children’ is found in Tertullian.” Tertullian, he says, does not use the word for infants but rather for small children—”the baptism [of which] he opposes.”⁴² As a result, McClendon rejects the baptism of young children.

Age-Related Demographic Trends among Early Southern Baptists

Unfortunately, when one turns from the study of individual views, to larger demographic trends, the average age of baptism during this time period is once again difficult to determine. Despite this fact, there does seem to be some indication that the age of baptism was higher during this time. Through an examination of the biographies of pastors in several states, it becomes evident that most of the pastors mentioned in these biographies were baptized between the ages of 15 and 20.⁴³ Yet, even while an older age of baptism may have been the norm, there were exceptions. For example, Williams Ferguson, a Missouri Baptist pastor, who “when but a lad was converted...and was baptized into the fellowship of Good Hope Church.”⁴⁴ Mississippi pastor W. E. Dear “while a small boy accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his savior and was baptized...into the fellowship of Mountain Creek Baptist church.”⁴⁵ He could have been no more than nine at the time. Further, as the testimonies of pastors from this era are reviewed, while most were not baptized until they were older, many seem to have had some sort of realization of sin at a much younger age.

⁴²H.R McClendon, *The Bible on Baptism* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Book Concern, 1896), 297.

⁴³See the biographical sketches in Foster, *Mississippi Baptist Preachers*; Maple, Rider, *Missouri Baptist Biography*; and Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee Pioneer Baptist Preachers*.

⁴⁴Maple and Rider, *Missouri Baptist Biography*, 121

⁴⁵Foster, *Mississippi Baptist Preachers*, 192

Samuel Southard, in his book *Pastoral Evangelism*, claims that the age of conversion and baptism has been dropping since the late nineteenth century.⁴⁶ He specifically cites the work of Edmund Starbuck in his *Psychology of Religion* as providing definitive demographic proof that the age of conversion and baptism was higher in 1899⁴⁷ than it was in Southard's day. Southard asserts from such "that Starbuck presents sixteen as the average age of conversion."⁴⁸

Table 3-1⁴⁹

		AGE— 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25																			
		GROUPS OF CASES.																			
Females,	1.	From old Study ¹	.	1	4	11	16	16	9	3	15	5	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2.	From W.C.T.U.'s	.	3	5	6	7	13	9	12	16	7	10	6	10	1	0	0	0	0	0
	3.	From M.E.'s	.	1	0	4	7	12	6	5	8	8	5	2	6	3	2	0	2	3	
	4.	Other churches	.	3	4	8	8	9	9	9	16	4	8	6	3	1	0	1	2	2	
	5.	Revival cases	.	3	3	7	10	7	3	1	11	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	
	6.	Not revival	.	0	1	5	5	6	7	2	4	5	5	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	
	7.	Total Females	.	5	7	20	26	31	25	17	34	15	21	10	11	6	3	1	4	5	
Males,	8.	From old study	.	1	1	2	3	3	4	9	3	2	5	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	
	9.	Amer. soldiers	.	0	3	2	6	3	8	14	18	16	15	9	6	6	4	2	3	4	
	10.	Drew Theol. M.E.'s	.	14	19	30	51	45	64	60	89	88	72	56	48	39	25	16	8	7	
	11.	Other Meth.'s	.	1	5	2	2	5	9	12	17	10	11	5	4	7	1	2	1	3	
	12.	Other churches	.	0	0	5	7	2	5	9	12	14	10	10	5	1	4	2	2	1	
	13.	Revival cases	.	1	1	6	6	6	9	14	18	13	13	8	3	6	3	1	3	3	
	14.	Not revival	.	0	2	0	3	1	6	9	5	5	6	9	4	3	1	3	0	1	
	15.	Total Males	.	15	27	38	64	56	85	89	121	114	45	77	58	47	31	23	11	12	
		AGE— 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25																			

TABLE I.—Showing the number of conversions which occur each year in several groups of persons.

C

Table 3-1 shows Starbuck's sampling. From a baptistic perspective several problems quickly emerge in applying his data to any assertion of a declining average age of conversion and

⁴⁶Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism*, 86.

⁴⁷Edwin Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (London: Walter Scott, 1899), 33ff.

⁴⁸Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism*, 86.

⁴⁹Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion*, 34. Starbuck's work is in the public domain.

baptism. First, Starbuck's sampling does not directly address Baptists. Given that Southard applies Starbuck's data to assert a decline in the average age of baptism amongst Baptists, this presents a major obstacle to Southard's assertion that the average age of baptism has been declining. Second, the above table is taken directly from Starbuck. It shows that Southard only included data from persons between the ages of nine and 25. Elsewhere in his report, he includes graphs showing that he had respondents at both younger and older ages,⁵⁰ but he never provides data about how many individuals fell into these other age ranges. Further, Starbuck's interest was not in calculating an average age for conversion (he does not even include one), rather it was in showing common periods in life when individuals made conversion-like decisions.⁵¹ As a result, Melvin Douglas Clark, who, despite arguing against the baptism of children, concedes in his dissertation that "Starbuck's data may not be relied upon for an average age at conversion among American Protestants in general and among Southern Baptists in particular."⁵²

Ultimately, a pattern emerges during these early years of Southern Baptist life. While the actual baptismal practices of Southern Baptists and their children are difficult to discern demographically during this era, it is clear that among Southern Baptists' most prominent academics and leaders at a minimum widely permitted and perhaps even endorsed the baptism of young children. Fuller, Broadus, Boyce, Dagg, and Strong all argue for the baptism of children at an age younger than others have asserted was common during this era. Further, Graves and Carroll imply that young children can be converted. Additionally, Baptists theologians such as Graves and Fuller directly tie baptism to obedience possibly even functioning as the profession

⁵⁰Ibid., 28, 32.

⁵¹Ibid., 30-31

⁵²Melvin Douglas Clark, "The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), 53.

one makes in response to salvation. To claim, as John Hammett does, “that Baptists prior to the twentieth century were slow to see childhood decisions as faith commitments warranting baptism” completely ignores the writings of several prominent nineteenth century Southern Baptists.⁵³

Southern Baptists and the Baptism of Children: 1900-1950

At the turn of the century, Southern Baptists were a people in transition. They had successfully weathered a pair of theological thunderstorms caused first by Crawford Toy and then by William Whitsitt. The convention was embarking on a financial rollercoaster with its \$75 million dollar campaign. Over \$90 million would be pledged to the campaign, but only a fraction of that would actually be collected. As a result the convention’s agencies would fall deeply into debt. Further, Southern Baptists would adopt their first confession of faith, the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, which was built upon the New Hampshire Confession. In it, Southern Baptists officially defined baptism.⁵⁴ In this setting, a new generation of pastors and theologians addressed how baptism related to children.

⁵³Hammett substantiates this by claiming that delaying the baptism of children until late adolescences at the earliest was common amongst the early Anabaptists and by noting the pattern of eighteenth century Baptists church to strongly question those churches in their association that baptized anyone prior to late adolescences. While as noted in a footnote above, both of these claims lie outside the scope of this dissertation, they do provide an area for additional historical research regarding the baptismal practices of children by subsequent scholars. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel , 2005), 272.

⁵⁴They stated, “Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The act is a symbol of our faith in a crucified, buried and risen Savior. It is prerequisite to the privileges of a church relation...”

The Views of Southern Baptists Regarding Children and Baptism

It would be hard to understate E. Y. Mullins influence on Baptist life in the first half of the twentieth century. Mullins served as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and was the primary author of the SBC's first confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1925). His *Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Christian Faith* stands as perhaps the most significant Baptist theological work of his generation. Mullins's primary contribution (for better and worse) to Southern Baptist theology was his emphasis on Christian experience as providing an appropriate foundation for Christian belief through the doctrine of soul competency.⁵⁵

Within the *Axioms of Religion*, Mullins includes a chapter on Christian nurture. After noting the contradictions inherent in Calvinistic understandings of paedobaptism⁵⁶ he turns his attention to the Christian child. His entire discussion is oriented around a dialogue with Horace Bushnell's understanding of Christian nurture.⁵⁷ Specifically, Mullins rejects Bushnell's position that an infant's unity with his family requires that the infant be united to the church just as the parent is united to the church. Affirming credobaptism, he argues that "baptism belongs to the stage of intelligence and personality, to the stage of tutorial influences, and not to the stage of

⁵⁵See Malcolm Yarnell, "Changing Baptist Understandings of the Royal Priesthood," in *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism*, ed. Deryck W. Lovegrove (London: Routledge, 2002), 236-52.

⁵⁶They "insist that man's action is not required by God's grace. Irresistible grace will sweep the elect into the kingdom without co-operation on their part. This, of course, simply ignores human freedom. Infant baptism also assumes that grace operates without the co-operation of the will of the child, but with a striking difference. In the one case it is insisted that we must not intermeddle with God's plans of persuading sinners to believe, while in the other it is urged that we must intermeddle and assist God's decree by bringing the infant to the baptismal font." Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 167.

⁵⁷See the introduction to the previous chapter of this dissertation for more on Bushnell's views.

unconscious impressions.”⁵⁸ As a result, a child must become cognitively aware of his environment and of his sin in prior to conversion and baptism.

As a result, Mullins argues, contra Bushnell, that a child must become conscious of his own sin prior to salvation and baptism in order to come to salvation. While children may avoid grosser forms of sin, it is important to note that intellectual assent to the Gospel is insufficient to bring about the Christian life. As a result, Mullins rejects the practice of recitation of the catechism (contra Boyce?) as evidence for salvation.⁵⁹ Instead, children should be baptized when “there is recognized the presence in the child of a permanent Christian motive and struggle.”⁶⁰

While not stating it directly, Mullins implies that this occurs at the age of 12. He notes that

Jesus as a boy of twelve, upon the occasion of his first visit to the temple, ...[felt] for the first time the great and wondrous significance of the Jewish system...upon [his] sensitive soul...Doubtless there was an awakening in his soul, a calling forth thus of the powers that were in him, and a quickening into a new sense of his mission and destiny...Even so should it be with childhood ever—expose the soul of the child to the truth, surround it with every incentive to holy living, permit it to respond to grace in the home circle.⁶¹

Mullins thus equates Jesus’ experience in the temple with the awakening of a child’s soul.

Although not stating it directly, in so doing Mullins implies that 12 stands as an age of accountability.

From this point, Mullins closes his discussion of children by noting the need to bring the elements of Christian character into the child’s conscious experience as early as possible. This

⁵⁸Mullins, *Axioms*, 175.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 177,

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 178.

⁶¹Mullins’s language here is problematic. While Jesus clearly learned and grew in both wisdom and stature with God and man (Luke 2:52), Mullins’s assumption that this is Jesus’ first encounter with the Jewish system or that he was only at this age able to grasp the significance of the Jewish system go significantly beyond what they text actually says (Luke 2:41-52). Further, Mullins’s language about Jesus’ “sensitive soul” is at best sentimentalism. *Ibid.*, 182.

occurs through the child's experience of religion, art, and science.⁶² Given the surrounding references to science and to Jesus' temple experience, Mullins is not contradicting himself. Rather, he is arguing that children should be nurtured in knowledge of Christianity and as soon as they are conscious of the experience of religion (which apparently occurs at 12 at the earliest), they are valid candidates for conversion and baptism.

Another significant Baptist theologian during the first half of the twentieth century was W. T. Conner. Conner is generally recognized as the preeminent systematic theologian of the SBC's second seminary, Southwestern, during this era. Conner addresses children within the context of anthropology. He reminds Baptists that, "for a child to be reared in the church...without regeneration is a perilous thing."⁶³ Such runs the risk of anesthetizing children to the gospel message. As a result, it would seem to follow for Conner that children are appropriate candidates for conversion.

Yet, in commenting on the appropriate candidate for baptism, Conner calls this conclusion into question. In noting the relationship between water baptism and church membership, Conner notes the apostle Paul's tendency to "address the members of the churches as 'saints' or in some similar way, showing that the members of the churches to whom he wrote were adult Christians," to which Conner immediately adds the following caveat: these adults were "not necessarily all grown people but old enough to be called 'saints' and so forth."⁶⁴ Conner's language here unfortunately lacks precision in regards to the question of this dissertation. Clearly, his language places significant distance between him and paedobaptism.

⁶²Ibid., 182-83

⁶³ W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937), 261.

⁶⁴The second sentence exists within a parenthesis as a caveat to the idea that only adults were members of the church. Ibid., 282

Yet it is unclear as to what age or developmental restrictions, if any, Conner is placing on baptism.

J. M. Frost, head of the Baptist Sunday School Board (the Southern Baptist publishing arm), produced two treatises on baptism. Within them, Frost does not directly address the issue of the age of baptism. He does, however, address both childhood salvation and the timing of baptism. Specifically, he dedicates a whole chapter to the subject matter of the relation between baptism and conversion: “The New Birth and then Baptism.”⁶⁵ Frost stresses that baptism’s “prime purpose...is obedience to Christ, an acknowledgement of his reign in the new life.”⁶⁶ Further, baptism “cannot be overemphasized so long as we count it the act of obedience of a saved person.”⁶⁷ Frost does give an order to when baptism should fall in a new believer’s life, pointing out that baptism should be preceded by regeneration, repentance, faith, and the remission of sins. “All this comes before baptism, independent of it, and in baptism finds an outward expression.”⁶⁸ Within this context of salvation first and then baptism, Frost provides a significant illustration for this study. He speaks of a “young boy” reading through the first three chapters of the Gospel of John. Upon reading John 3:7, “the boy leaped to his feet, rushed into the house shouting as he came, ‘O mother, mother, something has happened; something has happened.’ That was the new birth; it was of God.”⁶⁹ Within the context of this example of child conversion, Frost states, “then baptism.” In light of this example, it is clear that for Frost,

⁶⁵J. M. Frost, *The Moral Dignity of Baptism* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1905), 64-65.

⁶⁶ J. M Frost, *Evangelism and Baptism* (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1916), 41.

⁶⁷Ibid., 45

⁶⁸Ibid., 64-66, 67

⁶⁹Ibid., 64-65.

children are able cognitively to understand conversion. Further, when converted such children should be baptized. There is no support for the ideas of baptismal delay or the inability of children within Frost's theology.

Like Frost, O. C. S. Wallace, the Southern Baptist pastor of First Baptist Baltimore, emphasized obedience in relation to the timing of baptism. While Wallace fails to offer a specific age for baptism, he does emphasize that "the meaning of the ordinance suggests the priority of this duty."⁷⁰ For Wallace, baptism is then the first action a new believer takes after salvation. Therefore, there is no room for baptismal delay for Wallace.

George Truett, the famous pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, emphasizes the need for a child's salvation within the context of a sermon on the importance of training a child in the ways of the Lord.⁷¹ He does this through asking his audience a question: "How can parents be comfortable and satisfied when the children are not anchored to our Savior and Lord?"⁷² Next, Truett presents a testimony of a man who had pleaded and prayed with his son "to come to Christ." Truett goes on to explain how the prayer was answered. "It was just one week [from the time the prayers were offered] until I baptized that boy in this baptistery, upon profession of the boy's faith in Christ."⁷³ Truett, then, believes that parents should worry about the salvation of their young children. Parents should pray for their children's salvation not in an abstract sense, but with a sense of urgency. Upon salvation, Truett's example shows that he made every effort to baptize children quickly.

⁷⁰ O. C. S. Wallace, *What Baptists Believe* (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board, c. 1913), 155-56.

⁷¹ George Truett, *The Highest Welfare of the Home, 20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, vol. 8, ed. Clyde E. Fant and William M. Pinson (Waco: Word, 1971), 168.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 170

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 171

One of the most comprehensive statements on the baptism of children during this era of Southern Baptist life comes from Baptist pastor Joshua Wills in his *Believer's Manual on Baptism*. Therein, he argues that parents and churches, while not having an obligation to baptize children, do have an obligation “to train up children in the ‘nurture and admonition of the Lord.’”⁷⁴ Building upon this idea, Wills further points out that children,

can accept the blessed truth which parents affectionately inculcate, and [as a result] many instances of early piety have occurred in every age, and genuine conversions occur among children of tender years [as] the direct result of parental instructions....Hence the duty of every parent to children is not primarily baptism, but training and instructing them in order to their nurture in the Lord, enabling them in the exercise of faith to understand; they believe on the Lord Jesus, which is the prerequisite for baptism, not reversing “the order of the day,”...it is well to observe the New Testament teaching: first train, then the child will believe, and upon their confession of the Lord Jesus administer the ordinance of baptism.⁷⁵

Willis, then, emphasizes the temporal priority of conversion over baptism against paedobaptist practices. Yet, even while encouraging Baptists parents to make sure that their children are converted, Willis notes that once they believe, then baptism.

A final well-known Southern Baptist voice from this era is that of New Testament A. T. Robertson. Within his treatment of the doctrine of baptism, there is a brief but powerful note relevant to this study within his criticism of the evangelical paedobaptism. Therein, he states that paedobaptists “lay more stress upon baptism than Baptist do, since they will not wait till the child is converted.”⁷⁶ He goes on, stating that paedobaptism is “a relic of fears that infants would perish unless they were baptized.”⁷⁷ Robertson argues that conversion is the prerequisite for

⁷⁴ Joshua E. Wills, *Believer's Manual on Baptism* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1910), 94.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 96, 99

⁷⁶ A. T. Robertson, *The Spiritual Interpretation of the Ordinances* in *The Best of A.T. Robertson*, comp. Timothy George and Denise George (1911; repr., Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 210.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

baptism. Conversely for Robertson, once the child is converted, then baptize. Additionally, there is a note of caution in Robertson's exhortation, specifically parents who urge baptism for their unconverted young children should be reminded that their young child will not perish if they are not baptized.

Age-Related Demographic Trends among Baptists 1900-1950

Despite the fact that Southern Baptists did not collect data on the age at which individuals were baptized during this era, some have argued that there is a steady decline in the average age of conversion and baptism amongst Baptists during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, Gary Deane in his Doctorate of Education dissertation from Southwestern makes similar claims to Southard's claims above. His dissertation cites a slightly different set of studies to substantiate his claim that "there has been a growing tendency of children to profess a religious conversion in Baptist churches at a continuously earlier age."⁷⁸ He bases this assertion on the work of Paul E. Johnson. Johnson, writing in 1955, compiled five separate studies on the age of conversion.

Table 3-2⁷⁹

Age of Conversion			
Studies	Date	No. Of Cases	Average Age
Starbuck	1899	1,265	16.4
Coe	1900	1,784	16.4
Hall	1904	4,054	16.6
Athearn	1922	6,194	14.6
Clark	1929	2,174	12.7

⁷⁸Gary T. Deane, "An Investigation of the Child's Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development" (EdD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 6-7.

⁷⁹Paul E. Johnson, *Psychology of Religion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1955), 127.

Given that Starbuck's study has been noted as inadequate in the above section, it is appropriate to now examine the studies of Coe, Hall, Althearn, and Clark. Coe's study proves problematic because, as he notes, he is not doing an actual study. Rather he is simply taking Starbuck's data and combining it with the data of a second study on conversions in mystical religions.⁸⁰ As a result, like Starbuck, Coe's data has no bearing on the average age of conversion amongst Baptists.

In a similar fashion, Hall's numbers are also derived from a combination of other studies. Of his 4,054 cases, 2,652 are from a survey of Methodist-Episcopal ministers, 756 are alumni of the seminary of Drew University, a Methodist institution, 100 are from Starbuck's research, and 526 are from a questionnaire sent to YMCA members.⁸¹ Again, Baptists are not among the sampling, and as a result this study has no bearing on the average of conversion amongst Southern Baptists at the turn of the century.

Althearn and his colleagues offer a study of Sunday School and religious education methodologies used in the state of Indiana. Althearn's study was wide ranging. It measured the education levels of teachers in both secular and religious schools. Further, the study carefully measured the religious knowledge of the New and Old Testaments, as well of Christian ethics,

⁸⁰Johnson cites Coe's work, *The Psychology of Religion*, from which the above methodology is mentioned. A second study from Coe is found in *The Spiritual Life*. Therein, Coe combines Starbuck's data with a second study he himself did. He does not identify who his participants were except to note that he interviewed 272 individuals at a conference of the Methodist-Episcopal Church as well as an additional 82 men whose denominational background he does not identify but of whom 51 have gone on to experience a second religious awakening leading to a state of Christian perfection. Given Baptists reject the idea of perfectionism and the higher life, it is a safe inference from this to say that Coe is not working with Baptists regardless of which study his work on Christian conversion is referenced. George Albert Coe, *The Psychology of Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1916), 152-74; idem, *The Spiritual Life: Studies in the Science of Religion* (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1914), 29-55.

⁸¹G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (Charlottesville, VA: D. Appleton, 1905), 2:290.

according to age. Yet, he apparently does not directly measure the ages of conversion.⁸² Further, while Johnson cites Althearn, he does not cite a specific page or even volume number from Althearn's studies.⁸³ As a result, it is at best unclear how Johnson derives his numbers from Althearn's study. Additionally, Althearn's study is of Protestants in the state of Indiana. During the 1920s there were no Southern Baptist churches in Indiana, and Baptists as a whole were underrepresented in Indiana in comparison to their representation on a national level.⁸⁴ Taking these factors together, Althearn's study, like Hall's and Starbuck's before it, is unhelpful in calculating the average age of conversion for Southern Baptists.

The final study cited in defense of the premise that the average of baptism has been declined significant during the first part of the twentieth century is that of E. H. Clark. Whereas Southard, unlike Deane, ignores Althearn's, Hall's, and Coe's studies in his claim of a declining age of conversion, he does interact with Clark's study.⁸⁵ Clark's study is the most wide-ranging of the four in that he surveys over 2,000 individuals of a wide variety of denominational background, and, as a result, includes Baptists in his sampling. He sent questionnaires to college students who self-identified as religious and asked them a host of questions including their age of

⁸²This claim is made with some hesitancy. Althearn's study spans three volumes and is well over 1,000 pages in total length. Upon a review of digitally scanned pdfs of all three volumes, nowhere does this project deal with the idea of conversion. Indeed, the only references to the words "conversion" or "convert" in the whole dissertation are found within the context of representative Sunday School literature. As a result, Johnson's numbers related to conversions cannot be verified. Walter S. Althearn et al., *The Indiana Survey of Religious Education: The Religious Education of Protestants in an American Commonwealth* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922-1924), 2:388-92.

⁸³Johnson, *Religious Psychology*, 127 n. 21.

⁸⁴Althearn, *Indiana Survey*, 1:42-43

⁸⁵Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism*, 86.

conversion as well as their denominational identity. Amongst his respondents, Clark heard back from numerous Baptists.⁸⁶

Clark's data is certainly more useful than the other studies mentioned above. Still its applicability for Baptists is limited. First, since the target audience was college students, those converted later in life were not included. As a result, this study has a tendency to push the average age of baptism down.⁸⁷ Second, given that Southern Baptists were a largely rural and agrarian people in the first part of the twentieth century,⁸⁸ in only interviewing college-educated individuals, the applicability of Clark's study to Southern Baptists as a whole is unclear.⁸⁹ Third, Clark's calculations for an average age of conversion fail to distinguish between denominational groupings. As a result, Clark's survey is too narrowly focused to provide an accurate picture of to the ages at which Baptists were being baptized.

In summary, this section has shown that arguments contending that the average of baptism for Southern Baptists dropped throughout the first half of the twentieth century are flawed. Most of the studies that are relied upon to make this claim do not account for Baptists. While Clark's study does note something of the conversion patterns of Baptists, his findings present at best a limited picture of the conversion practices of Baptists during this era. As a result, Hammett's, Southard's, and Deane's claims that there were increasing numbers or

⁸⁶Elmer T. Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening* (New York: MacMillan, 1929), 116.

⁸⁷Clark, *Religious Awakening*, 27-28. See also Melvin Douglas Clark, *The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice*, 54.

⁸⁸Rufus B. Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900*, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 1.

⁸⁹As Clark himself acknowledges. Clark, *Religious Awakenings*, 28.

percentages of young children being baptized during this era should be rejected because of a lack of evidence.

Additionally during this era, direct treatments of the relation of children to conversion or baptism are rare. What can be known of the views of leading Baptists at this time is largely known through inference. Mullins indirectly argues that children are incapable of conversion prior to the age of 12. Conner argues that children must be regenerated before entering a church and that upon regeneration, should be baptized. Frost and Wallace argue that any regenerated person has an obligation to be baptized. Frost notes that young children can be converted. Truett and Wills believe children are valid candidates for baptism while in contrast Robertson cautions patience, waiting for the child to be ready to be converted. Still, once converted, children should be baptized for Robertson. Based on this evidence, it is follow that while some Baptists may have practiced baptismal delay or counseled that children did not need to be converted, none of the surveyed individuals goes so far as to explicitly argue for such limits or to insist that such limits should be rigid. In contrast, other Baptists assumes that even young children are valid candidates for conversion and baptism.

Southern Baptist and the Baptism of Children: 1950-2000

The second half of the twentieth century proved to be a turbulent era for Southern Baptist. The era opened with great promise in the 1950s. The convention grew at a rapid clip in terms of both overall baptism and total membership. Still, the decade planted the seeds of controversy. The firing of 11 professors from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for insubordination on doctrinal grounds led to the founding of two, more progressive Southern Baptist Seminaries, one in Wake Forest, NC (Southeastern) the other in Kansas City, MO

(Midwestern). In 1961, Midwestern Old Testament professor Ralph Elliott released *The Origins of Genesis*. The book generated significant conflict amongst Southern Baptist as it simply assumed that first eleven chapters of Genesis were mythological. As a result, the Southern Baptist Convention passed an updated version of their faith statement in the Baptist Faith and Message in 1963.⁹⁰ While this confession attempted to elevate a more conservative interpretation of Scripture within the convention, others found room within the document to hold to more moderate views of the Bible. As a result, before the century would close, the Southern Baptist Convention would find itself engaged in a “Holy War” over the Bible. On one side were the self-described moderates arguing for freedom to interpret the Bible according to the principle of soul-competency and higher-critical methodologies. On the other side were the self-described conservatives arguing for an inerrant Bible which was to be interpreted literally and which should have absolute authority over Baptist faith and practice.⁹¹

Interestingly, although controversy over the validity of Scripture consumed the convention, proponents of both a younger and older age of baptism are found within both the moderate and conservative camps. Further, this period saw a wealth of new materials directly addressing the appropriateness of baptizing children.

⁹⁰ The revised BFM contained two new lines on baptism stating that baptism “is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead...” Most germane to the subject of children is this revision’s emphasize on baptism as an act of obedience.

⁹¹ Arguing for one perspective over and the other the moderate-conservative conflict that shook the convention stands outside the scope of this dissertation. While the two camps would label one another as liberals and fundamentalist, ultimately this dissertation prefers the terms moderate and liberal as these are the terms each camp chose for themselves. For an overview of this conflict and the forces that shaped it from a conservative perspective, see Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000). Nancy Ammerman offers a more moderate perspective from within the middle of the conflict in Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

The Views of Moderate Southern Baptists Regarding Children and Baptism

The moderate⁹² Southern Baptist pastor and historian William L. Lumpkin argued against baptismal delay. He believes that the meaning of baptism was altered by the structure of the catechism. He writes “in the third century...[as] it became fashionable to speak of the ‘mysteries of the faith’,...the ancient catechetical structure was erected...[causing] the character of baptism [to] change from that of an outward act symbolizing a transformed inner life to that of a ceremonial ritual act which was held to effect regeneration in its own right.”⁹³ For this reason, Lumpkin contends that in the catechism “the groundwork [was] laid for infant baptism [as] a new kind of initiation ritual.”⁹⁴ In contrast to the catechism, Lumpkin points to the Didache of the second century. In the Didache, the baptismal “candidate is clearly a believer who is ready to acknowledge the word of faith.” Lumpkin argues that the delayed baptism found in the catechetical process ultimately leads to infant baptism while the baptism rooted in the simple confession of faith is scriptural. For the believing child, this would mean that baptism is not to be delayed.

In contrast to Lumpkin stands Dale Moody, a professor of theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Moody rejects both the baptism and conversion of children explicitly. He equates child baptism with infant baptism saying that he has “theological issues [with] the practice of child baptism (paedobaptism) among Baptists.”⁹⁵ Instead of baptizing

⁹²Evidence seems to suggest that Lumpkin would classify himself as a moderate. For example, the church he pastored is now part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and he maintained close ties to the University of Richmond, a moderate Baptist school.

⁹³William L. Lumpkin, *Meditations on Christ Baptism* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1976), 18.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Paraphrase is Moody's. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 460.

children claiming conversion, Moody argues for a restored catechetical system. He points out that while “both catechumens and the faithful were within the body of the Church of Christ, the baptism of catechumens...was a further incorporation into the body which increased communion.”⁹⁶ For Moody, children expressing a desire to be converted or baptized are to first be included in the church through a catechetical process. Such a process provides a safeguard to the communion of the church.

In his book, *Baptism: Foundation for Christian Unity*, Moody expands on this argument. He states “that Southern Baptist theology and practice are badly out of balance” when it comes to the baptism of children.⁹⁷ Parents “treat their [unbaptized] children in a different manner from the unbelieving adult,” by which he means that the child’s need of baptism is not as strong as that of the adult’s.⁹⁸ Children do not need baptism because psychologically they are not ready to commit to the church. He explains, “a more adequate understanding of child psychology and the value of ancient catechumenate” is needed so that churches will recognize that children are cognitively incapable of responding to the gospel. This more adequate understanding of the nature of children and conversion will keep younger children out of the baptistery. Children should be delayed from baptism and church membership until they complete the catechumenate process. Moody recognizes that he is arguing for using the catechumenate as a program for nurturing children until they are ready for conversion, baptism, and membership. He concedes that his “new nurture theology will not sit well with the traditional theology of revivalism.”

⁹⁶Ibid., 464.

⁹⁷Dale Moody, *Baptism: Foundation for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 258.

⁹⁸Ibid., 46.

because, revivalism “calls for conversion [immediately] *before* baptism.”⁹⁹ For Moody, then a move toward an older age of baptism is presupposed by a psychological inability of young children to understand the gospel message.

Following the pattern of Moody, Southern Baptist pastor and seminary professor¹⁰⁰ Sam Southard argues passionately against the conversion of children. Citing “a study of psychology and adolescence,” Southard argues for early adolescences as the time when some children may be baptized as believers because it is at adolescence that “they have reached the dawn of moral conscience.”¹⁰¹ He further points out that “psychological studies of childhood offer no support for responsible conversions at an early age.”¹⁰² Southard expands on his argument noting that churches cannot “expect the child of nine [to] show up having a well-formulated and flexible value system.”¹⁰³ As a result, Southard reasons that just because a child “says yes to statements about the ‘plan of salvation’” does not mean that child is genuinely converted.¹⁰⁴

Southard further contends that children who come to accept Christ at an early age experience an incomplete conversion. Thus, it is unsurprising that there are adolescent requests for rebaptism. These serve as evidence that children are being baptized at too young an age.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Southard recommends not baptizing children, instead arguing that what is needed is both

⁹⁹Ibid., 261(emphasis original).

¹⁰⁰“Rev. Sam Southard, Ph.D. Biography,” *Timeless Wisdom Of Spiritual Council*, accessed November 19, 2008, http://www.twscworld.org/sam_southard_bio.html.

¹⁰¹Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism*, 87

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid., 88

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 90.

pastoral patience and better communication with parents. Like Moody, Southard presupposes that children are cognitively incapable of making a legitimate profession of faith.

Building in part on the work of Southard and Moody, *Children and Conversion* was released by Broadman Press in 1970. It was a compiled work largely arguing against not just the baptism, but also the conversion of young children. It included contributions from scholars ranging from Roy Honeycutt to William Hendricks to G. R. Beasley-Murray.¹⁰⁶ While the contributions of this volume have been incorporated throughout this dissertation, it is significant here to note some of its most substantial criticisms against the practice of baptizing children. First, authors in this volume argue that the Bible does not teach that children can respond to the gospel in faith. For example the volume states that “Jesus’ references to children served primarily as object lesson...for adults,”¹⁰⁷ and therefore do not indicate that children can be converted. Elsewhere its authors argue that asking little children to make faith commitment is inappropriate because “little children may be led to express commitments to God beyond their capacity to understand or to decide—and do this in adult language.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, one of the authors of this volume concludes that instead of baptism “the church should recognize each child

¹⁰⁶Ingle states in the introduction that his reason for hosting a conference at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and subsequently releasing this volume on the conversion of children is that there is a great deal of confusion amongst Baptists regarding the theological status of children. Given his assumption that the rate of baptisms among young children has steadily increased while at the same time noting that the dropout rate of teenagers from church membership has skyrocketed, Ingle believes the study particularly necessary. He argues as a result, the study is needed because “we cannot escape the possibility that of a direct relationship between early acceptance into church membership and dropouts.” Despite Ingle’s desire, not all of the authors of the volume agree with his conclusion that the baptism of children is problematic. Ingle alludes to this fact on the back cover of the book stating “multiple authorship must sacrifice a certain amount of unity” and thus this volume offers a “more balanced perspective than one author could provide.” As noted elsewhere in this volume, Beasley-Murray’s article in particular is incongruent with the rest of the volume in arguing that children of Christians should have a special place in the church and when converted should be baptized. Clifford Ingle, ed. *Children and Conversion* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 14, back cover.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 143.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 145.

as a catechumen.”¹⁰⁹ While this dissertation has shown in chapters 2 and 4 that these arguments lack merit, from a historical perspective, Ingle’s work is significant because it presents a multi-fold argument against the conversion and baptism of children.

The most extreme treatment of Southard’s and Moody’s advocacy of delaying believer’s baptism to children based on their cognitive inability as determined by psychological standards is found in Baptist scholar Joseph D. Ban’s booklet *Believer’s Baptism*. Therein he examines the work of one of the cognitive psychologists Southard mentions in passing. After examining the cognitive stages found in the development of children according to Piaget, Ban examines the cognitive studies of James Fowler. Fowler postulates seven stages of faith development. The final stage of development is “universalizing faith which is exceedingly rare.”¹¹⁰ Ban applies this theory to children stating “baptism signifies more than a child-like belief in God and Jesus...[it] signifies a decision made by a person capable of independent judgment and action...a decision that is to be understood as life-long commitment...[and] a decision to commits one’s self, time, resources, and abilities to the work of God’s kingdom.”¹¹¹ Ban indicates that a person is not ready to make the commitment of baptism until he has reached the final stage of Fowler’s stages of faith development. Since Ban interprets Fowler’s universalizing stage as universalism, baptism is then reserved for the persons who have moved towards pluralism and universalism, which of course children will not be ready to embrace since they work in terms of absolutes.¹¹²

In summary, many moderate Baptists advocate delaying baptism to children because

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 146.

¹¹⁰ Note: Ban is using Fowler’s research to argue for universalism. Joseph B. Ban, *Believer’s Baptism—At What Age?* (Hamilton, Ontario: self-published, 1982), 14.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 16

¹¹² More will said about applying Fowler to discussions of child baptism in the next chapter.

children are cognitively unable to grasp conversion. Children, they reason, cannot be saved because doing so is cognitively impossible for them. Ultimately, when children reach a higher plain of enlightenment and are able to demonstrate behavior becoming of a Christian, they can be baptized. The actual standards for such behavior vary, and at the outermost extremes the standard for baptism becomes universalism. Still, some moderate Baptists (such as Lumpkin) apparently rejected arguments for baptismal delay and the cognitive inabilities of children.

It is also important to note that some Baptists during this era directly rejected the psychological arguments offered by moderate Baptists such as Southard, Moody, Ingle, and Ban. For example, in response to these cognitive arguments against the conversion of children, Roy Fish offered two objections. First, Fish argued that, “Christian conversion is a miracle which defies explanation on a psychological basis. To sovereignly declare that the Holy Spirit cannot convict children of sin, cannot reveal Christ savingly to them, and cannot work the miracle of regeneration in them is a pejorative no psychologist or theologian ought to assume.”¹¹³ Second, Fish noted that Matthew 18 is clear that “conversion occurs on the level of a child...little children can believe in Jesus...[and] it is not the will of the Father that a single child should perish,” which Fish takes to mean that “every child should be saved” and sought for Jesus.¹¹⁴

The Views of Conservative Southern Baptists Regarding Children and Baptism

While few moderate thinkers argue for either contemporaneous baptism or the possibility of child conversion, a much greater disparity existed among conservative Baptists as to the

¹¹³ Roy Fish. “Introducing Children to Christ” (lecture, Roberts Library, Fort Worth, TX).

¹¹⁴Ibid.

appropriateness of seeking to convert and baptize children. In general, conservative scholars and denominational executives viewed the baptism of children with a skeptical eye while expressing an openness to their conversion. Pastors, in contrast, were more open to both the baptism and conversion of children.

On the side of caution and perhaps restrictions stands James Leo Garrett who points out that “Southern Baptist...face an acute problem by virtue of the diminishing age at which very young children...are being baptized and received into church membership.”¹¹⁵ In his treatise on church discipline, Garrett, like Moody, notes that rebaptism is a twentieth century phenomena¹¹⁶ and that the church member is to be a person of “some competent knowledge of divine things.”¹¹⁷ For Garrett this idea of a “competent knowledge” precludes many children from church membership and therefore baptism. The baptism of such children is detrimental to regenerate church membership.

Also encouraging hesitation is Southern Baptist pastor and former director of evangelism for the Home Mission Board, Kenneth L. Chafin. Chafin argues strongly that children can understand and know the gospel. In fact, he outlines how to share the gospel effectively with children. However, when it comes to baptism, Chafin’s tone changes as he states that the parents and church leaders should,

move as slowly from first interest, to profession, to baptism as is necessary in order to give the child the best possible understanding of the meaning of church membership. This is not designed to perfect the child, nor should it discourage him... If the only motive for delaying the child[’s baptism and church membership] is to better prepare him for baptism, there is

¹¹⁵James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical*, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills Texas: BIBAL, 2000), 2: chapter 73, 22.

¹¹⁶James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1962), 1.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 36

little danger of losing him.¹¹⁸

For Chafin, then, a child is capable of salvation at a young age; however, a delay in the baptism of children may be prudent. The reason for the delay parallels Garrett's argument: Chaffin is worried about a regenerate church membership. The problem with Chafin's argument is that in arguing for delaying the baptism of converted children, Chafin undermines the idea of baptism being an act of obedience in response to salvation that stands contemporaneously to conversion.¹¹⁹

Building upon Chaffin, Roy Fish speaks to the need for delaying baptism. Fish also looks at the phenomena of rebaptisms and laments it. Fish believes the primary cause of rebaptism within the convention is a lack of effective counseling.¹²⁰ Still, Fish also sees the need for some delay in baptism.¹²¹

In opposition to these views stand the views of several pastors and scholars who argue for the baptism of children. Seminary professor Gene Russell, for example, believes that "a child is accountable to God [if he] understands simply and basically what sin is."¹²² This understanding of sin occurs at a young age. With this in mind, Russell argues that with a newly converted child one should "talk about baptism." The saved child should be baptized as that child "should be ready to obey Christ in everything by now."¹²³ For Russell, then, children should be baptized at

¹¹⁸ Kenneth L. Chafin, *Tell all the Little Children* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1974), 13-14.

¹¹⁹See chapter 1, as well as the arguments of several Baptist scholars noted above.

¹²⁰ Fish's independent research shows that most rebaptisms are a result of those being baptized never having been received counseling at the time of their first baptism. Roy Fish, "Introducing Children to Christ."

¹²¹ Roy Fish, "Introducing Children to Christ."

¹²² Gene Russell, *Let the Children Come In* (Nashville, TN: Church Growth, 1974), 27-28.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 102

young ages out of obedience.

Stanley Grenz¹²⁴ also argues against the delay of baptism. He adds that “as the initiation ordinance is separated from conversion and linked solely to membership in a local church, it loses its meaning as a sign of an important theological truth about the nature of salvation.”¹²⁵ In reference to children this means that “we cannot view children as participants in the church until they give personal and conscious expression to the faith community.”¹²⁶ Such expression happens at baptism, and therefore when a child is baptized they are giving a testimony of their faith to the community.

One of the most stinging rebukes against the delay of baptism for children comes from Nashville pastor Bob Mowery. Mowery notes that,

God is not looking to us for perfection. He accepts us under the perfection of Jesus. This takes place at the very moment we are saved through faith in Christ; therefore, that very moment one is qualified to be baptized. Even children have the right to be baptized. One parent said “well preacher, my youngest daughter was saved at eight, but I want her to wait about three years before she is baptized.” That is not Scriptural. That parent is casting shadows of doubt upon the little girl’s experience. We cannot know what is in the heart of children. We are not to play the role of God for our children. When a child says “I want to give my heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior” that child has just as much right to be baptized as any nineteen or any ninety year old person. We do not have the scriptural authority to deny anyone the privilege of baptism who sensibly and sincerely professes faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross.¹²⁷

Mowery points out that a delay of baptism is without scriptural foundation. Further, delaying the

¹²⁴The placement of Grenz with the conservatives is admittedly questionable. No doubt, as Grenz’s theology progressed he moved away from the conservative camp and towards the emergent church movement. Yet, Grenz’s earlier works do take a decidedly more conservative tone. That Broadman and Holman even after the Conservative Resurgence would publish his systematic text gives evidence to that fact.

¹²⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (1994; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eedermans, 2000), 548.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 546

¹²⁷ Bob Mowery, *The Significance of Baptism* (Nashville, TN: self-published, 1990), 21-22.

baptism of a saved child places the church or pastor in the position of God in seeking to discern the legitimacy of that child's conversion. Refusing baptism, for Mowery, also has the potential to rob the child of the assurance of salvation that comes from baptism. As a result, Mowery clearly strongly affirms baptizing children who confess conversion.

W. A. Criswell is a particularly interesting case in relation to his view on the baptism of children. His logic regarding the relation between baptism and conversion closely parallels that of Russell, Grenz, and Mowery. He states, "baptism is the first public act of a believer's confession of faith."¹²⁸ Criswell explains "we [cannot] 'dip them and drop them' and let them go... Baptism is an initial rite. It is the first and very beginning. The rest of the pilgrim way is... the responsibility of the church."¹²⁹ Thus, for Criswell, converts are to be baptized without delay.

Still, W. A. Criswell did not allow children to be baptized until the age of nine based on his beliefs regarding the age of accountability.¹³⁰ Kenneth Stewart's PhD dissertation on Criswell from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary directly addresses this issue.¹³¹ Based on interviews with members of Criswell's staff, Stewart explains that despite not allowing children under nine to be baptized, Criswell still desired to affirm such children in their desire for

¹²⁸W. A. Criswell, *Criswell's Guidebook for Pastor's* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1980), 203.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 206

¹³⁰David Galvan, for example, recently noted such of Criswell in an interview for a *Christianity Today* article. Galvan states that, "In our church, we have followed the example of W. A. Criswell [former SBC president] and baptize children at nine years of age [and older]." Kevin P. Emmert, "Baptizing the Dora Generation: Why Preschooler Faith Is So Controversial," *Christianity Today*, June 10, 2014, 1, accessed March 7, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/june-web-only/sbc-preschool-baptisms-under-age-6-southern-baptists.html>.

¹³¹Kenneth Todd Stewart, "An Inquiry Into the Determinative Evangelistic Growth Factors at the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas under the Leadership of W. A. Criswell, 1944-1991" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 138-41.

salvation. He would do this by first presenting children under the age of nine to the congregation and stating that the child (Janie in this case) “is taking a step toward God, and we’re going to love you Janie and we’re going to take care of you. And everybody joins in happiness and joy that you have come and made this step toward God.”¹³² These children were then placed in a class upon completion of which they would meet individually with Criswell for him “to discern whether the child fully understood the gospel and [had] made a profession of faith.”¹³³ In a footnote, Stewart expands on how seriously Criswell took the salvation of children: “If a parent or Sunday school leader called to schedule an appointment with a child inquiring about salvation, Criswell cleared everything else from his schedule. He made the individual counseling sessions with children a top priority.”¹³⁴

Criswell’s process was unique in that he provided personal counseling with each child in his efforts to discern their respective readiness of each child for salvation and baptism. Still, in restricting baptism to persons only over the age of nine while still apparently at the same time being willing to say that children under the age of nine could be converted, there was an inconsistency in Criswell’s theology. Specifically, immediate baptism was appropriate for only one type of convert within Criswell’s schema.

To summarize the views of conservative scholars and pastors explored within this section, it is clear that for some conservative Southern Baptists, such as Garrett, Chafin, and Fish, the baptism of children should be delayed. They argue for such because they believe that the baptism of children leads to unregenerate church membership, as evidenced by the problem

¹³²Ibid., 139.

¹³³Ibid..

¹³⁴Ibid, 142, n. XX.

of rebaptisms within in Southern Baptist life. In contrast, Russell, Grenz and Mowery argue for the primacy of baptism as the initial act of obedience. In response to the church membership argument, these men assert that those baptized are to be further disciplined after baptism. The baptized cannot be expected to be mature believers. They also argue that a delay of baptism is without any scriptural foundation. Criswell is unique in that he argues that baptism should immediately follow conversion and that children can be converted, but on the other hand he argues that children under the age of nine should not be baptized.

Dissertations Relating to Children and Baptism

As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, several other dissertations have been written directly addressing the relationship between children, conversion, and baptism from a Southern Baptist perspective. The first four of these dissertations appeared between 1950 and 2000. All four argued, contra this dissertation, that children should not be baptized. While the arguments of these dissertations are interacted with throughout this dissertation, it is appropriate to note each of their respective arguments here.

The first dissertation dealing with the baptism of children comes from Lewis Craig Ratliff, who graduated from Southern Seminary in 1963.¹³⁵ Ratliff argues that lordship stands as the central requirement to being a disciple of Jesus.¹³⁶ Lordship is also a central tenant of Baptist understandings of soteriology and ecclesiology.¹³⁷ Children, in order to follow Jesus as

¹³⁵Lewis Craig Ratliff, "Discipleship, Church Membership and Children among Southern Baptists: An Investigation of the Place of children in a Baptist Church in View of Christ's Teaching on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963).

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 43.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, chapters 3-5.

Lord, must be able to identify with Christ and not their parents, while also being able to give as much love as they receive. This requires abstract reasoning and happens at the age of 12 at the earliest, with most individuals not reaching this level of maturity until the age of 15.¹³⁸

The second dissertation comes from Melvin Clark, also of Southern Seminary, who graduated in 1969. He argues that children psychologically struggle with self-identification. Since conversion involves a change at the inner-core of one's being, it is inappropriate to view children as converts.¹³⁹ Still, there should be a place for children in the church according to Clark. As a result, he argues that children should be welcomed into the life of the church through being allowed to take the Lord's Supper prior to having been baptized and received into church membership.¹⁴⁰

Following up on Clark and Ratliff, Gary Thomas Deane of Southwestern Seminary studied the gospel comprehension of children at Vacation Bible School (VBS). The children Deane surveyed came from 30+ states and 20+ countries. He interpreted his data through the lens of Piaget's stages of development. As a result, Deane argues that older children grasp the gospel better than younger children.¹⁴¹

Withers's dissertation is the most recent opposing the baptism of children from a Southern Baptist perspective. He argues that, while young children may be able to be saved, they should not be baptized. Withers argues that social forces within the convention (such as a desire

¹³⁸Ibid., 160-183.

¹³⁹Melvin Douglas Clark, "The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969).

¹⁴⁰Ibid., chapter 5.

¹⁴¹Gary Thomas Deane. "An Investigation of the Child's Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development" (EdD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982).

for higher baptism numbers, the busyness of pastors, etc.) have led to a spike in young baptisms among Southern Baptists. Based on how children develop psychologically, Withers asserts that churches cannot discern conversion prior to the age of 12. As a result, he argues that churches should adopt policies which restrict baptism to those age 12 and older.¹⁴²

Age-Related Demographic Trends among Baptists: 1950-2000

Unlike in previous eras, in the latter half of the twentieth century, Southern Baptists began to keep records of baptisms by age. Through their Annual Church Letter (later the Annual Church Profile or ACP), sent to every single Southern Baptist Church, the Sunday School Board (later LifeWay Christian Resources) began requesting baptismal statistics by age beginning in 1966.¹⁴³ There were 1,146 baptisms of children under the age of six in 1966. This study in 1966 provides the first empirical data point as to the baptismal practices of Baptists. Every year from 1966 until 2013, the convention's annual church letter sent to every church in the Southern Baptist Convention included questions as to the age breakdown of all baptism in each individual church. As a result, a far more complete picture of the baptismal practices of Southern Baptists in regards to age emerges in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁴

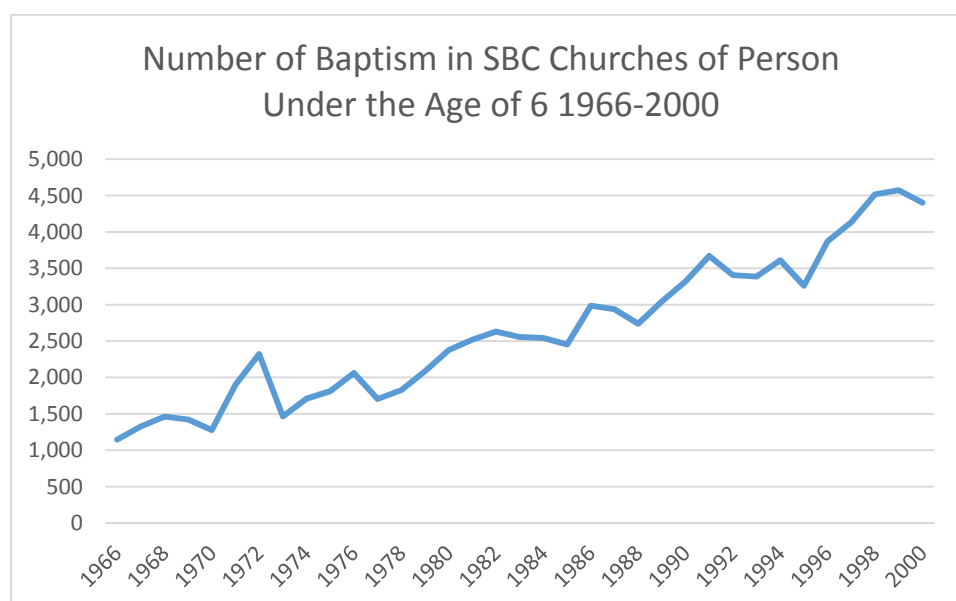
¹⁴²John Warren Withers. "Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist churches" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997).

¹⁴³See Appendixes 1 and 2 below for the complete data set derived from the compiled Annual Church Profiles from 1966-2012. This data was given to the author by Paula Hancock of Lifeway Christian Resources. See appendix 4 for the emails between the author and Mrs. Hancock. Paula Hancock, email message to author, June 13 2014.

¹⁴⁴Given that the ACP did not ask about the distribution of baptisms by age until 1966, data for the rates of conversion between 1950 and 1966 is less widely known. One survey is cited by Southard as providing a breakdown for baptismal data between 1929 and 1966. In 1959, Gerald Jenkins surveyed 42 pastors in two cities seeking an estimate as to what percentage of their congregants were baptized prior to the age of twelve. Douglas Clark levels three criticisms of this study. "The first is the extent—forty-two pastors in two separate locations. The second is that the figures were estimates, not statistics. The third is that even if the figures are representative and accurate, they still do not indicate a decline in age from those Clark gave thirty years previously. The logic of the matter is simple--

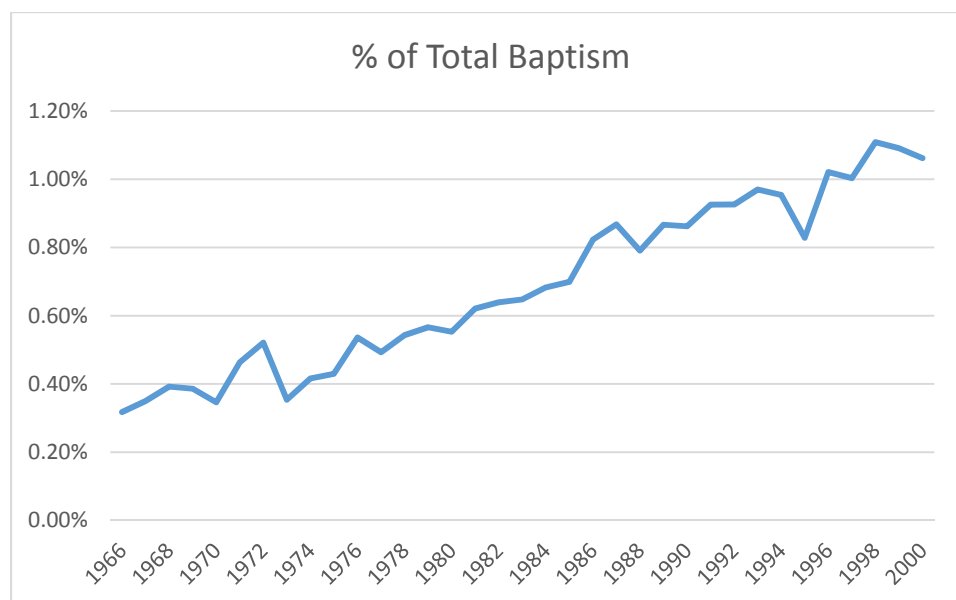
As already mentioned, one of the primary areas of concern in the discussion surrounding child baptism is a perceived increase in baptism amongst preschool-aged children. Below, tables 3-3 and 3-4 chart the progression of these under-six baptisms throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. These tables clearly show that there is an increase in both the number of overall baptism occurring among preschoolers as well as in the percentage such baptism makeup of the total baptisms within the convention.

Table 3-3¹⁴⁵



if almost half were between the ages of six and twelve, then more than half must have been above that age, unless many were younger than six This would provide an average age of about twelve years.” See Gerald Paul Jenkins, “A Pastoral Care Study of the Religious Experiences of Children Six to Twelve Years” (master’s thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1959); Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism*, 82; and Clark, “Evangelism of Children,” 54.

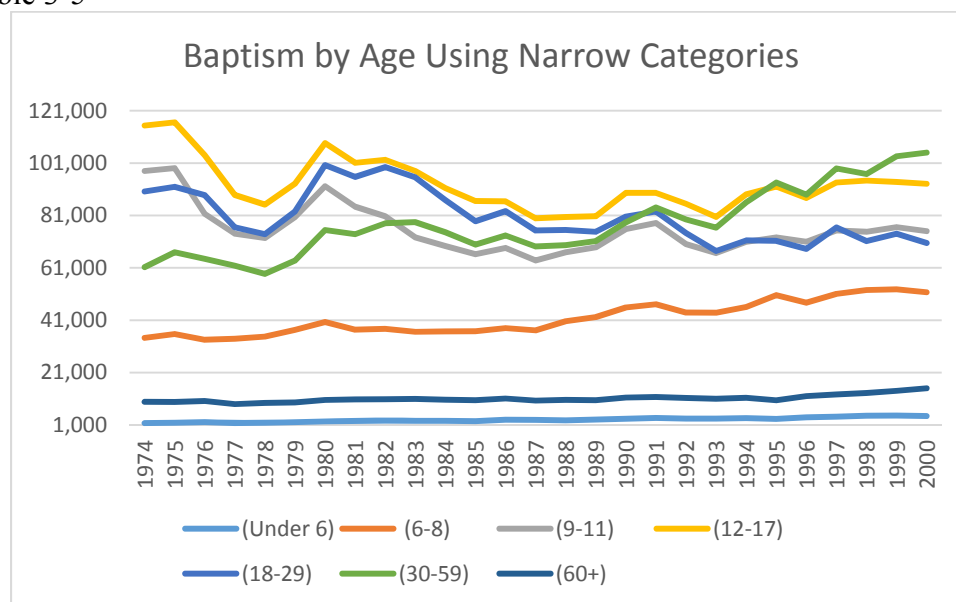
¹⁴⁵Data for Table 3-3 through 3-7 comes from the appendices 1 and 2 below. In 1966 there were 1,146 under-six baptisms. In 2000 there were 4,403 such baptisms. The highest recorded number of under-six baptisms occurred in 1998 with 4,574 baptism occurring of children under the age of six. The low occurred in 1966, with the second lowest number occurring in 1970 at 1,278.

Table 3-4¹⁴⁶

While there is a clear increase in the baptisms of children under the age of six during the latter half of the twentieth century, the concerns voiced previously about preschool baptisms are overstated. When the under-six baptism category is view in context of all baptisms as broken down by age, it quickly becomes apparent that the preschool aged baptism category has always made up a nearly negligible percentage of total baptisms. Table 3-5 makes this fact clear. It shows the number of baptisms by the age groupings used within the Annual Church Profile from 1974 until 2000. The line for under-six baptisms rests at the bottom of the chart for the entirety of the time under consideration.

¹⁴⁶As a percentage of total baptisms, the lowest percentage occurs in the first year data was recorded. Specifically, 0.32% of all baptisms in 1966 were of children under the age of six. The highest percentage occurs in 1998 at 1.11% of all baptism. In 2000 the percentage of all under six baptisms fell slightly to 1.06% of all baptisms.

Table 3-5

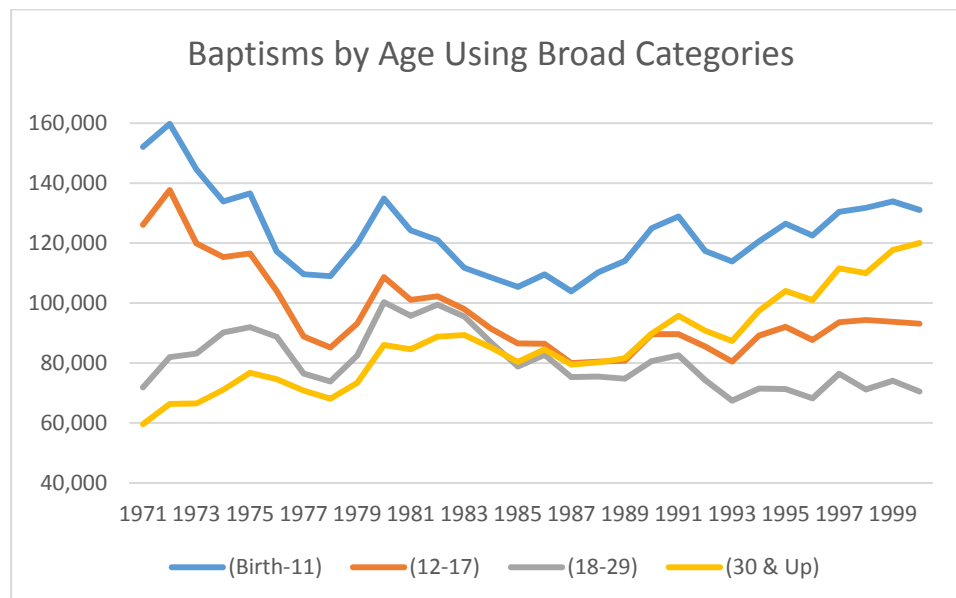


Yet many voicing concerns about preschool aged baptism also voice concerns about a general lowering of the average age of baptism. As a result, as noted above some have sought to restrict the baptism of those under the age of 12. In reality, such concerns are not grounded in data. The baptism of those persons under the age of 12 dropped from 152,087 persons in 1971 to 131,764 persons in 2000. This is a drop of over 20,000 children annually in just 30 years' time. This data is plotted in table 3-6.

Table 3-7 plots the same data as Table 3-6 with the exception that it places this data within the context of the percentage of overall baptisms. Especially noteworthy in this table is the fact that the baptisms of children under the age of 12 has declined from 37.13% of all baptisms in 1971 to 31.60% of all baptism in 2000. At the same time, the baptism of older adults has risen from 14.55% of all baptisms to 28.95% in the same time period. The table also shows that adolescent baptisms dropped as percentage of all baptisms during the latter part of the twentieth century. Therefore, with adult baptism up and child and adolescent baptism down it is quite clear that the average age of baptism rose throughout the latter part of the twentieth

century. Claims that the average of baptism dropped throughout the latter half of the twentieth century are wrong.¹⁴⁷

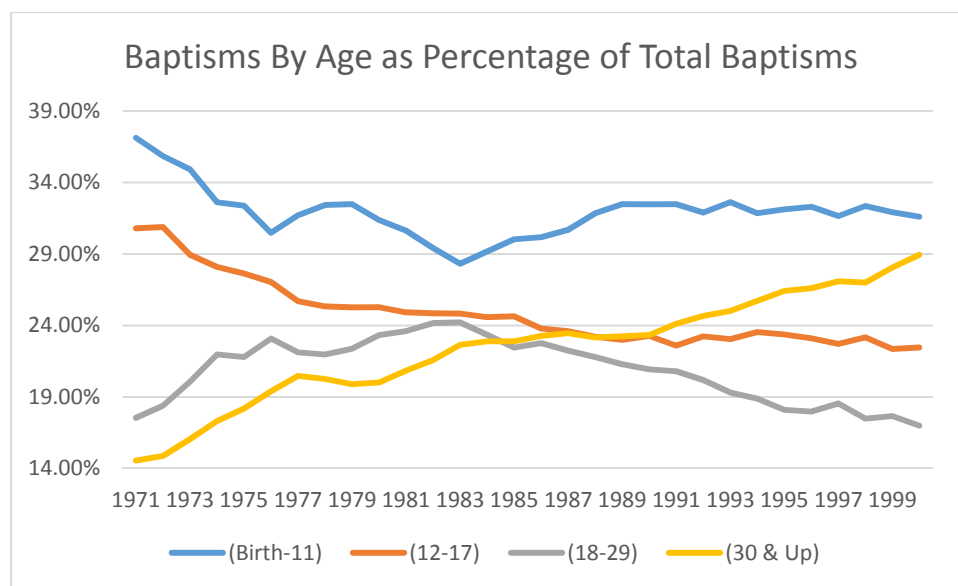
Table 3-6¹⁴⁸



¹⁴⁷For more on this, see Appendix 3.

¹⁴⁸The divisions of age groups listed within the Southern Baptist Convention's Annual Church Profiles changed repeatedly over the years. In 1966 and from 1968 to 1970 the age groups used were under 6, 6-8 years of age, 9-12 years of age, 13-16 years of age, 17-24 years of age and 25 years and older. In 1967 these groupings were combined into under 9, 9-16 years of age, an 17 years of age and older. From 1971-1973 the age division were under 6, 6 to 11, 12 to 17, 18 to 29, 30 to 59, and 60+. 1974 through 2010 used the exact same division as were used from '71 to '73' with the exception that the 6-11 age group was split into children ages 6 to 8 and ages 9 to 11. In 2011 and 2012 only four classifications were used: birth to 11, 12 to 17, 18 to 29, and 30 and up. Given that from 1971 to 2012 the data can be grouped according to four basic categories used in 2011 and 2012, this table reflects that fact.

Table 3-7



Several key trends emerge when these statistics are viewed as a whole. First, clearly there was an increase in the number of baptisms of children under the age of six during the latter half of the twentieth century. Second, this increase occurred both numerically and as percentage of total baptism. Third, the significance of this increase in “preschool baptisms” is overstated within the context of all baptisms. Fourth, the largest numerical increases in baptism occurred amongst persons over the age of 30. Fifth, as a result, the average age of baptism actually rose during the latter part of the twentieth century.

In summary, during the latter half of the twentieth century there was a marked shift in Baptist understandings of the doctrine of baptism as it relates to age. No longer did the academy condone or even encourage the baptism of children. Rather, as statistics showed children under six were being baptized, a slew of moderate Baptists citing psychology, as well as some conservatives citing the need for a regenerate church, argued against the baptism of children. Four doctoral dissertations were released during this time period, all arguing that the rising numbers of child converts is lamentable. Despite a growing hostility to the baptism of

children, there were others who still argued that even young children should be baptized.¹⁴⁹ In order to justify such, one moderate looked to church tradition and from it argued that it was appropriate to baptize children. Additionally, several conservatives argued that children should be baptized because baptism stands as the first act of obedience or confession of salvation. A careful look at the statistics reveals that much of the concern regarding the lowering age of baptisms ignores the actual data.

Southern Baptists and the Baptism of Children: Early 21st Century

In 2000, the convention ratified a new edition Baptist Faith and Message that significantly refined the language concerning the inerrancy of the Bible. The language regarding the doctrine of baptism remained unchanged. After its ratification, Baptists entered a period of brief peace. With many of the moderates having left the convention for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the convention meetings themselves became less contentious. The presidency of the convention was unopposed over a period of several elections. Yet, as Baptists entered the 2010s, new conflicts over God's sovereignty and human free will emerged. Within this context, another generation of Baptists theologians and pastor are examining the role baptism and conversion plays in the lives of young children.

The Views of Southern Baptists Regarding Children and Baptism

One such theologian is Russell D. Moore, a former dean at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the current head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. In

¹⁴⁹With Grenz's leftward drift, few of those arguing for the baptism of children were in positions of influence within the convention.

regards to the relation of the child to the church, Moore notes that a new characteristic that has emerged within Southern Baptist life. He states:

If you have not been baptized by the time you reach a certain age, something is wrong with you, something is wrong with your family, and there is great pressure to be baptized, whether or not you have ever come to know Christ. As a result, we have churches that will baptize unrepentant four-year-olds simply because the four-year-old understands, “I love Jesus, and I want to go to heaven.”¹⁵⁰

Although Moore does not provide documentation for this claim, if he is correct, then this development of doctrine in which children are pressured to be baptized by a specific age, leading to unregenerate four-year-olds being baptized, would indeed be novel as well as lamentable from the historical perspective outlined in this chapter. Early Southern Baptists who argued for the baptism of young children did so understanding that such children were regenerate and could give testimony to such. No one has argued for the baptism of unregenerate children, nor has anyone argued that “Jesus loves me is a sufficient confession of faith.” In light of these facts, Moore’s claim is disturbing from a biblical, Baptist, and historical perspective. Still, not too much credence should be given to it because it is purely anecdotal and lacks objective substantiation.

A second concern regarding the baptism of children is voiced by the moderate Baptist historian Bill Leonard. In his book *Baptists in America*, Leonard responds to “the serious theological problem” of children being baptized and offers three suggestions. First, he states “Baptists need to revisit their theology of conversion,” as young children cannot understand such a commitment.¹⁵¹ Leonard thus implies that children are cognitively incapable of grasping

¹⁵⁰ Russell D. Moore, “Baptism, the Church, and the Glory of Christ,” *The Center for Theological Research*, July 2006, accessed November 16, 2008, <http://www.baptisttheology.org/documents/BaptismtheChurchbyMoore.pdf>.

¹⁵¹ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist In America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 149.

salvation. Second, “Baptists need to rethink their understanding of baptism and its relationship to the age of accountability.”¹⁵² While Leonard fails to explore how Baptists can actually apply either of his first two suggestions, his third suggestion is more practical. Leonard proposes that the “decision [of a church] to baptize children requires extensive efforts to aid in understanding the nature of that commitment and nurturing a sense of Christian maturity.”¹⁵³ While in this suggestion Leonard implies that Baptists should delay the baptism of children to aid in their understanding of the commitment baptism involves, his advice of strong counseling to discern if the child is actually confessing Christ and cognitively grasps the Gospel could function as a point of agreement between divided groups.

In addition to Moore and Leonard, Daniel Akin, the current president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers a brief but insightful treatment of the question of the baptism of children. Akin points out that

We must be careful with respect to our own theological integrity concerning infant or early adolescent baptism that lacks a clear understanding and confession of the gospel. I am not one who believes a person cannot be saved until he becomes a teen or later. There is no Scriptural defense for such a position and psychological arguments carry no weight in this discussion. Still the large number of rebaptisms...must give us pause.”¹⁵⁴

Akin’s treatment of children and baptism is more even-handed than some of the others cited. On the one hand, he makes room for the concerns of Moore. The brief statement cited above makes room for the concerns of many regarding rebaptisms. Still, Akin leaves plenty of room for the conversion and baptism of young children. His counsel is wise in arguing that such baptisms must be handled with caution so as to assure that such children are regenerate.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Akin, “Ten Mandates for Today’s Southern Baptists,” in *The Mission of Today’s Church*, ed. Norman Stanton. (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 9.

In contrast to the reserved judgments of Akin, John Hammett, a professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues against the baptism of young children. Citing history, Hammett points to early nineteenth-century Baptist churches in the South in which “children of members were present but were rarely seen as fit subjects for baptism and church membership prior to their teenage years.”¹⁵⁵ Hammett provides no documentation for this claim, which, as previously discussed, ignores the writings of Broadus, Dagg, Strong, and others.

He continues, stating, “until recently Baptists would have never considered baptizing”¹⁵⁶ five-year-olds. As shown above, this claim rings hollow, as Richard Fuller explicitly considered baptizing five-year-olds and Dagg argued for the full membership of young children. Hammett then concludes his argument by stating, “developmental psychologists agree that children reach full moral decision making ability around the age of twelve.”¹⁵⁷ Therefore, Hammett encourages the delay of baptism until a child reaches the age of 12. Unfortunately for Hammett, as will be shown in the next chapter, developmental psychologist do not believe that moral decision making ability takes places at the age of 12.¹⁵⁸

Despite these glaring weaknesses in Hammett’s underlying argument, (as well as the other weaknesses noted in chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation), he does offer a helpful suggestion in regard to the baptism of children. Specifically, for those coming as new converts

¹⁵⁵ John Hammett, *Restoring Integrity within Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason Duesing, and Malcolm Yarnell (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 38.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 39

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 40

¹⁵⁸ Hammett also argues against baptism being the immediate response following conversion. To this idea Hammett quickly points to a few passages where Scripture is silent as to the Biblical order of conversion and baptism. His arguments are similar to those of paedobaptist arguing from the silence of the text that household baptisms speak of paedobaptism. For example, compare Hammett’s argument on page 38 to Fuller’s discussion of paedobaptism and households cited above. Hammett’s assertion of the psychological inability of children will be treated more fully in the next chapter.

and baptism, a review of the gospel is essential.”¹⁵⁹ Hammett is correct and agrees with Fish on this point; a major weakness in the conversion of children has been poor counseling. Lack of proper counseling, as Fish has shown, is a major factor in the rising rates of rebaptism.

As noted in the introduction, both Ed Stetzer and Mark Dever have recently noted a trend toward lower baptisms and found such to be lamentable. Dever’s arguments for baptismal delay and against the salvation of children are engaged at several other points in this dissertation and so will not be repeated here. In this section, is sufficient to note that Dever’s claim that a “practice of delaying [baptism] for maturity...was formerly common in the United States [with the] baptisms of children eight or nine years of age, or even younger, were either unheard of or very rare,”¹⁶⁰ cannot be substantiated within the context of the Southern Baptist Convention. As has been shown, there is no direct demographic data that supports Dever’s claim. The list of individuals he provides in a footnote who were baptized at later ages as evidence of the rarity of late conversions or delayed baptism among a previous generation of Baptists is ultimately anecdotal. Further, as has been shown, several prominent early Southern Baptists explicitly argued for the baptism of young children.

Age-Related Demographic Trends among Baptists

Stetzer’s concerns are derived from the data he reviews as the head of LifeWay Research. In 2006, Stetzer noted in a Baptist Press article that “from 2004 to 2005, every baptism category, by age, went down—except one. The one category that went up? Preschoolers—those under five

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 37

¹⁶⁰Dever, “Baptism in the Local Church,” 334.

years of age.” In 2005, the most recent year for which data was available when Stetzer made this claim, Southern Baptists baptized 4,272 children under the age of five, which is 1.15% of all Southern Baptists baptisms. Stetzer thus declares that these results “make me nervous. Though I am not one to say that a five year old cannot trust Christ, it’s hard to see the march toward infant baptism as good news.”¹⁶¹

More recently,¹⁶² a 2014 Pastors Taskforce assembled by NAMB again looked at the baptismal data by age. The purpose of the task force was to shed light on declining baptisms within the convention as a whole. Within that context, the taskforce noted from the research provided to them that “the only consistently growing age group [for baptism] is age five and under.”¹⁶³

While, as noted above, this claim could reasonably have been made in 2000, as of the present, this claim is extremely almost impossible to prove for two reasons. First, Table 3-8 shows the progression of under-six baptisms from 1971 to 2010 in terms of actual number of baptisms. The number of baptism for children under six peaked in 1999 at 4,574. By the year 2010, the number of baptisms had fallen to 3,356. This is the lowest total for under-six baptisms since 1995. Table 3-10 applies these numbers within the context of percentage of total baptisms. As a percentage of total baptisms, baptisms of children under the age of six peaked in 2005 at

¹⁶¹Ed Stetzer, “First-person: Making Evangelism Good News Again,” *Baptist Press*, November 7, 2006, accessed July 22, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/24349/firstperson-making-evangelism-good-news-again>.

¹⁶²The taskforce’s report notes that Stetzer “assisted the Task Force by providing context and perspective from research.” The author of this dissertation contacted Stetzer in order to provide greater clarity and context regarding this taskforce’s claim. Stetzer noted to this author that his 2006 article was “the last time I wrote on preschool baptisms. However, it’s not true anymore. Or, at least we don’t know for sure since we don’t record them the same way.” As a result, it appears that the taskforce reviewed Stetzer older report when making the claim that baptism were declining. Addis et. al, *Pastor’s Task Force*, 1. Ed Stetzer, email to author, April 4, 2015.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 2.

1.15% of all baptisms. From 2005 to 2010, under-six baptism fell to 1.01% of all baptisms, its lowest percentage since 1997.

Table 3-8

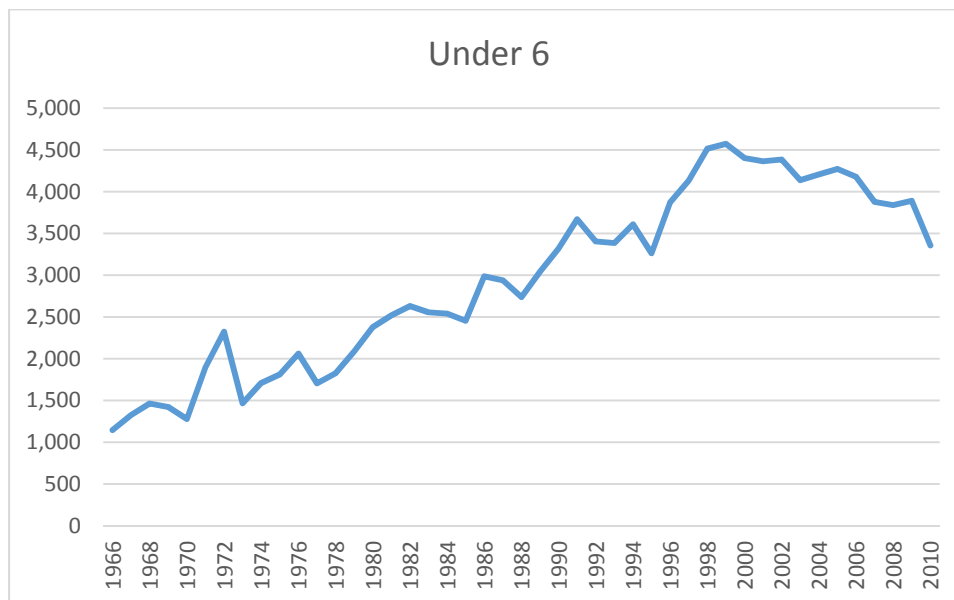


Table 3-9

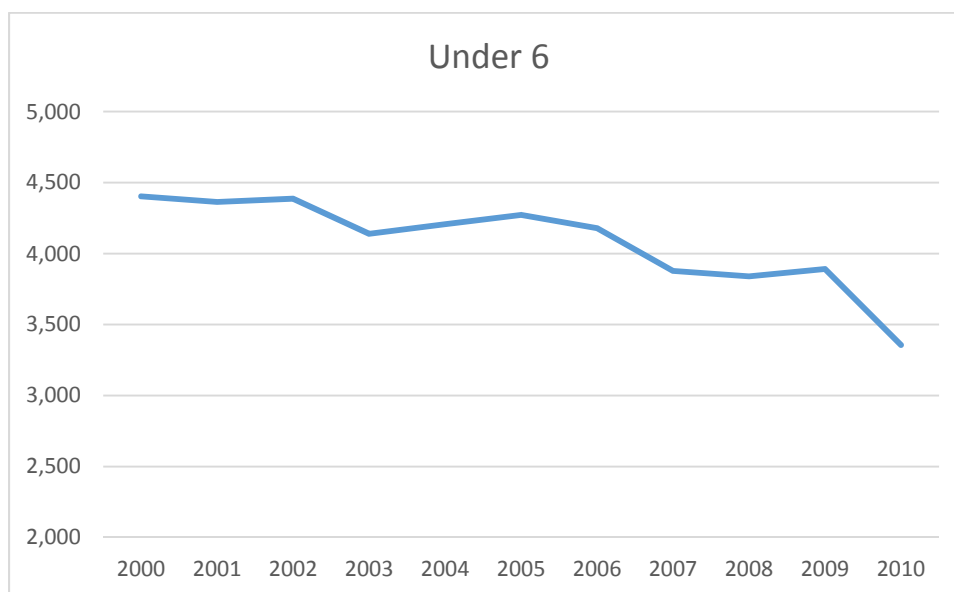
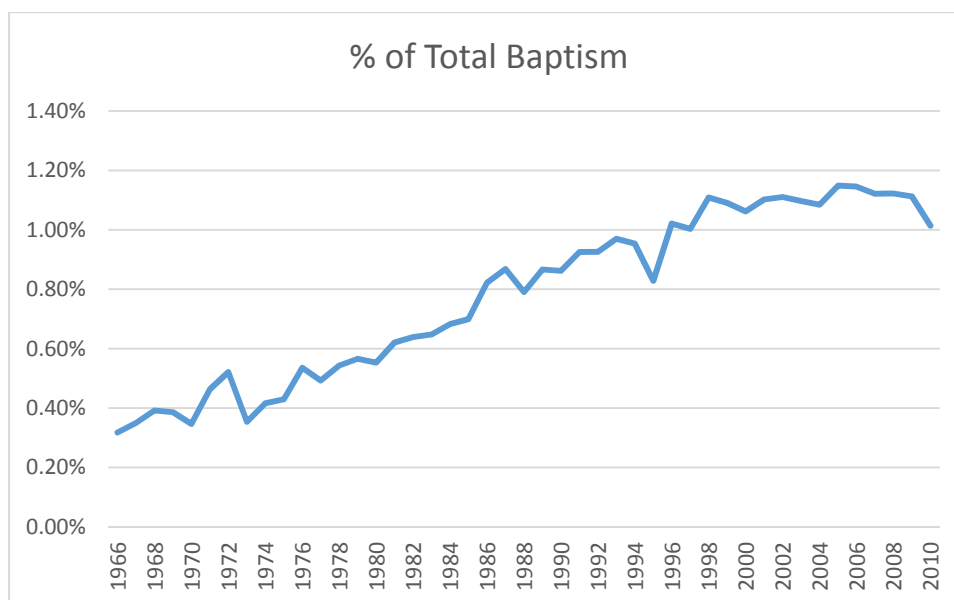


Table 3-10



While a recent *Christianity Today* article suggested that a trend line exists showing a general upward trend amongst Southern Baptists regarding under-six baptisms, it is significant that the chart of actual baptism provided within that context ends at 2007.¹⁶⁴ This is problematic because data for under-six baptisms exists through 2010. From 2007 to 2010, under-six baptisms dropped from 3,878 to 3,356, or by 13.4%. Omitting this data from the chart hides the fact that the number of under-six baptisms has in reality been dropping for 12 years. Perhaps a case could be made that trend line for preschool baptisms does exist as a percentage of total baptism by viewing 2010 as an abnormality, but this raises an additional problem with the committee's claim.

Second, to claim in 2014 that the only category that shows a consistent increase in baptisms are children under the age of six is problematic because LifeWay stopped collecting

¹⁶⁴Emmett, "Baptizing Dora," 1.

data on under six baptisms in 2010.¹⁶⁵ From 2011 forward, there is no way to measure the baptisms of children under the age of six. To claim four years after Baptists' stopped collecting data on under-six baptisms that this is the only area in which Baptists show a consistent increase is at best confusing. As a result, the claim that "the only consistently growing age group [for baptism] is age five and under" cannot be substantiated with data and ignores the emerging trends from 1998 forward.

Based on the data provided to the ACP in 2011 and 2012, generalized trends about age-related breakdowns of four categories of baptisms can be observed going all the way back to 1971. These categories are 11 and under (which combines the statistics of baptisms for children under six, ages six to eight, and ages nine to 11 into a single number), 12 to 17, 18 to 29, and 30 and up (which combines the categories of 30 to 59 and 60 and up). These broader categories are plotted below in Table 3-11 in terms of actual baptismal numbers and again in Table 3-11 as percentages of total baptism.

Table 3-11

¹⁶⁵See the author's email correspondence with Mrs. Paula Hancock in Appendix 4 for more on the changes to the ACP report.

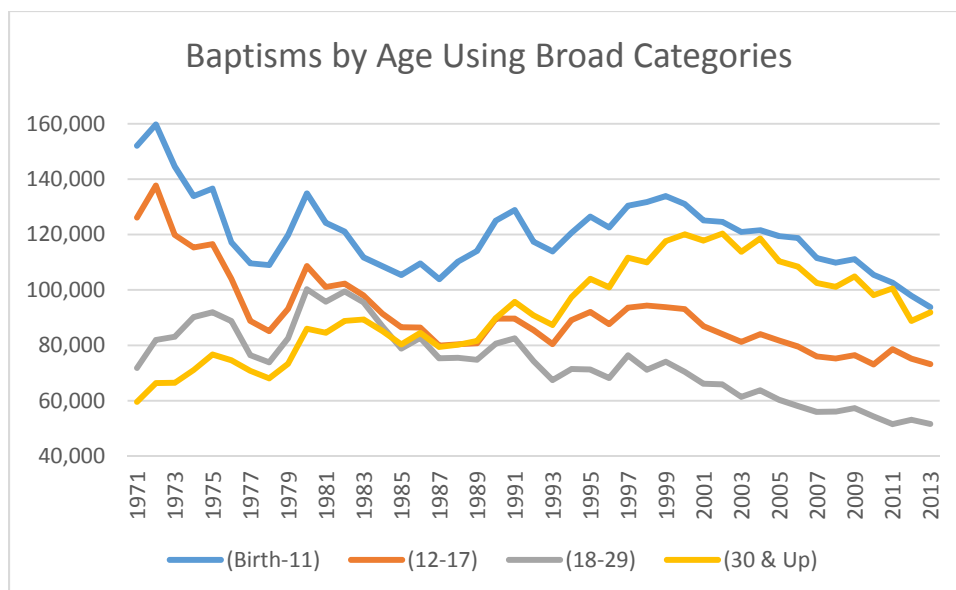
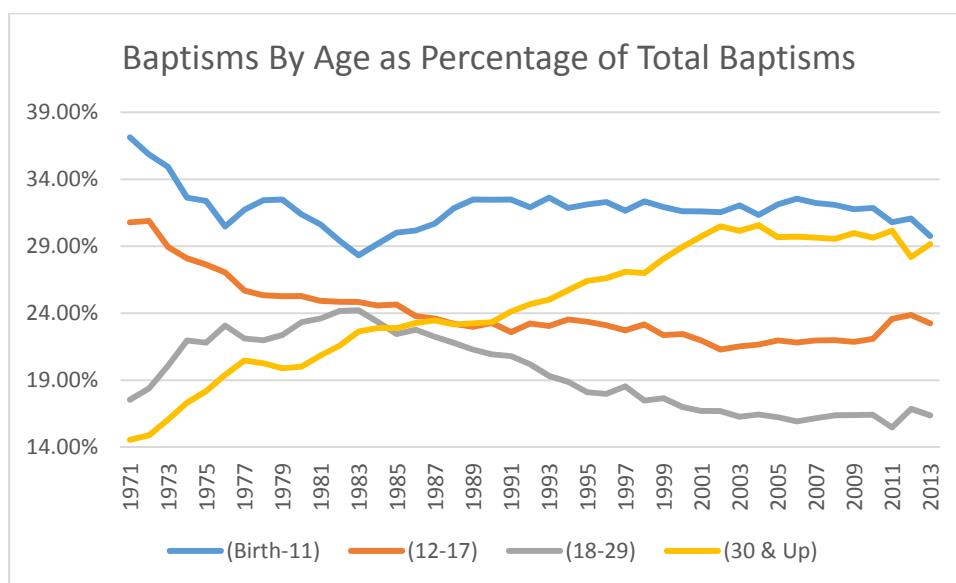


Table 3-12



These charts show that actual baptisms across all four age categories have been in decline since the mid-nineties. Further, as a percentage of all baptisms, child baptisms (age 11 and under) have slightly declined since over the course of the last 40 years.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶Child baptisms made up 32.62% of all baptisms in 1974 and 31.07% of all baptisms in 2012.

In terms of broad trends regarding age and baptism, several conclusions can now be drawn. First, the number of child baptisms has been declining for over 40 years. As a percentage of all baptisms, child baptisms shows the steepest drop relative to the other categories.¹⁶⁷ Second, the average and median ages of baptism over the last 40 years have almost certainly gone up. This is clear from the charts since while the number of adult baptisms rose in real terms from 1971 to 2002 and only began to drop as Southern Baptist's overall numbers of baptisms began to drop (at a roughly proportional rate to the overall baptismal decline), the actual number of child baptisms has dropped the entire time period surveyed. Third, claims of either a steady decrease in the average age of baptism or of Southern Baptists' "have[ing] become incredibly adept at baptizing preschoolers"¹⁶⁸ are problematic. Such claims based on the pastor's taskforce report are at best ignorant of the actual data because of the unverifiable claims of others.

In summary, Southern Baptists continue to ask questions about the significance of child baptism. Some fear that this practice is leading to an unregenerate church membership. Therefore, some Baptists continue to counsel against the baptism of children while others have counseled caution regarding absolutist policies. Yet, much of the consternation over child baptisms is based on a false narrative of a steady increase in child baptisms.

¹⁶⁷From 37.13% of all baptism in 1971 to 29.77% of all baptisms in 2012. The young adults drop is nearly as steep, going from 21.97% to 16.86 over the same time period.

¹⁶⁸John Mark Yeats, "Baptizing Preschoolers?," *Unfinished Works*, May 17, 2014, accessed May 29, 2014, <http://www.johnmyeats.com/unfinished-works/baptizing-preschoolers>.

Conclusions

From the historical section above, several conclusions can be drawn about Southern Baptists and their views of children. First, the setting of a strict age limit as to when a child can be saved is a historically novel practice from within the Southern Baptist context. Early Southern Baptists explicitly acknowledge the possibility of children as young as four being baptized. Many Southern Baptists throughout the history of the convention have viewed children as valid candidates for conversion as well as for baptism.

Second, throughout their history, Southern Baptists have largely understood water baptism as an act of obedience in response to or even as the profession of one's salvation. Advocates for delaying baptism in order to demonstrate a sanctified life are rare within the Southern Baptist context prior to the twentieth century.

Third, over the last 60 years a narrative has developed among Southern Baptists arguing that the average age of baptism has been decreasing or arguing that Southern Baptists are moving towards paedobaptism because baptisms under the age of six are increasing. This narrative should be rejected for several reasons. First, the average age of baptism among Southern Baptists has actually been increasing for over 50 years, not decreasing as is commonly assumed. Second, the number of baptisms for children under the age of six declined steadily for the last 12 years it was measured. Third, data used to calculate average ages of conversion among Baptists prior to 1966 is deeply flawed and cannot be applied within the Southern Baptist context.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BAPTISM OF CHILDREN AND A REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

In light of the teaching and practice of the New Testament, this dissertation has asserted on the one hand that baptism contemporaneously follows salvation and on the other hand that children are assumed to be valid candidates for conversion. Broadly, two criticisms have been made against this argument. Specifically, some have claimed that the practice of Southern Baptists baptizing their children is a twentieth-century phenomena. Against, this claim this dissertation has shown that the practice of Southern Baptists baptizing even young children predates the origins of the convention and has been argued for or assumed throughout the convention's history. Still, a second major objection against the baptism of children remains, specifically that the practice of baptizing children undermines a regenerate church membership.

For Baptists historically, few issues take on greater significance than that of regenerate church membership. From their founding forward, Baptists have always argued that baptism is a prerequisite for church membership and that conversion was a prerequisite for baptism. Thus, only converted persons were fit to serve as members of a church. Hence, Baptists by their very nature argue for a regenerate church.

For Southern Baptists, baptism is explicitly linked with church membership¹ in every edition of the Baptist Faith and Message. Both the 2000 and 1963 editions express this idea by stating that baptism “being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church

¹The 1925 edition states it differently than the 1963 and 2000 editions. It states that baptism “is prerequisite to the privileges of church relation.” The meaning of such is still clear equivalent to the more modernized language of the 1963 and 2000 editions states above.

membership.”² Some have interpreted this statement to mean that baptism automatically results in church membership.³

While Baptists have historically and confessionally affirmed a regenerate church membership, since the 1960s forward, Baptists theologians have noted a declining interest in such among local Southern Baptist churches.⁴ Garrett makes this claim and notes that the de-prioritization of a regenerate church membership manifest itself in six factors. Specifically, he argues that churches not requiring an oral testimony of one’s conversion prior to salvation, lack doctrinal standards for membership, pressures towards quantitative growth, semi-coercive evangelistic methodologies, rushed votes on new membership, and a willingness “to baptize increasingly younger persons” all contribute “to difficulties of maintaining a regenerate church.”⁵

The baptism of increasingly younger persons is thus seen as symptomatic of a declining interest in a regenerate church membership by many Southern Baptists. Several lines of argument have been advanced to argue that Southern Baptists willingness to baptize increasingly younger children undermines a regenerate church membership. First, drawing from the work of Piaget and Fowler, some have asserted that children cannot cognitively grasp or demonstrate

²Baptist Faith and Message, 2000, Article VII.

³Hammett argues such in his essay on Article VII of the Baptist Faith and Message. He states “to identify with Christ is also to identify with the church, Christ’s body. Acts 2:41 connects baptism with being added to the church. In fact, except for the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-39), all the accounts of baptism in the book of Acts seem to be connected to a church—whether established or just beginning. This is why the *Baptist Faith and Message* describes baptism as a “church ordinance,” and makes it prerequisite to church membership” John Hammett, “Article VII: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 73.

⁴See for example, James Leo Garrett Jr., “Seeking a Regenerate Church Membership,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 3:2 (April 1961): 26. R Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 47-63. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 178-81.

⁵Ibid., 31-33.

conversion. Second, others have asserted that Baptists baptize children not because of theology but because of social pressures to do so. Third, theological objections pertaining to the age of accountability relating to the requirements for salvation, rebaptisms, the ability of children to function as church members, and evangelistic methodologies have all been raised against the practice of baptizing children in relation to a regenerate church membership. In response to each of these objections against the practice of baptizing children, this chapter will consistently demonstrate that each fails because children can cognitively grasp conversion, churches can discern if children are converts, and children can and should be taught to function as church members.

The Psychological Inability of Children to Function as Regenerate Church Members

As noted in the previous chapter, in the latter half of the last century Southern Baptists developed a heightened interest in their own evangelistic and baptismal practices as related to children. As part of the resulting discussions, several Southern Baptists scholars argued that the Bible presented an at best inconclusive picture as to the appropriateness of child evangelistic and initiatory practices.⁶ As a result, numerous scholars turned to psychology and its corresponding insights on child development to ascertain when children can cognitively grasp the specific elements required for conversion and are then in turn ready for baptism and initiation into the

⁶Hendricks assumes such, stating that “Bible references to children are descriptive rather than theological.” Withers makes a similar argument in his dissertation noting “I have attempted to show that neither the New Testament nor early Baptist theology included the baptism of children. The only explicit New Testament texts regarding baptism report the baptism of adults. It is my contention that there is a trend in Southern Baptist churches in which children are being baptized prematurely.” William Hendricks, “The Age of Accountability” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. by Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 93. See also John Warren Withers, “Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), 7.

faith community. While the appropriateness of engaging psychology in this discussion has been challenged,⁷ since the topic has been treated frequently elsewhere, an overview of the psychological objections offered against the baptism of children as well as several responses are in order.⁸

The Psychological Argument against the Baptism of Children

In discussion of the baptism of children, the cognitive inability of children to grasp the gospel is often assumed without an actual engagement with cognitive research.⁹ The four

⁷Danny Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Seminary, makes this argument, stating that, “psychological arguments carry no weight in this discussion.” Daniel Akin, “Ten Mandates for Today’s Southern Baptists,” in *The Mission of Today’s Church*, ed. by Norman Stanton. (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 9.

⁸Such hesitations are often based on a skeptical attitude towards the compatibility of psychology with the Christian faith as a whole as well as certain soteriological presuppositions about the effectual nature of the Holy Spirit’s role in calling individuals to salvation. While from a Christian and Baptist perspective, caution is wise in terms of a wholesale acceptance of all psychological models of faith development, there are cognitive elements to the gospel. Further, while Christian orthodoxy as a whole affirms the sovereignty of God, from a Baptist perspective, which emphasizes conversion as an essential element in orientation to the faith, the Spirit of God’s sovereign work occurs within the context of individuals’ normal cognitive and volitional abilities. Therefore, this section, while presupposing the Scriptures as normative over psychology, remains open to the contributions of psychologists exploring child development.

In regards to the assertion that conversion occurs within the context of normal cognitive processes the Abstract of Principles of Southern Seminary, which is a moderately Calvinistic document and as a result affirms God’s effectual call, is helpful. It notes that God’s sovereign work occurs in such a way as “not in any wise...to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures.” “Abstract of Principles,” The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, last modified 1858, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.sbts.edu/about/truth/abstract/>. For more on the relation between faith and psychology see Timothy E. Clinton and George W. Ohlschlager, *Competent Christian Counseling* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2002).

⁹For example, former Midwestern Seminary professor Temp Sparkman argues that since the science of “growth and development will not admit that the young child is capable of abstract reasoning [or] that he is old enough to accept a philosophy of life,” non-sectarians such as Southern Baptists should not baptize their children. For Sparkman, if children are baptized before coming to a “full awareness” of themselves, such children should be re-baptized. If this does not happen, Baptists become Bushnell-ian in their thought process. Sparkman does not directly interact with or cite any studies of cognitive development (or for that matter even Scripture), but instead simply assumes that “science” clearly shows that children cannot reason abstractly or possess self-awareness. Robert Proctor offers a similar line of argument. He states that “the consensus of psychological opinion would be that one is not an autonomous self, capable of making commitments of one’s self, until early adolescences.” Yet like Sparkman, Proctor also fails to interact with a single psychological source. G. Temp Sparkman “The Implication of Conversion among Young Children,” *Religious Education Journal* 68, no. 541 (July 1965): 300-302, 313. Robert A. Proctor Jr., “Children and Evangelism,” *Review and Expositor* 63, no. 1 (Winter 1966): 62.

doctoral dissertations from a Southern Baptist perspective referenced in the introduction to this dissertation do, however, directly interact with psychological research. As a result, the findings of these four dissertations are discussed below.

Lewis Craig Ratliff's Dissertation

The first major objection to children's cognitive ability to respond to the gospel in a way that is indicative of regeneration is found in the dissertation of Lewis Craig Ratliff.¹⁰ Ratliff argued that the baptistic belief in lordship precludes children from salvation. Specifically, in his dissertation, Ratliff argues that to be a disciple of Jesus one has to be able to follow Jesus as Lord.¹¹ To follow Jesus as Lord, one must be capable of grasping abstract concepts relating to sin, repentance, and the atonement of Christ, and one must be able to function independently in the sense of being able to self-criticize must be able to function autonomously in the social setting of the community of faith. In light of such, Ratliff questions if children can follow Jesus as Lord. To answer this question Ratliff turns to the theories of child development as presented based upon the research of Piaget.

Ratliff notes that the beginner child (ages four-five) "is extremely concrete minded," which he defines as lack of an ability to grasp symbolic meaning. Such children ask "inappropriate" (or heretical) religious questions, understand God through an entirely parental lens, and are characterized by a blind faith independent of reality (as seen in an adamant belief in

¹⁰Lewis Craig Ratliff, "Discipleship, Church Membership and Children among Southern Baptists: An Investigation of the Place of Children in a Baptist Church in View of Christ's Teaching on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963).

¹¹Ratliff summarizes his argument on the nature of conversion and discipleship as, "The argument thus far has been that one is accountable for his eternal destiny according to his relation to Christ. The relation between the Christian and his Lord is the Lordship-discipleship relation."Ibid., 132.

Santa). Thus, Ratliff reasons that at such an age, “children cannot find their fulfillment in personalized religion.”¹²

As with the beginner, so also with the primary child (ages six-eight), Ratliff asserts that these children cannot respond to the gospel. He argues that they have “little mental facility to deal with abstraction.” Specifically, children at this age do “not possess enough experience to reason clearly or strongly.”¹³ Such children, Ratliff argues, have “no responsibility because [they are] not capable of having it. [As a result, such children possess only] rudimentary knowledge of God and the world, but comprehend very little of its real meaning.”¹⁴ Therefore, while Christian education and nurture are of utmost importance for such children, Ratliff reasons that they cannot be converted.

In the junior years (ages nine-12) the child’s development turns sharply according to Ratliff. Children disassociate from parents as their primary source of identification, learn to love unselfishly, and develop a true morality. Further, it is in the junior years that children begin to apply “abstract principles of fairness and unfairness, right and wrong.”¹⁵

Ratliff therefore argues that children begin to move towards a readiness for faith at the end of the junior years (12 at the earliest) and even more so as the child moves into the intermediate years (13-16). Yet, Ratliff cautions about seeing twelve year-olds as genuine converts. Instead, he notes that at twelve while a few children begin to grasp concepts abstractly,

¹²Ibid., 153-54.

¹³Ibid., 155-56.

¹⁴Ibid., 156.

¹⁵Ibid., 161.

or to emerge from parental sway in their thinking, none are responsible before society.¹⁶ Thus, “as a general rule, twelve does not have the necessary maturity to become a disciple.”

It is only by the age of 14 that “the adolescent has gained the power of abstract thinking. Now he can understand what it means to take Jesus as his Lord. He can comprehend repentance, [*sic*] faith, sin, and discipleship. By these criteria, fourteen has reached the age of disciple-ability.”¹⁷ It is at 14 that Ratliff argues that persons enter a point of independence in which self-criticism is possible. Ratliff reasons that self-criticism is essential for a person to be converted because “self-criticism precedes repentance. Fourteen has this ability.”¹⁸ Further, it is at 14 that Ratliff believes a person is capable of becoming a church member who can enter the mission of Jesus and be responsible for discipline. In order to do such, one must have reached a point of social maturity in which one can contemplate “the basic choices that must soon be made and at the same time have competence in determining one’s present social life.”¹⁹

So to summarize, based on the out-workings of the cognitive theories of Piaget, Ratliff argues that individuals become accountable before God and are thus fit persons for discipleship around the age of 14. Ratliff reasons that 14 is the age at which a person can be converted because only at 14 are individuals able to reason abstractly, self-criticize, and think about the future as well as one present social standing within the community of faith. Only once an adolescent can function in these ways does the adolescent become an independent person capable of conversion, submission to the lordship of Jesus and disciple-ability.

¹⁶Ibid., 162-67.

¹⁷Ibid., 172.

¹⁸Ibid., 174 .

¹⁹Ibid., 177.

Douglas Clark

Douglas Clark's dissertation from 1970 offers a second insight into the psychological justifications used to baptize young children. Clark also relies on Piaget's stages of cognitive development as well as the work of Erik Erikson's stages of personality development. Clark asserts that work of Piaget and Erikson harmonize and reveal a picture of the young children as unable to grasp the gospel.²⁰ From such, Clark is able not only to argue that children are not ready to grasp the cognitive concepts of the gospel but also isolates a reason for false childhood conversions.

In regards to childhood conversions, Clark explains that beginning at the age of five or six children develop "a capacity for guilt."²¹ Children growing up within the Southern Baptist faith context will almost certainly "have this latent capacity awakened." As a result, childhood faith decisions are built upon "a sense of guilt and a need to find forgiveness and reconciliation."²² Yet, Clark believes that a sense of guilt alone is not sufficient for a child to be viewed as a convert. Rather, baptism and a church affirmation of such children as converts should be delayed. Instead, these children should be given the Lord's Supper.²³

Gary Thomas Deane

Clark closes his dissertation noting that additional research is needed regarding "the nature of [children's] religious experiences," as well as "conceptual development of children's"

²⁰Melvin Douglas Clark, "The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), 227-28.

²¹Ibid., 230-31.

²²Ibid., 231.

²³Ibid., chapter 5.

cognitive skills. Gary Thomas Deane's dissertation from Southwestern Seminary accepts Clark's call to additional research in these areas.²⁴ Specifically, Deane applies Piaget's stages of development to the faith development of children. In order to do this, Deane surveyed children attending a summer Vacation Bible School at the Glorieta Conference center in New Mexico in 1980. His survey took places over eight weeks and he interviewed 819 children.²⁵ The children he surveyed were evenly distributed across ages.²⁶ From both a cognitive and New Testament perspective, Clark assumes that children should not be viewed as valid candidates for conversion.²⁷

Deane's methodology was to survey children's conceptions of Christian conversion, baptism, and church membership. The children in question were all Southern Baptists and had just competed between grade levels three and six. Deane's survey was vetted by a panel of experts.²⁸ The children surveyed were highly churchied; 80.9% had been baptized, with the average of baptism being 7.8.²⁹ Deane shows that in line with Piaget's model, older children will reason more abstractly in regards to the domains of Christian conversion, language of Christian

²⁴Deane asserts that his research is the logical outgrowth of a rising concern regarding the baptism of children in specifically citing Ingle's collection of essays in *Children and Conversion* as well as Clark's dissertation arguing for delaying the baptism of children. Gary Thomas Deane, "An Investigation of the Child's Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development" (EdD. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); Clark, "The Evangelism of Children." Clifford Ingle, et al., eds., *Children and Conversion* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970).

²⁵Deane, "An Investigation," 56.

²⁶Ibid., 60.

²⁷Ibid., chapter 1.

²⁸Including theology professors, senior pastors, and children's ministry leaders.

²⁹Deane, "An Investigation," 62-63.

conversion, church membership, and baptism.³⁰ Additional analysis of Deane's data will be offered in the section of responses below.

John Warren Withers

Following Deane, John Warren Withers completed his Ph.D. dissertation from Southern Seminary in 1997.³¹ Withers's dissertation has proven particularly significant for those arguing against the baptism of children as it provides a potential rationale for why pastors have viewed increasingly younger children as valid candidates for baptism.³² Unlike Ratliff and Clark, who directly argue that children are not cognitively capable of grasping salvation, Withers does concede that "children can, and do, experience personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."³³ Even when this is the case, Withers asserts that discernment of the cognitive-faith development of children is almost impossible. As a result, the baptism of children should be delayed until children can clearly express faith that normally happens during adolescence.³⁴ Such

³⁰Ibid., 82.

³¹John Warren Withers. "Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); Melvin Douglas Clark, "The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969).

³²For example, Dever cites Withers approvingly, asserting that, "in 1996, John Withers submitted a doctoral dissertation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in which he noted this trend and suggested that it occurred in the twentieth century largely due to social pressures on the pastor." Mark Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 346; John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005).

³³Withers, "Social Forces," 5.

³⁴Ibid., 118ff.

delay will help to assure that children are genuine converts and preserve a regenerate membership.³⁵

In arguing for the inability of adults to discern child conversion, Withers present a series of psychological arguments derived from the cognitive work of Piaget as well as the faith-development work of Fowler.³⁶ As a primer for his discussion on the ability of children to respond to the Gospel in a way that adults can discern, Withers notes the cognitive requirements that the gospel presents for salvation.

The two human responses involved in salvation are faith and repentance. For a child there is no problem regarding faith. All believers must have faith like a child. Jesus described the faith of children as exemplary. The problem area in childhood understanding is repentance. Repent means simply “to turn.” When applied to one’s relationship with God, repentance involves a mature understanding of turning away from anything displeasing to God and turning to everything that pleases God. It indicates a rational choice has been made to co-operate with God in the transformations of one life [*sic*] that are necessary to please him. The message of repentance *is* depicted by Paul as a death. Mature thinking capacity is needed *in* order to understand repentance.³⁷

With this in mind, Withers turns towards Piaget, Fowler, and cognitive development as it relates to faith.

He notes Piaget’s four successive stages of cognitive development.³⁸ In applying Piaget to the conversion of children, Withers argues that children must “be taught to think through

³⁵Withers expresses a strong concern regarding false conversion and an unregenerate membership in his introduction. He states, “From my perspective, the danger of baptizing young children is to imply that salvation has occurred in their lives” and “If children are being baptized without being converted the churches can have a growing number of unregenerate church members. Premature baptism could help account for increasing numbers of Southern Baptist church members who cannot be located or have become inactive.” Ibid., 5,7 .

³⁶Ibid., chapter 3. Cf James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1981); Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic, 1969); Jean Piaget, *Possibility and Necessity: Volume 1* (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³⁷Withers, “Social Forces,” 35.

³⁸They are sensorimotor, birth to age two; preoperational, age two to seven; concrete operations, age seven to 11; and formal operations, age 11 through adulthood. Withers, “Social Forces,” 81.

problems.” If they make decisions without doing such, “they are being encouraged so as to ‘erect a verbal superstructure that may crumble under even minimal cognitive stress.’”³⁹ If children simply learn to recite facts about the gospel without a cognitive understanding of such facts, when these children are challenged they will be far more inclined to reject the gospel.

Withers also highlights Piaget’s understandings of guilt, lies, and moral failures as relevant to his thesis that the baptism of children should be delayed. He argues from Piaget’s studies that, “this research indicates that children up to age 10 are in a precarious position with regard to understanding the nature of sin.”⁴⁰ Only during middle childhood (ages seven-11) does a child begin to “understand intentionality regarding right and wrong.”⁴¹

Withers continues noting the implications of Piaget’s work as applied to the children’s ability to be introspective and to reflect on their reasoning processes. Before age 11 or 12, children’s ability to do such is limited. Withers reasons from such “If one does not know why salvation is needed, is it possible for one to receive it? The directions of one’s own thoughts deal with the processes of logic and reason. If children are not yet capable of thinking through and understanding a commitment of life, children cannot understand sufficiently the concept of salvation.”⁴²

Withers believes that Piaget’s research clearly shows that “children before the age of 7 or 8 do not follow logical patterns” and that children are not capable of real logical experiment prior

³⁹Ibid., 83-84.

⁴⁰Ibid., 86.

⁴¹Ibid., 88.

⁴²Ibid., 89.

to 11 or 12.⁴³ Only when they reach age 12, the fourth stage of Piaget's developmental schema, are children capable of formal thought and logical assumptions. Therefore, Withers argues that "It would be an error to move children too quickly on their faith journey during a time when they are arranging their thoughts so as to be able to make decisions based upon good judgment and sound reasoning."⁴⁴

Withers also looks briefly at the work of Kohlberg, Elkind, and Klausmeier. From Kohlberg he notes that children do not volitionally embrace the beliefs that they practice until around the age of 13.⁴⁵ From Elkind, Withers argues that children ages seven through 11 have an inability to recognize the truth.⁴⁶ From Klausmeier, he notes that young children are able to gain simplistic understandings from which a greater truth can be understood later in life. Withers states, "Young children who see a picture of Jesus and are taught "Jesus loves you" may be capable of transferring the concept of love that they experience from their father and mother to the concept of love from this person, Jesus, which does not mean that children understand salvation."⁴⁷ As a result of the work of these psychologists, taken together with the formative work of Piaget, Withers argues that the baptism of children is at best unwise because of their cognitive inability to grasp the abstract reality that is Christian salvation.

Withers closes his discussion of child development with an in-depth treatment of James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*. Withers finds Fowler's six stages of faith development particularly

⁴³Ibid., 91.

⁴⁴Ibid., 92.

⁴⁵Ibid., 95.

⁴⁶Ibid., 99.

⁴⁷Ibid., 104.

helpful to his overall argument, outlining each in detail.⁴⁸ From Fowler, Withers notes that children struggle to distinguish between fantasy and reality before the age of eight. It is only as the child enters the synthetic-conventional faith stage “that cognitive awareness is sufficiently developed in children for them to question the authority of the beliefs they have been taught and either adopt or reject them for themselves.” This occurs in early adolescence.⁴⁹

Withers asserts that Fowler research is complimentary to his thesis, specifically “that salvation in children is progressive and should not be validated through baptism prematurely.”⁵⁰ Since Fowler argues that both the home and the church play a key role in the faith development of children throughout childhood, Withers notes that the home and church should play this role. Baptism then becomes “the more dramatic step in the conversion process for children.”⁵¹

While Withers concedes that the faith Fowler has in view is not the saving faith of the Bible, but rather is a type of human faith that tries to make sense out of life, Withers is undeterred. Withers argues from Fowler that when children have premature conversion experiences, such experiences have a stunting effect on their faith development. Teaching children about hell and the devil at a young age will often lead to an early faith commitment “in which the child takes on adult faith identity” but such leads to “a very rigid and authoritarian personality in adulthood.”⁵² Following Fowler, Withers then argues that “people who take on

⁴⁸Stage 0 is primal faith age 0-three. Stage 1 is intuitive projective faith ages three-seven. Stage 2 is mythic-literal faith ages seven-early adolescences. Stage 3 is synthetic conventional faith that occurs during adolescence. Stage 4 is individuate-reflective occurs in late adolescences or early adulthood. Stage 5 is conjunctive faith, which does not occur prior to mid-life. Finally, stage 6 is universalizing faith, which only occurs in a rare number of individuals. Withers, “Social Forces,” 105-110. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

⁴⁹Withers, “Social Forces,” 119.

⁵⁰Ibid., 116.

⁵¹Ibid., 117.

⁵²Ibid., 118.

prematurely the patterns of adult faith modeled by their church will not go through the normal processes and stages of faith development and remain in that stage of non-faith development for life.”⁵³ Withers believes such individuals are common in Southern Baptist churches based upon his own experiences. Therefore, Withers argues for baptismal delay of child converts because there is no way to discern if children are genuinely converted. Withers reasons that it is only in early adolescences that a child can apply faith to themselves.

In Response to the Psychological Arguments against the Baptism of Children

Several significant responses can be offered to the psychological objections of Withers, Deane, Clark, and Ratliff. Specifically, a study of Scripture, contemporary theories of cognitive development, child evangelism practices, assumptions related to theories of faith development, and the relationship between age of conversion and life-long faith commitment provide ample warrant for rejecting the dated psychological arguments offered above against the conversion and baptism of children.

Biblical Reasons

The first response to these lines of arguments has already been offered in chapter 2 of this dissertation. Specifically, the reason Clark, Withers, and Ratliff argue that it is necessary to turn to psychology to support their arguments is because they argue that children are not presented as candidates for conversion or baptism in the New Testament. Chapter 2 has presented a series of arguments showing that even young children in both Testaments are presented as valid

⁵³Ibid.

candidates for discipleship, and are held accountable for their sins. Further, the New Testament notes of children that their natural state of dependence makes them more receptive to conversion than adults and issues direct appeals to children as members of the faith community. As a result, the implicit or explicit claims of scriptural silence by those who object to the baptism of children lack substance.

Ephesians 6:1-4, which was treated in depth in chapter 2 of this dissertation, is particularly relevant to their insistence of a need to turn to psychology. This passage deals with children's obedience to parents as well as parents training and instruction of their children. While Ratliff asserts that children cannot be converted because they are not yet ready to submit to Jesus as lord as part of the discipleship process, this passage states explicitly that because children are "in the Lord" they are to obey their parents. Such indicates that children can be disciples and submit to the Lord. Moreover, contra Withers's presuppositions, Paul's command to the Ephesian children to obey parents obviously assumes the possibility of disobedience to parents. In commanding children to obey, Paul is also commanding children to abandon or repudiate disobedience. Given that repentance is by its very nature an abandonment or repudiation of sin⁵⁴ to claim, as Withers does, that children cannot repent, ignores Paul's explicit teaching to children.⁵⁵ Therefore, since the Scriptures are not silent about the role of children in the faith

⁵⁴The negative aspect of conversion is the abandonment or repudiation of sin. This is what we mean by repentance. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 947.

⁵⁵Tellingly, both Withers and Ratliff avoid treatments of Ephesians 6:1-4. Ratliff ignores it all together. Withers makes one brief statement about the passage in order to argue from it that children are part of community of faith and thus do not need baptism. He cites Beasley-Murray to justify this argument. While Beasley-Murray does make a passing reference to the passage in *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, he does not use the passage to rule out the baptism of children. Indeed, Withers ignores Beasley-Murray's argument in the pages directly following the allusion he cites as well as Beasley-Murray's article on the theology of the child. Reading Beasley-Murray in the context of his larger theology of the child, it is clear that he sees the converted (even young) child as a valid candidate for baptism. Beasley-Murray notes that "children reach maturity at different ages" and as a result, "grace, already given in the death burial and resurrection of Christ, needs to be symbolized in an event that may be continuously remembered by the child. Baptism is the event and Christian education provides the memory and recall that is necessary." Therefore, Beasley-Murray concludes that "Baptists should repudiate the concept of adult baptism in

community, as is wrongly assumed by Withers, Ratliff, Deane, and Clark, insights from psychology are subservient to Scripture from a Southern Baptist perspective.

Cognitive Development

Second, while Withers, Clark, and Ratliff present a unified narrative that psychology has shown that the cognitive development of the child means that children cannot grasp the truths of Christianity at an early age, such claims fail to account for advances in cognitive research from the mid-1970s forward. It is widely acknowledged today that children can learn far more than Piaget originally thought. Even those who agree with the major features of Piaget's approach have modified major aspects of his theory. Specifically, as even basic textbooks of child development now acknowledge, these Neo-Piagetians "retain the idea that the acquisition of knowledge goes through stages, but they believe that individuals' passage through the stages occur at different rates in different domains. A child may be a demon chess player or a precocious musician, yet solve typical Piagetian tasks no better than his peers."⁵⁶

This idea that children learn different skills at different rates was first explored in the research of Michelene Chi and Randi Koeske in 1983. They studied the cognitive abilities of a 4 ½-year-old boy who "had been exposed to dinosaur information for about 1 ½ years. Like many children of his age, he was very interested in dinosaurs and was highly motivated to learn about them. His parents read dinosaur books to him often during this period (an average of 3 hours per week), and he had a collection of nine dinosaur books and various plastic models for use in

favor of baptism of *confessors of Christ*" (emphasis original). G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (New York: St. Martin's, 1966), 103ff; Withers, "Social Forces," 58-59; G. R. Beasley-Murray, "The Theology of the Child," *American Baptist Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1982): 201-202.

⁵⁶Michael Cole and Sheila R. Cole, *The Development of Children*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth, 2000), 350.

play.”⁵⁷ Chi and Koeske then probed the child’s knowledge of dinosaur names as well as various characteristics about these dinosaurs in order for “information [to be] obtained about the child’s recognition and spontaneous generation of a subset of the dinosaurs and their properties.”⁵⁸ After observing the child, two lists were generated, one consisting of 20 names the child mentioned most frequently and another of 20 names he mentioned less frequently. The child was able to memorize twice as many names from the list of names he mentioned more frequently than from the list he mentioned less frequently. Further, the child was able generate attributes about the dinosaurs when given their names.⁵⁹ From this, Chi and Koeski concluded that the more a young child knows about a topic, the easier it is for the child to recall items pertaining to that topic.⁶⁰

Chi followed up on her research in 1986 and again in 1988. These later studies examined more specifically how one’s knowledge of a domain affected one’s ability to reason about that domain (the domain once again was dinosaurs).⁶¹ In these studies, Chi explored the differences in reasoning abilities between children who had an “expert knowledge” of dinosaurs and children who had a “novice knowledge.”⁶² She found that those with an expert level knowledge of the domain (dinosaurs) could successfully classify dinosaurs they that had previously never seen before because they could reason about the dinosaur’s physical features. Of this finding Chi and her team then note:

⁵⁷Michelene T. Chi and Randi D. Koeske, “Network Representation of a Child’s Dinosaur Knowledge,” *Developmental Psychology* 19, no. 1 (1983): 31.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 31-35.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 36-38.

⁶¹Michelene T. H. Chi, Jean E. Hutchinson, and Anne F. Robin, “How Inferences about Novel Domain-Related Concepts can be Constrained by Structured Knowledge,” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 35 no. 1 (1989): 27-62.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 38-39.

It seems that young children often reason in a naive way because they lack the relevant domain knowledge. But the direct evidence of our present study shows that 4- to 7-year-olds can reason deductively for domains (such as dinosaurs) in which they have acquired an independent and coherent theory. These young experts reason much like the way 10 year-olds and adults reasoned in the [another] study.⁶³

Chi also argues from her study that “background knowledge per se can enable the expert children to learn new domain-related concepts more readily, despite the fact that both expert and novice children have the same fundamental learning skills.”⁶⁴ The conclusion of her studies is “that one reason that children generally display global inadequacy across a number of domains is that they lack the relevant knowledge in a number of domains. By selecting a domain that some children know something about, qualitatively superior abilities that can be attributed only to domain-specific knowledge and the way that it is organized have been demonstrated.”⁶⁵

Thus, from Chi’s research the idea that even young children can develop “islands of competence” when children know something about a specific areas has arisen. As a result of Chi’s study among young children, a whole body of literature on these islands of competences has developed exploring all the various ways children’s cognitive abilities can advance more rapidly than Piaget projected.⁶⁶

⁶³Ibid., 50.

⁶⁴Ibid., 59.

⁶⁵Ibid., 61.

⁶⁶The idea of islands of competence does not come directly from Chi. Rather as Cole and Cole note, it is one relevant domain demonstrating that children are capable of understanding more than Piaget previously understood. These domains, Cole and Cole label as “islands of competence.” Cole and Cole, *The Development of Children*, 344-354, 359-363. Environmental-learning accounting for increased knowledge and reasoning abilities within a domain has also been applied to gifted children’s science reasoning skills. K. H. Kim et al. “Assessing Science Reasoning and Conceptual Understanding in the Primary Grades Using Standardized and Performance-Based Assessments,” *Journal of Advanced Academics* 25, no. 1 (March 2014): 47-66. It has also been applied to children’s reading skills. Broek, Paul, Elizabeth Puzles Lorch, and Richard Thurlow. “Children’s and Adults’ Memory for Television Stories: The Role of Causal Factors, Story-Grammar Categories, and Hierarchical Level.” *Child Development* 67, no. 6 (December 1996): 3010-28

As was noted above, Clark, Deane, Ratliff, and Withers all apply the four-stage cognitive development model of Piaget to the conversion of children. As a result, all (to lesser and greater extents) argue that children are cognitively incapable of either grasping (Ratliff, Clark, Deane) or applying (Withers) the gospel. Therefore, they universally conclude that it is at best unwise to baptize younger children. Yet, this application of Piaget fails to account for the fact that children can develop islands of competence about subject matters and as a result are able to reason and communicate about such matters in ways that are beyond what their age-level would otherwise anticipate. As a result, one would expect that children growing up in environments in which they were educated about Christianity, the Bible, and the gospel message in a way that caused the child to take an interest in such matters would comprehend the gospel message and conversion at a much younger age.

At this point it is appropriate to look further into the research of Gary Deane. As noted in the last section, his dissertation from Southwestern deserves a second look in light of this idea of islands of competence. Deane argues that his survey of children at Vacation Bible School at Glorieta reveals that older children reason more abstractly about conversion, baptism, and church membership than younger children.⁶⁷ While the necessity of abstract reasoning for a correct

⁶⁷At this point several weakness of Deane's study should be noted. Specifically, Deane does not ask about a conversion experience in his biographical survey. He (possibly) assumes that baptism implies a conversion experience. Yet, since he is exploring the reasoning skills of children as it pertains to the separate domains of baptism and conversion, such an omission in his survey stands as a significant weakness in its application to child conceptions of conversion.

Further, while Deane acknowledges that 19.1% of the children had not been baptized and that the younger children were less likely to be baptized, he does not distinguish between baptized and unbaptized children in his results. Since, Deane never examines the significance of baptism (and potentially correspondingly conversion) for abstract versus concrete reasoning skills as it applies to his four measured domains. It is quite possible that baptized children reasons more abstractly about conversion, baptism and church membership than do unbaptized children, however Deane does not look for statistical significance or correlation between these measures. Arguably, since nearly 20% of the children are unbaptized, this importance population could be affecting his measures significantly. While this was outside the purpose of his study, such limits the application of his study. Deane, "An Investigation," 91, 62, 64.

conception of conversion is open to debate,⁶⁸ Deane does not interact with a significant finding of his research, namely that even the young children he surveyed were able to successfully reason abstractly on several of his questions.

Deane classifies his questions of children into four domains (concepts of conversion, language of conversion, church membership as understood by Southern Baptists, and baptism as practiced by Southern Baptists). The responses to Deane's questions pertaining to the conception of Christian conversion⁶⁹ showed that even younger children possessed a high level of abstract reasoning skills on three of the five questions he asked.⁷⁰ This is true even though Deane failed to isolate for the fact that 19.1% of respondents were unbaptized and that a significant number of these unbaptized persons were in the younger age groups.⁷¹ Despite the limitations of Deane's

⁶⁸"At six or seven, many children are ready to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. At this age, a child begins to put together a connected story." Salvation is grasped by such children through the use of "supportive concrete ideas, such as being set free from a prison, being bought like a gift, or receiving a prize or gift." Elsiebeth McDaniel, "Understanding First and Second Graders (Primaries)," in *Childhood Education in the Church*, ed. Robert E. Clark, Joanne Brubaker, and Roy B. Zuck, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 132; Edward L. Hayes, "Evangelism of Children," in *Childhood Education in the Church*, ed. Robert E. Clark, Joanne Brubaker, and Roy B. Zuck, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 410.

⁶⁹Deane does note that this domain, "discriminated the least between the age groups," but he does not go beyond this to examine the significance of this result or to explore what it means that young children were able to reason abstractly. Deane, "An Investigation," 80

⁷⁰Deane also asked questions about sin and faith. Specifically he asked "Sin is _____" with the abstract answer being "choosing your own way instead of God's way" of which 70.3% responded, the middling answer being "doing something when you really know you shouldn't" of which 18.0% responded, and the concrete answer being "doing something bad" of which 11.7% of all the children responded. While from a theological perspective the first answer is the most complete, all three answers reflect a sufficient understanding of sin for a person to respond properly to the gospel.

He also asked "To have faith in Jesus means _____" of which 71.4% responded with the abstract answer of "you trust Jesus to forgive your sins," 26.8% responded with the middling response of "you believe what the Bible says about Jesus," and only 1.8% responded with the concrete (and theologically wrong) response of "doing something good." Both answers 2 and 3 are theologically acceptable definitions of faith. As a result, even those questions which were asked by Deane which supposedly show that younger children reasoned more abstractly than older children, the questions themselves do not reveal that the younger children did not have a proper grasp of the topic in view (in this case sin and faith), but rather that all the children had theologically correct understandings of sin and faith. Ibid., 68, 92, 101. See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 951-54.

⁷¹Unfortunately, Deane never examines the significance of baptism (and potentially correspondingly conversion) for abstract versus concrete reasoning skills as it applies to his four measured domains. It is quite possible that baptized children reasons more abstractly about conversion, baptism and church membership than do unbaptized children, however Deane does not look for statistical significance or correlation between these measures.

study, it remains noteworthy that Deane found that 94.1%⁷² of all children surveyed responded to the question “To Become a Christian a person must_____” with the abstract response of “decide to choose God’s way instead of your own.” While Deane does not break down the responses to any of his questions by age,⁷³ the fact that the overwhelming majority of children at this Vacation Bible School responded to his question with the correct abstract response indicates that even young children reasoned abstractly (and correctly) about the idea of Jesus’ Lordship.⁷⁴ Given the contention of Ratliff’s dissertation was that children could not grasp lordship until they reached the age of 14, Clark’s finding at this point throws much of Ratliff’s argument for baptismal delay into doubt.

Deane also found that 95.8⁷⁵ of all children surveyed responded to the question “A Christian is _____” with the abstract answer of “a person who has placed his faith in Jesus.”⁷⁶ This indicates that the majority of young children gave an equivalent verbal response as to the appropriate object of faith as older children. It further reveals that even young children recognized that conversion requires a total commitment of oneself to Christ. Additionally, Deane notes that 92.4%⁷⁷ of all children surveyed responded to the question “that the best reason for

Arguably, since nearly 20% of the children are unbaptized, this importance population could be affecting his measures significantly. While this was outside the purpose of his study, it limits the application of his study. Dean, “An Investigation,” 62, 64.

⁷²Ibid., 68.

⁷³Rather, he simply notes that there was even distribution of responses by age between the ages of 8 and 12, Ibid., 60.

⁷⁴Which is even more significant given Clark’s failure to isolate for the fact that 19.1% of his respondents were unbaptized.

⁷⁵Ibid., 68.

⁷⁶Ibid., 92.

⁷⁷Ibid., 68.

becoming a Christian and being baptized is because _____” with the abstract answer “you have faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.” Taken together, the responses Deane records to these three questions reveals that a majority of these young children were abstractly reasoning about the nature of conversion.

Understanding Deane’s research within the context of islands of competence, it becomes clear that young children can reason abstractly about conversion. The vast majority of his participants were from highly church backgrounds, and, as a result, it is reasonable to assume that many would have a significant exposure to the criteria for conversion prior to taking Deane’s questionnaire. Within this context, despite Deane’s failure to isolate for the fact that a significant percentage of his younger respondents were unbaptized, it follows that many of his younger respondents would have developed islands of competence about conversion.

Applying Deane’s results to arguments against baptizing young children that state that young children cannot abstractly reason about conversion, such arguments should be at least partially rejected. In fact, for children being raised in environments in which there is significant exposure to the idea of conversion, Deane’s results understood through the lens of Chi’s research indicate that even young children are able to abstractly reason and grasp the nature of conversion if they have significant knowledge of conversion as result of living in an environment in which they are frequently exposed to this concept.

Evangelistic Reasons

Third, in agreement with Withers, when it comes to the conversion of children one cannot simply assume that a recitation of verbal facts by a child in and of itself indicates that this child has been converted. Yet, (contra Withers) from such it does not follow that the baptism should be delayed for all children. Instead of contradicting the New Testament pattern of contemporaneous

baptism for converts,⁷⁸ parents, teachers, church leaders, and pastors who are confronted with such children have an obligation to seek to discern if these children actually cognitively can grasp the gospel and desire to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ within their lives. Through asking open-ended questions,⁷⁹ even young children's conceptions of the gospel message as well as their willingness to repent and recognize Jesus' lordship in their lives can be discerned.⁸⁰

Faith-Development

Fourth, despite Withers's caveats, applying Fowler's stages of faith development to Christian conversion is highly problematic. Specifically, Withers acknowledges that the faith Fowler has in view is not the saving faith of Christian conversion. Rather the faith he has in view is of a more humanistic variety that allows a person to find meaning in life. While Withers still believes that Fowler's stages are applicable, in reality Fowler's vision of faith as presented by Withers is incompatible with Southern Baptists' understanding of faith.

As noted above, Fowler⁸¹ argues that children can be converted at the synthetic-conventional stage of faith development. Fowler notes of this stage that a person experiences

⁷⁸See chapter 1.

⁷⁹For example, of the child expressing a desire for salvation and baptism, one could ask questions such as, "why do you want to be baptized?" or "why do you want to be saved?" Such questions force the child to express in his or her own words what is taking place in the child's life. If the response of the child seems scripted, other questions could be asked about the nature of repentance or lordship. The point of such questions is to see if the child can express salvation as his or her own independent of adult pressures. Therefore, while parents should be present for such discussion it is of vital importance to let the child express himself in his own words.

⁸⁰Hayes notes "avoid making the invitation so easy that acceptance is not genuine. Some response is necessary." Hayes, "Evangelism of Children," 409.

⁸¹The descriptions of Fowler's views are understood through the lens of Withers's dissertation. The reason that Fowler is being interpreted through this lens is because it is only Withers's interpretation of Fowler that is germane to the research questions of this dissertation.

“disillusionment, [and a] questioning [of] the authority of the stories they once took literally.”⁸²

Further, at this stage, faith development lacks an objective ideology, lacks an independent perspective, and is unsure of itself to the extent that it cannot make independent judgments.⁸³ It is surprising then that in this time of supposed personal uncertainty that Withers argues that children should be baptized and affirmed as converts since it is at this stage that children can “cognitively embrace for themselves the faith they have been taught.”⁸⁴ Based on Withers’s description of the synthetic-conventional stage of faith-development, he implies that faith should be embraced with uncertainty.

Withers description of Fowler’s final three phases of faith development amplify this impression. The individuitive-reflective stage begins as early as late adolescence. Fowler notes that this stage is characterized by a movement from “the absolutes of previous faith stages.” Instead, these absolutes “become more relative and individualized by people in this stage of faith development.”⁸⁵ Conjunctive faith follows, normally in mid-life, in which the individual “sees truth in apparent contradiction.”⁸⁶ Faith then reaches its zenith in a universalizing faith. This type of faith is described as a quasi-universalism in which the individual transcends his own tribe and instead “relinquish themselves for the sake of love and justice at the moral and religious levels.

⁸²Withers, “Social Forces,” 108

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., 119.

⁸⁵Ibid., 109.

⁸⁶Withers, “Social Forces,” 109.

They live with a felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world. They embrace a universal Community.”⁸⁷

It impossible to reconcile Withers’s understanding of Fowler’s stages of faith progression with the description of faith offered in the Baptist Faith and Message. This document, which serves as the confessional doctrinal statement of Southern Baptists, defines faith as “the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior.”⁸⁸ From adolescence forward, the faith Withers argues for from his understanding of Fowler’s research is increasingly a relativized faith rooted in a sense of progressing doubt about absolutes. Since Southern Baptists argue that faith involves a total commitment, Withers’s understanding of Fowler’s progression for faith development provides an inadequate rubric by which to judge the validity of childhood faith commitments.

Age of Conversion and Faith Commitment of Adults

Fifth, as noted above, the overarching concern underlying attempts to delay the baptism of children is based on the belief that such children are not capable of cognitively committing to a lifetime of Christian service.⁸⁹ Yet, there is a growing body of research that indicates that people who come to faith as children⁹⁰ go on to become the most committed Christians later in life. In a 2004 survey, the Barna group offered a significant support to this line of thought. Specifically, based on a phone survey of 992 born again Christians from across the country, they

⁸⁷Ibid., 110.

⁸⁸Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 Article IV, Part A.

⁸⁹See footnote 31.

⁹⁰ As opposed to as adolescents or adults.

found that 43% of adult born-again Christians became born again prior to the age of 13.

Significantly for purposes of this dissertation, Barna found that “People who become Christian before their teen years are more likely than those who are converted when older to remain ‘absolutely committed’ to Christianity” while those who convert as high school or college students were the least likely to describe their faith as deeply meaningful. The determining factor for the majority of those individuals converting at a young age was their family. Barna notes, “Among Christians who embraced Christ before their teen years, half were led to Christ by their parents, with another one in five led by some other friend or relative.”⁹¹

In a follow-up study in 2009, Barna found that early-life spiritual experiences within the local church context played a key role in church attendance as adults. Barna notes, “among those who frequently attended [church] programs as a child, 50% said they attended a worship service in the last week.” Further, Barna found that “weekly activity as a child...[was] connected with the lowest levels of disconnection from church attendance” as an adult.⁹²

Within a specifically Baptist context, Baylor University’s Dennis Horton’s 2007 study, which examined the relationship between age of conversion and long-term faith commitment through a nationwide survey, is particularly noteworthy.⁹³ Horton anonymously surveyed ministry students from over 50 different theological schools and found that a disproportionate

⁹¹The Barna Group, “Evangelism is Most Effective among Kids,” Barna Group, October 11, 2004, accessed June 30, 2014, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids#.VQR_tI54pcR.

⁹²The Barna Group, “New Research Explores the Long-Term Effect of Spiritual Activity among Children and Teens,” Barna Group, November 16, 2009, accessed June 30, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/family-kids/321-new-research-explores-the-long-term-effect-of-spiritual-activity-among-children-and-teens#.VQSAFo54pcS>.

⁹³Horton’s survey included a significant number of adherents from other credobaptistic denominational contexts. Still, a plurality of his respondents (1,054 out of 2,604 total) were Baptists. Further, Horton isolates that Baptists from the other groups in many of his findings. Dennis Horton, “Ministry Student Ages and Implications for Child Evangelism and Baptism Practices,” *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 30-51.

percentage of Baptist ministry students were converted at a young age in comparison with overall baptisms.⁹⁴ Horton states, “While only about 1 % of the Baptist congregants reported a preschool age, about 8% of the Baptist ministry students noted that they became a Christian during their preschool years. The percentage of early elementary conversions (ages 6-8) was about three times higher for the ministry students (26%) than for [typical] congregants (9%).”⁹⁵

While several implications of Horton’s research will be explored in a later section, two findings of it are key to this discussion on the cognitive ability of young children to grasp the gospel. First, the younger the age of a Baptist ministry student’s conversion, the more regular he or she was in church attendance during their teenage years.⁹⁶ Second, the younger a Baptist person’s conversion was, the more likely the individual was to come from a household in which one or both parents were active Christians.⁹⁷ Thus, Horton concludes from his research that young “children need not be discouraged from making a decision about their faith if they have committed Christian parents who will provide an environment for their faith to flourish.”⁹⁸ Assuming perseverance and a lifetime of committed ministry service are evidence of genuine Christian conversion, it follows that many individuals baptized at a young age were genuinely converted. Therefore, “while parents and church leaders should not rush their children too

⁹⁴Given that Horton is surveying ministry students, it follows that the typical age of conversion amongst such persons is lower than as ministry students as a populace skew younger than the general populace.

⁹⁵Horton, “Ministry Student Ages,” 38.

⁹⁶“At least 95% of those with preschool conversion experiences attended worship services on a weekly basis during their preteen or adolescent years. Weekly worship attendance ranged from 89-95% for those with conversion experiences during their early elementary years (ages 6--8). Participants with later elementary age conversions (ages 9-11) had weekly worship attendance ranging from 80-91 %. After age 12, the weekly attendance rate drops to about 70% through age 17. Less than 40% of those with later conversions (ages 18+) had weekly attendance during their preteen or adolescent years.” Ibid., 40-41.

⁹⁷Ibid., 40.

⁹⁸Ibid., 43.

quickly through spiritual milestones, they should make room for spiritual experiences, even conversion in some cases, at a young age.”⁹⁹

Taken together, these three studies reveal that the most involved and engaged church members as adults were the most involved and engaged church attendees as children. Further, a young conversion experience does not in and of itself lead to an unregenerate church member later in life. Rather, if the parents of a converted young child are Christians, such children are more likely to remain involved in a local church as adults.

Conclusions about the Cognitive Abilities of Children

Viewing this research with the responses listed in the previous four sections, it becomes clear that some children can (and perhaps even should be expected to) cognitively grasp salvation at a young age. Specifically, applying Chi’s research and the resultant theories about islands of competence to children growing up in Christian households, one should expect that such children will cognitively grasp what it means to be converted at a younger age than children not growing up in such a context. Moreover, those children growing up in households in which they are taught about the nature of the Christian gospel from an early age will develop a competence about the Christian message (including ideas of Lordship, faith, repentance, etc.) that exceeds what the Piagetian stages would otherwise dictate.

Such arguments should not be rejected because the Bible is supposedly silent as to the soteriological or ecclesiological status of the child. Instead, the idea of children as young

⁹⁹Ibid., 44

converts is fully compatible with a biblical picture of children as disciples, accountable individuals, and members of the community of faith.¹⁰⁰ Even though Withers has argued that the idea of children as young converts is not compatible with his understanding of Fowler's stages of faith development, such conclusion are to be rejected. Fowler's stage of faith development (as understood by Withers) should not be applied to Southern Baptist understandings of faith development as Fowler's understanding of faith is incompatible with Southern Baptist conceptions of faith. Finally, from an evangelistic perspective, churches do have a responsibility to determine if children are confessing the Christian message. Therefore, the setting of one-size-fits-all policy in which children cannot be baptized prior to a specific age is to be rejected.

The Sociological Critiques

In addition to the assertion of children's psychological inability to cognitively comprehend conversion, Withers offers three sociological critiques as to why Southern Baptists would be compromising a regenerate church membership if they baptize children. Specifically, Withers notes that the religious socialization theory, the social exchange theory and the church-sect theory explain the social forces which cause Baptists to baptize their children. Withers argument for each of these theories is presented below as well as a corresponding brief response as to why each sociological critique does not preclude the baptism of children.

¹⁰⁰See chapter 2.

Religious Socialization Theory

Explanation: Early Baptisms, rites of passages, and rebellious adolescents

Withers first examines the work of Meredith McGuire.¹⁰¹ McGuire, he notes, explores how children become committed to a religious system. Children adopt the commitment of a religious system “through interaction with other members of the group who are mediators of the group’s way of thinking and doing.”¹⁰² It is within adolescence that individuals develop a “new identity involving responsibility, knowledge, ritual, and symbolic roles occurs.”¹⁰³ The bar mitzvah among Jews, the first communion among Roman Catholics, and confirmation among many Protestants all function in this role among other faith groups. Therefore, Withers reasons, “in Southern Baptist life, the primary rite of passage is baptism. It is important, then, that this rite of passage occur at a time that is appropriate in the life of maturing children.”¹⁰⁴

From the religious-socialization theory, Withers goes on to note that when a child is initiated prematurely into the faith community, rebellion often results. Premature incorporation, both Withers and McGuire speculate, results in a faith community in which the decisions of children are not taken seriously. As a result, children rebel because they are on one hand told that they are capable of making an adult like decision and on the other hand being restricted from the responsibilities of leadership.¹⁰⁵ Such should cause alarm for Southern Baptists as,

¹⁰¹Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1992), 53-58.

¹⁰²McGuire, *Religion*, 55. Withers, “Social Forces,” 123.

¹⁰³Withers, “Social Forces,” 126.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰⁵Withers, “Social Forces,” 127-30.

It is common practice [for Southern Baptist] to provide ritual adult spiritual status to children through baptism without the corresponding adult social status. Perhaps the common exception would be providing congregational voting rights to members who are children. Even voting rights for young members presents a dilemma for church leaders who recognize the limited cognitive skills among child members to make valid decisions about church matters.¹⁰⁶

Response: Baptism, Confession, Church Membership, and the Incorporation of Children

Applying the religious-socialization theory to the Baptist practice of water baptism is problematic. Specifically, Withers assumes that baptism's primary purpose is as a rite of passage in order to incorporate an individual into a faith community. This dissertation has argued that such a definition of baptism is biblically inadequate. Specifically, based on the biblical data presented in chapter 1, it was shown that baptism functions as a confession of faith that should be contemporaneous with one's conversion experience. Thus, its relationship to membership in a local church congregation or to its function as a rite of passage is secondary to its primary confessional function.

Further, by limiting baptism to "a rite of passage," as Withers does, not only potentially curtails its usage among children, but also among adults.¹⁰⁷ As a result, Withers's application of the religious-socialization theory is problematic in that it fails to account for the confessional view of baptism that is held by many Baptists. G. R. Beasley-Murray, whose understanding of baptism Withers cites positively,¹⁰⁸ expresses the view of baptism for which Withers fails to

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁷Withers's language indicates that baptism is a "coming of age" ceremony. Thus, he presents it as a ritual for adolescents entering the faith community. As noted in chapter 3, adult baptisms stand as the area of primary percentage growth amongst Southern Baptists over the last 50 years. In emphasizing baptism as an adolescent coming of age ritual, Withers (unintentionally) ties it to a single age group. Understanding baptism's function as confessional safeguards it against ageism.

¹⁰⁸Withers, "Social Forces," 24-25.

account when he states that “Baptists should repudiate the concept of adult baptism in favor of baptism of *confessors of Christ*.”¹⁰⁹

Withers’s application of the religious-socialization theory raises a second issue. Specifically, Withers’s assertion that failing to incorporate children fully into congregational life leads to children’s rebellion raises the question of the relationship between baptism and church membership. While Withers’s contention that partial incorporation into the faith community leads to rebellion is highly suspect given the data explored in the psychological section,¹¹⁰ the question Withers raises at this point is significant, specifically, should baptized children be incorporated *fully* into the membership of the church?

As noted in the introduction, the Baptist Faith and Message states that baptism “is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership.” While baptism is clearly *a* prerequisite for church membership, the Baptist Faith and Message does not indicate that baptism is the *only* prerequisite for church membership and all corresponding privileges and responsibilities thereof.¹¹¹ Given Southern Baptists’ belief in local church autonomy, how churches choose to incorporate baptized children into their congregational life is no doubt varied. Still, Beasley-Murray provides a helpful suggestion at this point. Specifically, he states that

a child’s baptism ought not to mark the final event of his Christian education. Instead it should be an interruption of the Christian education, so that the child may respond personally and accountably, to God’s grace which has been presupposed throughout the process... Grace already given in the death burial and resurrection of Christ, needs to be

¹⁰⁹Beasley-Murray, “The Theology of the Child,” 201.

¹¹⁰See especially Horton, “Ministry Student Ages.”

¹¹¹Arguing that baptism is *the only* prerequisite to church membership on a pragmatic level is problematic. If a person only needs to be baptized as a believer in order to enjoy the privileges of church membership, then it does not matter what a person does after baptism. Thus, making baptism the only requirement for the privileges of church membership rules out even the possibility of church discipline.

symbolized in an event that may be continuously remembered by the child...[Thus] the catechumenate should continue beyond baptism.¹¹²

Following the logic of Beasley-Murray, baptism should not be viewed as a rite of passages upon which a child theoretically¹¹³ immediately enjoys all the responsibilities and privileges of church membership while at the same time practically being restricted from many of membership's responsibilities. Instead of viewing baptism as the completion of the educational process it could be viewed as a point of transition within the process. Before baptism, a child (or for that matter any person) enjoys none of the privileges or responsibilities of church membership. After baptism there could be a gradual incorporation of the child into the privileges and responsibilities of church membership.¹¹⁴ While the specifics of how this could happen present an opportunity for additional research, if baptism's relation to the church is viewed as a starting point rather than a culminating point, most of Withers's concerns about rebellion should be abrogated.

Social-Exchange Theory

Withers's primary line of sociological critique is found in the social-exchange theory. Withers's understanding of the social exchange theory is derived from the work of Peter Blau.

¹¹²Beasley-Murray, "Theology of the Child," 121-22. Beasley-Murray draws much of this analysis from Warren Carr, *Baptism: Conscience and Clue for the Church* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1964), 182.

¹¹³Withers point that Baptists do not actually allow baptized children all the privileges and responsibilities of church membership is well-taken. In reality, the author of this dissertation experience matches Withers assertion that Southern Baptists "provide ritual adult spiritual status to children through baptism without the corresponding adult social status" knows of no churches which, for example, have children serving as voting committee members. It is the author's observation that in most Baptist churches that baptize children, children are allowed to take the Supper and vote. Outside of these two privileges/responsibilities, baptized children are generally excluded.

¹¹⁴This could happen by expecting children initially to observe committee work, soliciting feedback from children in the planning of various ministry projects of the church, etc., in addition to the more traditional roles of voting in business meetings and being allowed to take communion.

Following Blau, Withers explains a “social exchange as ‘voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do, in fact, bring from others.’”¹¹⁵ Thus, social-exchange theory dictates that “People’s positive sentiment toward evaluations of others such as affection, approval, and respect, are rewards worth a price that enter into exchange transactions, but they must not be explicitly bartered in exchange lest their value as genuine feelings or judgments be compromised.”¹¹⁶

Withers believes that such forces exist within Southern Baptist life. Specifically he notes that such social forces exist within the relationship between pastors and churches members. He states “When those who hold positions of power within the congregation need the unique services provided by the pastor, one of which is the baptism of their children, the exchange enhances the pastor’s power.”¹¹⁷ Such exchanges are unspecified, meaning that the pastor’s power enhancement is intangible, but this too fits the theory according to Withers because those “involved in the transaction cannot precisely specify the worth of approval or help in the absence of a monetary value.”¹¹⁸

These social-exchange forces also exist in the relationships between pastors and local associations, as well as between pastors and conventions. Withers states that another source of “possible social forces in the diminishing age of baptism include recognition by the church’s local association, state convention, and Southern Baptist Convention based on the number of

¹¹⁵Withers, “Social Forces,” 140 Peter Michael Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1986), 91.

¹¹⁶Withers. “Social Forces,” 5

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 144.

baptisms or the ratio of baptisms to church membership.”¹¹⁹ Again, Withers states that such forces do not provide conscious motivation for pastors. Rather baptizing young children provide subconscious rewards for pastors. This idea of a subconscious reward also fits with the social-exchange theory in that “that rewards must not be explicit lest the true underlying motives be exposed. In other words, for most people, it is satisfactory to enter into exchange transactions, such as recognition for number of baptisms, as long as the motives of the parties are assumed to be honorable”¹²⁰ Withers contends that in so doing, Southern Baptist pastors are acting against their own “biblical conviction and theological foundations. Many church leaders are not comfortable with the baptism of young children and preschoolers in spite of the benefits.”¹²¹

A treatment of the merits and weakness of social-exchange theory rests outside the expertise of the author of this dissertation.¹²² While Withers’s application of it does seem open to abuse,¹²³ the fundamental problem with how Withers applies the social-exchange theory is that he assumes that pastors are acting against their own biblical and theological convictions. This

¹¹⁹Ibid., 11-12.

¹²⁰Ibid., 12.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²Although, significant critiques have been offered. See, for example, Russell Cropanzano and Marie Mitchell, “Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review,” *Journal of Management* 31, no. 6 (December, 2005): 874-900.

¹²³Given, as Withers acknowledges, the result of these intangible benefits cannot be measured, it follows that any statistical phenomena within Southern Baptist life could be attributed to social-exchange theory and its corresponding argument that the reason a person does something is out of a subconscious desire for reward. For example, while Withers would probably argue that the reason the actual number of under six baptism has declined since the publication of his dissertation is because Baptists have recognized that under-six baptism could not be justified, one could just as easily use social-exchange theory to explain this new trend which runs opposite to the trends that precipitated his own dissertation. Specifically, one could argue that the reason Baptists are baptizing less of their young converts is not because of the clear teaching of Scripture for contemporaneous baptism, but rather because a current generation of Southern Baptists leaders (such as Dever, Hammett, Yeats, etc.) have argued against it. Thus, pastors hoping for denomination recognition recognize they will not be rewarded with such if they baptize young children. Ultimately, the way Withers applies social-exchange theory to the Southern Baptists context is prone to abuses to the point of absurdity.

dissertation has argued that there is strong biblical and theological warrant for baptizing young children. Further, this dissertation has shown that arguments for the baptism of young children are not a historical abnormality among Southern Baptists. As a result, Withers application of social-exchange theory rest on a faulty assumption in stating that Southern Baptist “pastors are acting against their own biblical and theological convictions.” Since this assumption has been demonstrated as Biblically and historically false for Southern Baptists, Withers application of the social-exchange theory is unnecessary.

Church-Sect Theory

A third line of sociological critique offered by Withers is the church-sect theory. Withers cites sociological research which notes that as religious sects gain greater social acceptance they take on the characteristics of a church and not just of a religious sect. Withers states that according to this theory, “The church is generally thought as ‘something into which members are born,’ whereas persons join a sect by voluntary conscious choice. Therefore, as the institutionalization of a church group occurs, there is a move from identification by individual choice to identification by culture and birth.” As Southern Baptists have moved from being a sect to a more institutionalized church, Withers argues that they have sought incorporate their children at progressively younger ages.¹²⁴ Withers asserts that the church-sect theory manifest itself when pastors baptize the children of members who used to be paedobaptists. These parents posses “latent theological concerns” because their previous denominations tied baptism to grace.

¹²⁴Withers, “Social Forces,” 14.

Baptist leaders then compromise historic Baptist beliefs so that the “parents continue to be active participants in the church and the leadership, in exchange, baptizes their preschooler.”¹²⁵

Withers’s argument at this point is fundamentally flawed. Even if one grants that the church-sect theory is valid, its application to Southern Baptists is misplaced. Withers assumes that Southern Baptists have moved from being a sect to the generally accepted “church” of the South. In so doing, Withers ignore the entire history of the Southern Baptist Convention. From its inception in 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention has stood as one of the two most dominant religious groups within their region.¹²⁶ Thus, to argue that Southern Baptists only in the latter half of the twentieth century became open to compromising their belief in a regenerate church membership as a result of their emerging dominance and a corresponding desire to solidify their demographic gains simply ignores history. Again, Withers also ignore the numerous significant Southern Baptist historical figures who either explicitly or implicitly affirm the baptism of even young children.¹²⁷

Theological Objections to the Baptism of Children

In addition to the objections from secular research regarding the adverse effects the baptism of young children has on a regenerate church membership, several theological objections have been raised regarding how baptizing young children affects the nature of the church. Specifically, the nature of sin, the nature of conversion, the role of children within the

¹²⁵Ibid., 14-15.

¹²⁶The other being Methodism. Rufus Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900*, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), x.

¹²⁷See the first two major sections of chapter 3 of his dissertation.

church, the problem of rebaptisms, and the methods used in child evangelism have all been raised as objections to baptizing young children.

The Sin Nature of Children: The Age of Accountability

Throughout church history, the question of what happens to infants who died has loomed large. The issue of the taint of original sin led (at least in part) to the proliferation of infant baptism.¹²⁸ Augustine argued that both sin and guilt were imputed to young children and thus baptism was needed to wash away original sin. Paedobaptistic Calvinistic covenantalists have maintained the doctrine of paedobaptism because infants are part of God's covenant which baptism pictures. B. B. Warfield expresses this view well, stating, "God established His church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church and as such entitled to its ordinances."¹²⁹ Thus, both Roman Catholic and Reformed advocates of the nurture approach to child evangelism assert that entrance into the faith community should not be dictated by a "conversion-experience" but rather by their parents' commitment to nurturing a child within the Christian faith.¹³⁰

¹²⁸Please note that Bushnell and the vast majority modern liberalism reject the doctrine of original sin but still often practice paedobaptism. See Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (1861; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979).

¹²⁹B. B. Warfield, "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," in *Studies in Theology* (1932; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 9:408.

¹³⁰For an overview of all the different arguments used to justify infant baptism, see James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2001), chapter 72, 19-20.

In response, Baptists have frequently asserted that the justifications for infant baptism err in their assumption that condemnation is imputed to infants and that either baptism or being part of the elect community¹³¹ (of which baptism initiates just as circumcision did for Abraham and the Jews) protect infants from damnation. As a result, Baptists have often appealed to the “age of accountability” as the age at which condemnation¹³² for sins actually occurs in the life of each individual child.¹³³ According to this view, a child is not actually damned for his sins until he is cognitively aware that he is sinning. Baptists thus generally reject the idea that God holds infants accountable for original sin. Steve Lemke of New Orleans Seminary expresses this idea when he argues that the idea of God damning infants seems both incompatible with His nature and odious to common understandings of whom God is. Mennonite George Konrad is also helpful at this point in noting that there is a distinction between the transmission of original sin to all humanity and the guilt¹³⁴ of original sin which humans are born without.¹³⁵

¹³¹John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R 1959); Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹³²See Adam Harwood's *Spiritual Condition of Infants* for a comprehensive overview of all the ways Baptists have addressed the issue of imputation of guilt and sin to infants. The use of the word condemnation in place of guilt above is intentional. Most Reformed Baptists would argue that guilt is imputed to infants but such does not mean that infants are condemned. For example Al Mohler's article on the topic of infant salvation argues that while guilt is imputed to infants, individuals are actually condemned for the sins they knowingly commit. “First, the Bible teaches that we are to be judged on the basis of our deeds committed ‘in the body.’ (2) That is, we will face the judgment seat of Christ and be judged, not on the basis of original sin, but for our sins committed during our own lifetimes. Each will answer ‘according to what he has done,’ (3) and not for the sin of Adam. The imputation of Adam's sin and guilt explains our inability to respond to God without regeneration, but the Bible does not teach that we will answer for Adam's sin. We will answer for our own.” Albert Mohler, “The Salvation of the ‘Little Ones,’” *AlbertMohler.com*, July 16, 2009, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/the-salvation-of-the-little-ones-do-infants-who-die-go-to-heaven/>.

¹³³“It is the apparent fact that prior to a certain point in life, there is no moral responsibility, because there is no awareness of right and wrong. ...[Thus] the biblical teaching is that children are not under God's condemnation for this sin, at least not until attaining an age of responsibility in moral and spiritual matters.” Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 655.

¹³⁴Unlike Reformed Baptists, most “traditional” and Arminian credobaptist communities argue, as Konrad does, that children are not guilty of sin until the age of accountability and thus reject (or at least nuance) the idea of imputed guilt. A thorough treatment of the differences between the two views lies outside the scope of this dissertation. Still, both groups are in agreement that infants who die go to heaven and that when children become aware that they are committing sinful actions, those children then become liable to punishment in hell. Therefore,

The credobaptistic belief in the age of accountability raises a second issue, specifically, at what age does accountability for sins actually occur. In a 1963 article in Southern Seminary's journal *Review and Expositor* Kenneth Chafin noted the great uneasiness Baptists feel about setting a specific age for the age of accountability. Chafin conducted an informal poll and asked when all children were accountable for sins and before what age are children not accountable for sins. Chafin found that "there was great reluctance to give a definite answer to either question. As to when all are accountable the answers varied from 8 to 18, with no one wanting to be dogmatic. As to when none are accountable the answers varied from 5 to 10 with everyone uneasy even about the question."¹³⁶

As a result of this Baptist uneasiness about setting a specific age, Chafin goes on to argue that the key issue in determining when a child is lost is a child's understanding of sin. Chafin argues that a child is not guilty of sin because "sin, which makes guilty, assumes a responsible person."¹³⁷ Children, Chafin reasons, are not responsible persons. Society at large recognizes this fact and therefore, Baptists should too. He states:

At a time when he is too young to choose his clothes for himself, at a time when he is too young to choose a life's vocation, at a time when he is too young to serve on a church committee, at a time when he is really too young to vote intelligently on business matters in the church, at a time when he is not considered legally responsible by any agency in the community, there has been a tendency to feel that he is sufficiently responsible to

for sake of simplicity the terms guilt and condemnation will be used interchangeably in this discussion to note that an individual will be punished in hell apart from conversion.

¹³⁵See Steve Lemke, "The Age of Accountability is a Foundational Belief," *Baptist Message*, January 11, 2010; and George G. Konrad "The Conversion of Children," *Direction* 9, no. 4 (October 1980): 28-29.

¹³⁶Kenneth L. Chafin, "Evangelism and the Child," *Review and Expositor* 60, no. 2 (Spring 1963): 164.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 165.

make a life-binding, permanent-type decision concerning his relationship to Christ and his church.¹³⁸

Therefore, Chafin swings to the opposite extreme of the paedobaptists. He argues that when a church attempts to evangelize a child, it denies what is obvious, specifically that children do not yet need to be saved because they are not yet accountable before God for their sins.¹³⁹ When such children are prematurely converted, which Chafin believes happens to a large number of children,¹⁴⁰ the damage to both the child and the church is significant, in that the child does not know what to do when he actually become cognitively aware of his sin and the church becomes filled with unregenerate members.

There is much that is commendable in Chafin's article. He rightly recognizes the uncertainty Baptists feel about setting a specific age of accountability. He also rightly argues that an awareness of and personal accountability for one's sins brings about a culpability for sins. This is in line with much of what was discussed about the relation between cognition and sin outlined in the sections on accountability in Chapter two of this dissertation.

Yet, there is a significant flaw in Chafin's argument. Specifically, he assumes that societal or ecclesiastical standards determine (relating to life vocation, serving on church committees, to vote intelligibly, legal responsibility in the community, etc.) when a child become accountable. Since society as a whole sees young children as unaccountable, young children are not accountable for sin. Chafin's logic at this point is problematic. It makes societal standards authoritative on church practice. Yet, societal standards are varied. In one culture children may

¹³⁸Ibid., 166

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

be seen as responsible to help provide for the family (through working on a farm) beginning around the age of five. In another, children are seen as irresponsible agents until they reach 18 or 21. In turning to societal standards to determine when children should be baptized, he functionally undermines the Bible's role in determining the Christian view of anthropology.¹⁴¹

Further, Chafin also problematically assumes that the child is not “cognitively aware of his sins.” As noted in chapter 2, the Bible does link cognition of sin with responsibility for sin. Yet, the Bible does not delineate a specific age at which individuals become cognitively aware of their sins.¹⁴² While it is true that most children have not fully realized or experienced all the impacts of sin that an adult has (thankfully!), it does not follow from such that children are unable to comprehend their sin or that their sin separates them from God. Children who can comprehend that sin alienates them from God are in turn accountable for their sins. Therefore, instead of turning to fungible societal standards, a better standard for determining child accountability would be empirical research measuring children's conception of sin.

At this point, the Ph.D. dissertation of Thomas Sanders is helpful. Unlike the dissertations of Withers, Clark, Deane, and Ratliff, which all argued against the baptism of children, Sanders's far more recent dissertation allows for the validity of child conversion and baptism. The purpose of Sanders study was not, however, to develop a biblical, historical, and theological justification for the baptism of children, but rather to measure empirically the cognitive understandings of young converts.

¹⁴¹Capitol Hill Baptist's Church's faith statement is open to the same criticism. As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, it states that the appropriate age for baptism is as children “assume adult responsibilities” which the statement goes on to define as “late high school with driving, employment, non-Christian friends, voting, legality of marriage.” Dever, “Baptism in the Local Church,” 342 n. 28.

¹⁴²Although Paul's commands to the Ephesians children implies that young children could sin and repent of them.

Sanders is a Southern Baptist and completed his PhD work at Dallas Baptist University. He performed “qualitative phenomenological research to explore the conversion experiences of children ages 12 and younger in Baptist churches” in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.¹⁴³ He also interviewed the children’s parents/guardians, pastors, and other influential persons in their lives.

As part of his research, he queried children about their understanding of sin. He notes that these young converts understood sin as “doing something that God would not want a person to do.”¹⁴⁴ Others understood sin within the context of “honesty, disobedience, and God’s displeasure.”¹⁴⁵ When asked about what sins they had actually committed, the children identified actions that included “hitting, lying, stealing, or saying something bad.”¹⁴⁶ The children recognized that the Ten Commandments, the Bible, and God’s Word defined what sin is. They further understood that all are sinners and as a result cannot have a relationship with God apart from conversion. Most acknowledged the reality of hell and that sins deserve punishment for such.¹⁴⁷ Sanders later summarizes childhood conceptions of sin, stating,

sin was a concept they understood and recognized as a reason for separation from God. They also admitted that they had sinned. Many of them expressed that part of becoming a Christian is asking for forgiveness, however, forgiveness of sin was not a significant motivating factor [for their conversion. Still,...the concept of sin and the impact of sin on

¹⁴³Specifically, Sanders interviewed 12 children as well as 35 others persons of influence (parents, pastors etc.) in the children’s lives. He interviewed four children under the age of eight, three between the ages of nine and 10 and three between the ages of 11 and 12. Obviously, because of Sanders’s small sample size, general trends cannot be extrapolated from his data. Still, what Sanders’s research does show is that children can conceptually grasp specific doctrines. Thomas Sanders, “The Kingdom of God Belongs to Such as These: Exploring the Conversion Experiences of Baptist Children” (PhD diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2009), 57.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 173.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 174.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 175.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 176-79.

life was one part of the formula for conversion and confession of faith.¹⁴⁸

Therefore, while Chafin is right to note that children only become accountable for sin as they become cognitively aware of their sins, his rubric of societal responsibility is a poor one. Indeed, Sanders's research reveals that a younger child can be made aware of sin, grasp it, and turn from it before it ensnares him. While children may not see sin as "a significant motivating factor" in their conversion, the fact remains that children understand they are sinners and that they need forgiveness for such. As a result, arguing that children should not be baptized and become part of a local church because they have not yet reached an age of accountability for sins, ignores the testimony of children themselves that they know they are sinners in need of forgiveness. While a specific age of accountability cannot be pinpointed, it is clear that children become cognitively aware of the fact that they are sinners at a much younger age than Chafin assumed. Therefore, arguing that only adolescents are appropriate candidates for church membership because only adolescents have reached the age of accountability is untenable.

Soteriology and the Baptism of Children

In addition to questions of sin, others have raised questions about the specific content of the salvation¹⁴⁹ message that a child must cognitively grasp in order to be converted. Among evangelical Christians, a debate raged in the 1980s over what an individual must affirm in order

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 244-45.

¹⁴⁹In his dissertation, Clark asserted that another soteriological issue regarding the baptism of young children was Calvinism. Specifically, Clark found that one of the reasons the Child Evangelism Fellowship argued for young conversions was that its theological stance was too Calvinistic. It left no room "for the cooperation of man with God in his salvation. It is all of grace, all of God. It is because of this low estimate of the role of man that small children can make the needed response." Clark, "The Evangelism of Children," 197. Yet, given that leading contemporary advocates of delayed child baptism and of skepticism towards the conversion of children are leading Baptists-Calvinist (Dever, Hammett, Yeats, etc.) this line of criticism rings hollow.

to be converted. The primary participants in this debate were Zane Hodges, who argued that all an individual must do in order to be saved is to believe in Jesus Christ (also known as the free grace position)¹⁵⁰ and John MacArthur, who argued that individuals must surrender to Jesus as Lord in order to be saved.¹⁵¹

Hodges's argument for his free grace position is in part based on his readings of Jesus' teachings about receiving the gospel as a little child.¹⁵² Since all Christians are supposed to receive the gospel as a young child, this means for Hodges that anyone can understand the gospel and appropriate it to his life. Noting the account of the belief of the Philippian jailor and his household, Hodges states that "eternity alone will reveal how many souls have rested their eternal happiness and well-being on this uncomplicated declaration [of simply belief]. Their ranks will certainly include many who appropriated this promise as very young children."¹⁵³

Against Hodges, MacArthur and those arguing for lordship salvation argue for a much more rigorous understanding of salvation in which faith is connected with repentance and obedience. Becoming a Christian involves not a childlike understanding of faith, but rather "a willingness to surrender to Christ's authority."¹⁵⁴ MacArthur believes that Jesus' statement about become as little child is made because "a child [is] the perfect picture of obedient humility, [and thus functions as] an object lesson about saving faith."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰Zane C Hodges, *Absolutely Free: a Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2014).

¹⁵¹John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus: What Is Authentic Faith?*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

¹⁵²Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 23, 53.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁵⁴MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 54.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 53.

While various other works were released seeking to find common ground between the two positions,¹⁵⁶ the difference in perspective between MacArthur and Hodges at the point is illustrative. Hodges clearly views children as valid candidates for conversion because of their simple, child-like willingness to assent intellectually to what others tell them. MacArthur, in contrast, views children as object lessons of obedient humility and not as potential converts in and of themselves.¹⁵⁷

Malcom Yarnell has argued that an understanding of Jesus as Lord stands as a unifying motif for Southern Baptist.¹⁵⁸ As a result, this dissertation has so far interacted with those who would be more sympathetic to the lordship understanding of how one is saved.¹⁵⁹ From Hodges's quotes, it is clear that those who hold to a free-grace position have no qualms with the conversion of children. It is those who hold to a lordship position who are more hesitant to baptize children.

In Chafin's article, he argues that a Christian is one "who has heard the Gospel and understands and believes it. A Christian is one who has repented of his sins and has committed himself by faith to Jesus as Lord and Savior. He is a responsible person who by his own free will

¹⁵⁶See, for example, Michael Scott Horton, ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008)

¹⁵⁷It is therefore not surprising that Dever notes of MacArthur that he delays that baptism of children. Dever, "Baptism in the Local Church," 325. See also John MacArthur, "Evangelizing Children: A Grace Community Distinctive," *Grace to You*. Grace Community Church, 2003, accessed March 18, 2015, <<http://www.gty.org/resources/distinctives/DD05/evangelizing-children>>.

¹⁵⁸Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 173. There are some exceptions to this, however. Specifically, Horton argues that noted Southern Baptist pastor and former SBC president Charles Stanley holds to a free grace position. Horton, *Christ the Lord*, 275

¹⁵⁹Most explicitly, Ratliff's dissertation is clearly from a lordship perspective despite the idea of lordship theology not being labeled as such until 20 years later. Ratliff, "Discipleship."

has decided to become a disciple and servant of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶⁰ Chafin goes on to posit that a child cannot be a responsible person who can decide to serve Christ as Lord.

Those holding to a lordship understanding of salvation who also argue that children cannot follow Jesus as Lord do so based on a belief about the cognitive abilities of children. Specifically, they are that children are unable to cognitively comprehend what it means that Christ as Lord. Yet, as was noted above, such arguments rest on a presupposition that the cognitive studies no longer support with uniformity. Specifically, current psychological evidences indicates that a child nurtured in a devout Christian context can indeed make a responsible decision to follow Christ. Additionally the empirical research cited above confirms this is the case.¹⁶¹

In response to the assertion that children cannot respond to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the cautions of the early Anabaptist Menno Simmons are helpful. Simmons states “little ones must wait according to God’s Word until they can understand the holy Gospel of grace and sincerely confess it; and then, and then only, is it time, no matter how young or how old, for them to receive Christian baptism.”¹⁶² Therefore, rather than restrict children from baptism, ministers and parents should seek to discern children’s understanding of salvation and there corresponding willingness to follow Jesus as Lord. Children who are willing to do such, “no matter how young,” should receive baptism.

¹⁶⁰Chafin, “Evangelism and the Child,” 167.

¹⁶¹See specifically the sections above on “Cognitive Development” and “Age of Conversion and Faith Commitment of Adults” within the larger section on “In Response to the Psychological Arguments against the Baptism of Children.”

¹⁶²Menno Simmons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale: Herald, 1956), 241.

Ecclesiastical Concerns Pertaining to the Baptism of Children

Growing out of concerns about a regenerate church membership, two other ecclesiastical concerns have been noted. First, some have argued that a regenerate church membership is undermined through the baptism of individuals who are not publicly demonstrable believers. Second others argue that a regenerate church membership is undermined through the phenomena of rebaptisms which results from people being converted at too young of an age.

Mark Dever presents the first objection. He argues that children should not be baptized because it is unclear if they are “a publicly demonstrable believer.”¹⁶³ One cannot be certain of the conversion of a child, he reasons. Therefore, “parents should not presume to be certain of their children’s faith but should pray for them and teach them.”¹⁶⁴

Dever continues by arguing that there is a significant benefit in delaying the baptism of young children. He states that delaying baptism,

tests the reality of their profession and reduces nominalism and false conversions. It emphasizes the importance of baptism and clarifies that it is faith, not baptism, that saves. It allows time for the child to be better taught, to evidence humility while waiting, to mature, and to better remember, cherish and use the experience of his baptism. True conversion manifests itself over time...Time allows the child’s faith to mature and evidence itself consistently.¹⁶⁵

Therefore, Dever’s hesitancy to baptize children “is not intended as a statement asserting that the child is not regenerate but simply as a reluctance publicly to affirm that which has not yet been maturely evidenced.”¹⁶⁶ In so doing, Dever reasons that a regenerate membership is

¹⁶³Dever “Baptism in the Local Church,” 338.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 339.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 339-40.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 340.

maintained while a false assurance of salvation is avoided. Thus Dever concludes that the baptism of children should be avoided as while it may be well intended, these “ill-fated baptisms...seem to have tragically resulted in the confirmation of millions of people in conversions that have evidently proved to be false.”¹⁶⁷

As noted in chapter 1, underlying all of Dever’s arguments is his claim that “the Bible gives us no command for immediacy or for delay [of baptism], but the nature of baptism clearly shows that it is to be only for those who profess saving faith. Therefore, if delay is necessary to ascertain genuine saving faith in the person, then delay would seem to be the path of prudence.”¹⁶⁸

On one level, chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation stand as a sustained argument against the presuppositions Dever employs to make this argument. Chapter 1 has argued that baptism is meant to be contemporaneous with conversion. There is strong evidence in the New Testament that any person claiming conversion, faith in Christ, repentance, or Spirit baptism would have been baptized in water. A refusal to be baptized or desire to delay baptism by one claiming repentance would have been met with the response that the individual was not actually converted. Thus, Dever’s argument is an argument for children to disobey the teaching of Scripture for contemporaneous baptism¹⁶⁹

Further, chapter 2 has demonstrated that children are treated as disciples in the same way

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 337.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 336

¹⁶⁹An argument he dismisses with the simple statement that in Acts “there would have been little question of the state of those people (as in the cases of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, and Cornelius’s household in Acts 10)” and therefore there is no reasons for contemporaneous baptism. Such an argument fails to engage the relevant passages, but simply attempts to dismiss arguments for contemporaneity without actually examining the passages in question. Given that Dever provides no documentation for this claim, it should be rejected. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for more on the timing of baptism. Ibid.

that adults are. Children are accountable for their own sins. Children can repent. Children are commanded to obey their parents because they are “in the Lord.” Chapter 2 has shown that children are clearly cognitively held to the same standards as adults. As a result, since this dissertation has shown children can be converted and that baptism is the appropriate response to conversion, contemporaneous to it, children should be baptized.

But, on another level there is still more that can be said in response to Dever’s argument. Specifically, Dever’s claim that the baptism of children had led to “the confirmation of millions of people in conversion that have evidently proved to be false” is both unsubstantiated and problematic in light of the empirical data examined above.

Specifically, as was shown in the section above on the “Age of Conversion and Faith Commitment of Adults” within the larger section on “Responses to Psychological Objections to the Baptism of Children,” recent empirical data dealing with the conversion of children shows that the most likely age group to endure is those making a conversion decision at a young age, within the context of an nurturing Christian home. Conversely, the empirical data shows that those who become born-again Christians during adolescence (broadly defined as between the age of 13 to 21) “are less likely than other believers to describe themselves as ‘deeply spiritual.’ They donate substantially less money to churches than do other Christians...are less likely to engage in lifestyle evangelism.” Further, those who become born-again as adults “have a less Biblical view of God, less likely to believe that divorce with an instance of adultery is sin, and more likely to believe...that both Christians and Muslims believe in the same God.”¹⁷⁰ While Dever assumes that the baptism of young children is the cause of millions of nominal Christians, Barna’s research indicates that young converts grow up to become the most committed

¹⁷⁰Barna, “Evangelism is Most Effective.”

Christians. It is older converts who demonstrate lower levels of commitment. As a result, it stands to reason that cause of a large portion of these millions of false conversions¹⁷¹ are adult and not child converts.

Dever's desire to forbid the baptism of young children also fails to account for the biblical data regarding the differences between children growing up in a Christian environment and those growing up in a secular environment.¹⁷² As noted in chapter 2, the Bible assumes that children growing up in homes rooted within the faith community will have a different experience than children who grow up outside the faith community. G. R. Beasley-Murray provides a helpful corrective to Dever's desire to develop a uniform policy restricting baptism. Beasley-Murray states:

To maintain that there is no difference between the children of the followers of Mao Tse-tung in Peking and the children of the followers of Jesus in Philadelphia in their respective relations to the church would be foolish. (Lest there be misunderstanding, let it be equally said that the comparison equally holds good between the children of the followers of Jesus in Peking and the children of mammon worships in Philadelphia!) Most of us believe that there is a difference between the church and the "world" (in the sense of John 15:18-19), but we strangely hesitate to recognize the effect of this difference on the children of believers and the children of people of the "world."¹⁷³

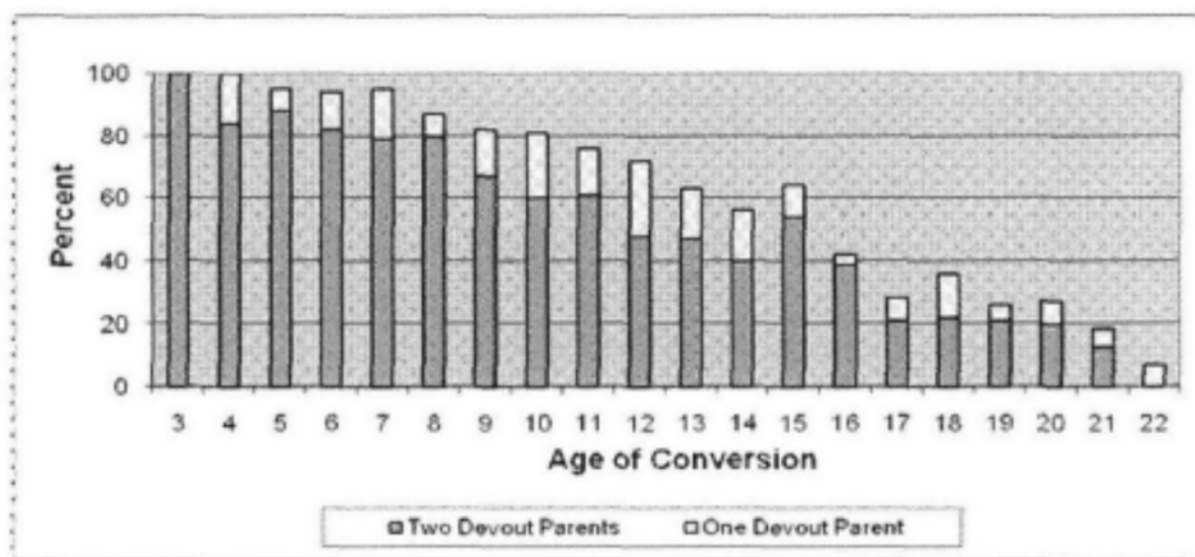
¹⁷¹By which Dever seems to be alluding to the fact that there are millions more people on church roles than there are attending church services each week.

¹⁷²As a footnote to Dever's chapter he includes his church's teaching on the baptism of children. As a part of that teaching, Dever (and his church) states that, "We believe that the normal age of baptism should be when the credibility of one's conversion becomes naturally evident to the church community. This would normally be when the child has matured, and is beginning to live more self-consciously as an individual, making their own choices, having left the God-given, intended child-like dependence on their parents for the God-given, intended mature wisdom which marks one who has felt the tug of the world, the flesh and the devil, but has decided, despite these allurements, to follow Christ." Leaving aside for the moment Dever's fault assumption about the nature of baptism, this quote reveals that Dever assumes that conversion becomes evident at a uniform point in life. While such may provide a consistent standard at which all persons are clearly demonstrating conversion, it fails to account for the fact that many person demonstrate conversion at a much earlier age and that such can be anticipated based on one's background. Dever, "Baptism in the Local Church," 342 n. 24.

¹⁷³Beasley-Murray goes on to examine 1 Corinthians 7:14 and its enigmatic statement about children who would are made holy as a result of having a single believing parent so long as the believing parent does not leave the unbelieving the spouse. Of this passage, Beasley-Murray notes that it obviously at a minimum means that "*your children are holy!* The holiness of children is axiomatic—even when only one parent is a Christian." (emphasis

The empirical research of Horton confirms Beasley-Murray's assertion. Specifically, Horton found that the younger a Baptist ministry student's age of conversion was, the more likely that student was to come from a stable, two-parent, devout Christian home. Table 4-1 is taken directly from Horton's article. It graphically shows the reality that Beasley-Murray describes, specifically, that there is a difference between children being raised within a Christian family and those children being raised outside of a Christian home.

Table 4-1¹⁷⁴



Horton comments on this table as follows:

The ministry student survey findings also reveal a strong correlation between the age of conversion and the seriousness with which the parents hold their faith. While the term “devout” can have a variety of meanings (and thus this aspect of the survey must be considered with great care), a clear pattern does develop. Younger conversion experiences are reported more frequently by ministry students who were raised by parents whom they considered to be “devout” Christians...Of the Baptist ministry participants who reported conversions occurring at age 3, 100% indicated that both parents were devout Christians. All of the respondents with conversions at age 4 had at least one

original). G. R. Beasley Murray, “The Child and the Church,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 130-31.

¹⁷⁴Horton, “Ministry Student Ages,” 40.

devout Christian parent with the vast majority (84%) having two devout Christian parents. For conversion experiences at age 5, 6, or 7, 95% had at least one devout Christian parent. At least 79% of those recording a conversion experience prior to 9 years of age had two devout Christian parents. The percentage of students with devout Christian parents therefore decreases steadily as the age of conversion increases. For the Baptist ministry students who became Christians at age 22, none had two devout Christian parents and only 7% had one devout Christian parent.¹⁷⁵

Thus, in response to Dever's argument that young children should not be baptized because one should not "publically affirm" a child's conversion until it is "maturely evidenced," this dissertation asserts that such an argument divorces baptism from its confessional role, ignores the biblical data that children are held to the same standards of discipleship as adults, fails to account for the fact that Christian children are not pagan children, and that the younger someone self-identifies as a convert, the more likely that person is to persevere.

A second line of criticism about the adverse effects that child baptism has on a regenerate church membership comes from John Hammett. Like Dever, Hammett also argues against the conversion and baptism of young children. Such children, he notes, cannot contribute to the financial support of the ministry, pray for other members, visit the sick, or use their gifts to serve the church as they are simply too young. Further, Hammett argues that since 36% of all adult baptism within Southern Baptist churches are re-baptisms, many young children did not understand the gospel when they were baptized. Hammett believes the baptism of young children has done great harm to the makeup and nature of the church.¹⁷⁶

Most of Hammett's claims at this point are superficial. While children cannot (normally) contribute to a church in a significant financial way, they can still give, and indeed many plans

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 39-40.

¹⁷⁶Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 112-13.

for teaching children about money including charitable giving.¹⁷⁷ To argue that giving large amounts of money to a church is a prerequisite for incorporation into the people of God directly contradicts the clear teaching of Jesus (Lk. 21:1-4).

Hammett's arguments against the baptism of children because they cannot pray for other members or visit the sick are equally vapid. While they might need help with transportation, children can visit the sick.¹⁷⁸ Further, this author has personally observed children praying for other church members (as well as for their lost friends). While Hammett seems to assume that children obviously do not do these things, his assumption fails to account for the fact that, biblically, children are expected to function as disciples in the same way that adults are.¹⁷⁹

He further argues that children cannot use their gifts to serve the church in any significant way. Hammett's understanding of gifts is inadequate at this point. While children are not going to be leading the church services, he seems to forget that faith is a spiritual gift. As noted in Chapter 2, Jesus points to the faith of children as axiomatic for what Christian faith is. Therefore, it is clear that their gifts can serve the church.

Leaving aside Hammett's unsubstantiated assertions about the limited abilities of children, Hammett's does cite a study exploring the phenomenon of rebaptisms. Hammett cites this study within the context of his lament that "the number of preschool baptisms [has] tripled."¹⁸⁰ He notes of the study that it reveals "that the majority of adult baptism (60 percent)

¹⁷⁷Dave Ramsey, *Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace Junior: Teaching Kids How to Win with Money* (Brentwood, TN: Lampo, 2011).

¹⁷⁸One of the most personal and rewarding experiences this author has had is to take children from a church group to visit elderly members living in a nursing home.

¹⁷⁹See chapter 2.

¹⁸⁰Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 112.

were rebaptism...[with] 36% of these adult [re-]baptism being of those who had previously been baptized in a Southern Baptist church.”¹⁸¹ Many of these re-baptisms were of people who had “not been regenerate believers when they were first baptized.”¹⁸² Thus Hammett concludes [independent of the study itself] that “pastors baptized these individuals without clear assurance that they were baptizing believers . . . They were baptized as children but see no evidence of genuineness in their relationship with Christ until much later.”¹⁸³

Unfortunately, the study Hammett cites does not support his conclusion. First, it notes that very few Southern Baptist re-baptisms were of individuals whose first baptism occurred prior to the age of six (or as preschoolers). Rather, the median age of the individuals’ surveyed for their first baptism was 12.¹⁸⁴ In fact, one of the respondents was 68.¹⁸⁵ Further, of the re-baptized individuals surveyed, over 40% understood their baptism as a rededication with another 20% understanding as necessary for joining the church or for another unstated reasons.¹⁸⁶ Thus, this study reveals little about the conversion experiences of young children, but rather shows that many adults possess a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of baptism (seeing it as a rededication) from a Southern Baptist perspective. To extrapolate from this study that young children are being falsely converted and then re-baptized (as Hammett does) is to draw a conclusion that goes beyond the data and that the researchers who actually did the study did not

¹⁸¹Ibid.

¹⁸²Ibid.

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴Phillip B. Jones, Stephen C. Witten, Richard C. Stanley, and Robert A. Reinner, *A Study of Baptized Adults in Southern Baptist Churches* (Alpharetta, GA: Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1993), 10.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 10.

¹⁸⁶Ibid, iii.

themselves draw.¹⁸⁷ As a result, the contention that the phenomena of rebaptisms is a product of children being baptized at too young of an age is not empirically verifiable.

Evangelistic Practices Relating to the Conversion of Young Children

A final objection regarding baptizing children centers on the nature of some child evangelism practices. Specifically, some Southern Baptists scholars have argued that the nature of the conversion message that children assent to when they are baptized leads to unconverted persons, which in turn undermines a regenerate church membership.

Former Southwestern Seminary professor William Hendricks expresses this concern. Specifically, he laments that in the desire of many child evangelists to win converts, such men “reduce the conceptual content of what is required in a genuine experience of conversion to a minimal ‘Do you love Jesus?’ kind of questioning; and it leaves the impression of a conversionist-oriented church member that she or he is ‘all right’ because of an early, precognitive decision, whether such is actually the case or not.”¹⁸⁸ While, as noted above, Hendricks’s assertion that the evangelism of children leads to them making “precognitive decisions” should be rejected,¹⁸⁹ his allegation (while unsubstantiated) that children are being baptized with a simple affirmation of loving Jesus is troubling.

Kenneth Chafin expresses another line of concern about child evangelistic practices.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., ii-vi.

¹⁸⁸William L Hendricks, “Baptists and Children: The Beginnings of Grace,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 52.

¹⁸⁹See the section above on “In Response to the Psychological Arguments against the Baptism of Children.” Hendricks more fully develops his cognitive objections in his article William L. Hendricks, “Theology and Children: Remarks on Relationships between Christian Theology and Childhood Developmental Psychology,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 2, no. 20 (Spring 1978): 60-72.

Specifically, he argues against pressuring children to make decisions for Christ. He notes that church membership, pleasing adults, and the decisions of peers can all act as sources of pressure on children to accept the gospel message.¹⁹⁰ As a result of these pressures, Chafin counsels pastors to delay baptism for children expressing a desire to be converted or even cognitively affirming that they are converted.

Chafin's and Hendricks's argument that Southern Baptists are baptizing children who are merely affirming that they love Jesus or who are responding to peer pressure (while unsubstantiated in their actual articles) is problematic. Given the free-grace salvation position advocated by Hodges that was noted above, it must be conceded that such practices could exist within Southern Baptists churches. Further, such practices, assuming that they do exist within Southern Baptist churches, in practice undermine the assertion of this dissertation that children are appropriate candidates for baptism because they can function as disciples in the same way that adults can.

Yet, it does not follow from Chafin's and Hendricks's concern that children should not be baptized. Rather, it follows that Southern Baptists have an obligation to make sure their children (as well all converts) are actually cognitively and volitionally surrendering to the lordship of Christ. Perhaps then the problem with child baptism is not that children cannot be converted, but rather that Baptist pastors are unwilling to actually take the time to figure out what children seeking conversion are actually confessing and desiring to do.

A 1991 article in the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* is helpful at this point. Drew Gunnells argues that a significant problem with child evangelistic practices is that "far too few of

¹⁹⁰Chafin, "Evangelism and the Child," 169-70.

these children have no counseling.”¹⁹¹ Gunnells substantiates this study by pointing to the study of Norman Deaton. Deaton found that “more than half the subjects [who had been baptized between the ages of 5 and 7] had no counseling whatsoever...and only 26% had more than ten minutes of pastoral time devoted to what should have been the most important decision they would ever make.”¹⁹²

Rather than simply baptizing children who walk an aisle or sign a card, Southern Baptist pastors and lay leaders have a responsibility to make sure that all persons claiming conversion and seeking baptism understand what they are doing. A time of counseling with the child to discern what the child actually understand becomes essential. Gunnells recommends that this should take place through the use of language the child understands, to use questions “which cannot be answered with a pat or memorized statement,”¹⁹³ and to listen to their answer to see if they actually have understanding of the decision they are making.¹⁹⁴ Some children will not be ready, having come for salvation “seeking only to be baptized or to drink the grape juice,” such children should be encouraged but should not be baptized or affirmed as converts.¹⁹⁵

Both children and adults are to affirm the same gospel message. There is not one gospel for children and another one for adults. Moreover, the baptism of adults and children should have the same requirements: a confession of faith. As a result, while much of this dissertation has

¹⁹¹Drew J Gunnells Jr., “Counseling Children about Conversion,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 33, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 36.

¹⁹²Norman Deaton, “A Study of Postbaptismal Conversion” (master’s thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1959), 90, As Cited in Gunnells, “Counseling Children,” 36.

¹⁹³Gunnells suggests questions such as “When did you start thinking about this?” or “What caused you talk with your mother and dad about this?” Gunnell, “Counseling Children,” 37.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 38.

taken issue with Mark Dever's view regarding the baptism of children, his counsel as to how a baptism should actually be conducted is helpful.

Dever counsels that the baptismal water themselves can serve as place in which an individual conversion is confessed. Specifically, he states that "hearing from those about to be baptized makes the event more meaningful to the congregation." Asking questions that require the individual to assent to the gospel and to commitment to a local church helps to solidify the individual's decision. Dever also suggests that "a more personal testimony from those about to be baptized both solidifies their own understanding of their baptism and informs the congregation. While such testimonies should not be required, surely in them Christ is exalted, the gospel explained and exemplified, Christian obedience demonstrated, and faith portrayed."¹⁹⁶ As noted in the introduction to this chapter, such testimonies within the baptismal waters have a historical precedent amongst Baptists. In returning to such a practice, Baptists could ensure that both children and adults are truly taking part in a confessional baptism.

Conclusions

This chapter has established that the conversion and baptism of even young children, is an acceptable practice for Southern Baptists. Specifically, it has argued that this practice, rightly carried out, does not undermine a regenerate church membership. Instead, rightly executed, the practice of young baptism has the potential to stand as a long-term safeguard to a regenerate church membership as young converts are the most likely demographic of convert to persevere in the Christian faith.

¹⁹⁶Dever, "Baptism and the Local Church," 342.

It was noted that arguments against the baptism of young children are predicated on the belief that children cannot cognitively grasp conversion or give evidence of such through living a life of discipleship. Specifically, this chapter has shown that arguments that have been presented based on the cognitive-developmental stages of Piaget and the faith-developmental stages of Fowler are dated or inadequate in light of a Southern Baptist understanding of faith. Assumptions regarding the limited cognitive ability of children as well as a belief that children are not seen biblically as candidates for discipleship were shown to have led to sociological arguments seeking to explain a perceived growth of young child converts. Such arguments were shown to rest on faulty presuppositions about the biblical nature of children as well as the historical position and beliefs of Southern Baptist regarding child conversion.

The sin nature of children and its relationship to the age of accountability was also explored. It was shown that children could understand sin and the need for conversion at a younger age than had previously been assumed. It was argued that children could surrender to the lordship of Christ (against MacArthur) and could properly function as church members (against Hammett and Dever). Finally, it was argued that the evangelistic practices to children should seek to ensure that children cognitively grasp conversion.

In response to the numerous false assumptions addresses in this chapter, it has been shown that children can cognitively grasp conversion. There is significant empirical evidence that the majority of young converts coming from devout Christian homes remain Christians. The key factor in determining if a child will persevere is the home life of the child. Children raised in such an environment develop islands of competence regarding the cognitive content of conversion, and, as a result, at a much younger age than Piaget would have anticipated, such children can truly acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. In regards to concerns about how

Baptists are hesitant to incorporate child members fully into both the privileges and responsibilities of membership, it was argued that children should be gradually incorporated into the life of the church as fully functioning members. Finally, through the use of good counseling practices, it was argued that churches could discern if children were ready for conversion.

CONCLUSIONS, APPLICATIONS, AND AREAS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Conclusions

Over the last 60 years, numerous Southern Baptist theologians, pastors, and leaders have argued against the baptism of children. The purpose of this dissertation has been to rebut these arguments and instead assert that for Southern Baptists, the baptism of children is a legitimate practice so long as the child is making a credible confession of faith. It has justified this claim by demonstrating that even young children are biblically, historically, theologically, and psychologically appropriate candidates for conversion and baptism when they grow up in a nurturing Christian environment.

The first two chapters made the biblical argument for the conversion and baptism of children. Chapter 1 argued that from the New Testament perspective baptism is the appropriate *initial* response to conversion. It noted that there are some who argue that baptism should be temporally separated from conversion. These argue that baptism is for those who “as far as the local church has good reason to believe, desires to follow Christ and be baptized *and who lives consistently with an earnest confession* of sin and repentance and a faith in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for him.”¹ Therefore, for such Baptists baptism should be delayed “if delay is necessary to ascertain genuine saving faith in the person.”² Such arguments are based on assumption that the Scriptures noting the timing of baptism are descriptive and not prescriptive.

In response to these arguments, the first chapter showed that the water baptism is by its very nature meant to be contemporaneous with faith, repentance, Spirit baptism (be it understood

¹Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 323.

²Ibid., 338.

as initiation or conversion), and the confession of sins. Any person claiming conversion then should desire water baptism. The idea of a temporal delay of water baptism by a convert from the New Testament perspective is foreign as it would be understood as equivalent to a refusal to repent. From the perspective of the Gospel writers, the book of Acts, and the Pauline writings, baptism functions as the *sine qua non* for those who have received the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all Christians should be baptized contemporaneous to their conversion.

The second chapter followed up on the first in arguing that biblically, children are appropriate candidates for conversion. This chapter examined the expectations Scripture places on children in both the Old and New Testaments. From the Old Testament, children were shown as valid candidates for discipleship in the exact same ways that adults are. Specifically both children and adults were shown as able to pursue wisdom, welcome discipline, recite the law in order to remember its significance, and to continually learn to fear the Lord. In the New Testament, children were assumed to be capable of living the same lifestyle resulting from discipleship as adults, specifically children are expected to live a life of submission to Jesus as Lord. In the Old Testament, children undergo a process of orienting themselves to being active disciples instead of simply passive recipients of information through asking questions. Applying such to the present-day, it follows that children who are regularly exposed to the faith community (i.e., children of Christian parents) will ask questions about the nature of faith and in turn come to a cognitive understanding of faith at a younger age than those who are not exposed to it.

The second chapter also explored the issue of an age of accountability as understood in Scripture. It argued that there is no biblically definitive age of accountability. Rather, accountability for sin is closely tied to an individual's cognitive and volitional abilities. In the

Old Testament, accountability is connected to a person's knowledge of sins. In a similar fashion, in the New Testament a greater knowledge of God's expectation brings about greater accountability for one's actions. Yet the Scriptures are silent as to a specific age or even cognitive level when such occurs. As a result, it follows that the gospel should be shared with children throughout their lives and that children should be encouraged to repent and believe the gospel from the earliest possible age.

Additionally, the biblical data relating to the initiation and of young conversion was analyzed. In regards to initiation, the Old Testament presents children as partial but not total members of the community of faith. The New Testament references are open to the possibility of children being fully incorporated as members of the community of faith, but are not explicit. Only the New Testament addresses the conversion of children. Within the context of Jesus' teaching on children, children are presented as existing in a state of dependency upon others, which is a necessary requirement for all individuals for conversion. Churches have a responsibility to convert their children and to labor to prevent their children from falling away. As a result of their status as disciples, accountable individuals, and dependent on the assistance of others, chapter two established that children can be converted.

Despite this positive argument for the baptism of children, several objections remained regarding the appropriateness of baptizing children within a Southern Baptist context. The third chapter addressed the historical objection to the baptism of children. It noted that several Baptist scholars have argued that there is an increasing willingness for Baptists to baptize their children which previous generations of Baptists would have rejected. In response, it was demonstrated that numerous significant nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Baptists figures argued that children could be converted, and when this occurs, should be baptized. While some nineteenth-

century Southern Baptists argued against child baptisms, the position was less prominent during Southern Baptists' formative years. Beginning with Mullins, such objections gained momentum.

Statistically, the third chapter demonstrated that claims of a steadily decreasing average of baptism century among Southern Baptists are almost impossible to prove prior to the mid-twentieth century. Further, it asserted that laments regarding preschool baptism are overstated as barely 1 percent of all baptisms are of the preschool age group and that claims of rising preschool baptisms are hard to substantiate over the course of the last 15 years. As a result, this chapter argued that the historical objection to the baptism of children lacked merit.

The fourth chapter dealt with psychological, sociological and theological objections relating to how the baptism of children adversely affects a regenerate church membership. This chapter argued that cognitively children can understand conversion at an earlier age than has previously been assumed. Specifically, based on the work of Chi, it asserted that children growing up in a Christian context are more likely to grasp cognitively the requirements of conversion than the Piagetian stages of child development would have anticipated. Sociological arguments against baptizing young children were shown to rest on faulty presuppositions regarding both the biblical and psychological data.

Theologically, this chapter asserted that children can understand sin and thus become accountable for it at an earlier age than has previously been assumed. It argued that children could surrender to the lordship of Christ and could properly function as church members. Evangelistically this chapter asserted that careful counseling is needed to ensure that children do cognitively grasp the requirements for salvation. It also noted that children can function within the church as church members and that rebaptisms are not primarily a result of child baptisms.³

³Taking into account Fish's finding that the primary reason for rebaptisms is poor counseling, (See Chapter 3 footnote 120), a possible solution for those concerned with the rebaptism of children would be to record a verbal

Taking these four chapters together, this dissertation has argued that children can cognitively grasp conversion and when this occurs, they should be baptized.

Applications

Several applications have been suggested throughout this dissertation that are now offered collectively. First, since chapter 1 has demonstrated that the baptism operates fundamentally as a confession of obedience in which one professes their desire to repent contemporaneous with one's conversion, it follows that all converts (regardless of age) should be baptized contemporaneous to their conversion. An individual who seeks to delay baptism cannot be affirmed as a convert from the New Testament perspective. Therefore, local Baptists churches have an obligation to baptize all people confessing Christianity.

Second, this dissertation has further argued that children can be converted. They can repent of their sins. They can place their faith in Christ. They can cognitively comprehend what it means for Jesus to be their Lord. Therefore, Christian parents and local churches have an obligation to be sensitive to the spiritual inquiries of children. Since children will ask questions about the nature of faith, these times of questioning should be encouraged. The response to such questions should always be to relate the child's questions about God, the Bible, Jesus, the nature of the church, etc. back to the basic message of Christ's redemption of humanity through his substitutionary atonement and bodily resurrection.⁴

statement from the child at the time of their baptism. This would allow both the church and the child to have a record of what the child understood he was doing at the time of his baptism.

⁴As noted in chapter 2, within the Old Testament economy, when children were asked questions about the polity of ancient Israel, parents were to respond with the story of God's deliverance of his people through the Passover. In a New Testament context, it follows that rather than story of God's redemption of Israel through the

Third, as parents, Bible study teachers, and local church leaders share the message of Jesus' redemption with children, these adults must make sure that children are actually cognitively grasping the message of salvation. Not all children will be able to grasp the truths of the gospel at the same age. Therefore, child evangelistic practices should emphasize one-on-one⁵ time with the child to ensure that the child is verbally confessing his state as a sinner, his desire to repent of his sins, his belief in Jesus' death for his sins and subsequent bodily resurrection, and his willingness to submit to Jesus as Lord.

A fourth point of application centers around the appropriate minimum age for conversion. This dissertation has been careful up to this point to *not* suggest a minimum age at which children can be converted and baptized. As Kenneth Chafin noted in his informal study, many Southern Baptists are generally uneasy about setting a specific age at which children can cognitively comprehend salvation.⁶ This uneasiness is commendable. Rather than setting an arbitrary minimum age limit at which salvation can occur, Baptists should deal with their children on a case-by-case basis. As this happens, parents and church leaders will find that some children are confessing Christ as their Lord, are repenting of their sins, and are placing their faith in Christ's death, burial and resurrection at young ages. Such children are Christians.⁷ These

Passover, instead parents and adults should respond to children's questions about Christianity with the story of God's redemption of humanity through the cross of Jesus.

⁵When it comes to church leaders, such does not mean that the setting should be private or that parents or other guardians should not be present. Rather, such language is meant to emphasize that the church leader counseling with the child has an obligation to make sure that the child is actually desiring to become a Christian and understands what that means independent of external coaching.

⁶Kenneth L. Chafin, "Evangelism and the Child," *Review and Expositor* 60, no. 2 (Spring 1963): 164

⁷In chapter 2, footnotes 73 and 76 suggested that five-year-olds could be incorporated into the life of the church. In chapter 4, the psychological studies cited from Chi suggested that four-year-olds could be incorporated into the life of the congregation. The most significant pieces of data arguing for leaving the age open to even young children is that children orient themselves to discipleship process in the Old Testament through asking questions

children should be permitted to confess their conversions in the waters of baptism as this is by definition the function of water baptism for credobaptists.

Fifth, G. R. Beasley-Murray's suggestion of that "the catechumenate should continue beyond baptism"⁸ is wise. Rather than viewing baptism as the finish line after which individuals are fully incorporated into the rights and responsibilities of church membership, local Southern Baptist churches would be wise to view it as a transitional point in a child (or for that matter any) convert's incorporation into the life of the church.

Sixth, church leaders should be prepared for young conversion from children growing up within a nurturing Christian environment. Such children should not be discouraged from making a decision of faith when they are confessing faith and repentance. Far more unexpected (although not impossible) will be the case of the child seeking conversion who comes from a home background that does not contain nurturing Christian parents. Pastors and church leaders should use extra caution in counseling such children as they normally will not cognitively grasp the commitment entailed in conversion.⁹

Areas for Additional Research

Several areas for additional research arise from the thesis of this dissertation. First, in the historical section of this dissertation, it was noted that some have claimed the baptism of children is a novel practice from not just a Southern Baptists perspective, but also from a global-historical

(something young children do) and that younger children are addressed with Paul's command in Ephesians 6:1–4. See the sections on discipleship in chapter 2.

⁸G. R. Beasley-Murray, "The Theology of the Child," *American Baptist Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1982): 122.

⁹Dennis Horton, "Ministry Student Ages and Implications for Child Evangelism and Baptism Practices," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 43–44.

Baptist/Anabaptist perspective. While the Menno Simmons quote analyzed in chapter 4 calls this assertion into question from an Anabaptist perspective,¹⁰ the question of the actual historical views of Baptists and Anabaptists globally regarding child baptism remains open. Therefore, additional historical research is needed analyzing the historic views of other credobaptistic groups regarding the baptism of children and the compatibility of such with the idea of a confessional baptism.

Second, Gary Thomas Deane's dissertation from Southwestern stands as the only large-scale empirical study of the cognitive understandings of children regarding conversion. Deane writes from a Piagetian perspective.¹¹ As noted in chapter 4, there are indications within Deane's research that the young children he surveyed did develop competencies at younger ages than Piaget would have expected relating to conversion. A follow-up study (perhaps among summer camp children at Ridgecrest in North Carolina) taking into account Chi's insights on domain-related learning competencies would provide needed insights regarding the nature of children's religious experiences.

Third, a process is needed for educating children into the privileges and responsibilities of church membership following baptism. This dissertation has argued that child church members should be gradually incorporated into all aspects of the church's work. Specifically, while it may be common to exclude children from many functions of church life,¹² regenerated

¹⁰Simmons states "little ones must wait according to God's Word until they can understand the holy Gospel of grace and sincerely confess it; and then, and then only, is it time, no matter how young or how old, for them to receive Christian baptism." See Menno Simmons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale: Herald, 1956), 241

¹¹Gary Thomas Deane. "An Investigation of the Child's Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development" (EdD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982)

¹²Withers makes this claim stating "It is common practice [for Southern Baptist] to provide ritual adult spiritual status to children through baptism without the corresponding adult social status. Perhaps the common

baptized children should not be excluded from the congregational processes and ministries of their local church. Thus how to properly and gradually incorporate baptized children into the congregational life of the church remains open to additional research.

exception would be providing congregational voting rights to members who are children. Even voting rights for young members presents a dilemma for church leaders who recognize the limited cognitive skills among child members to make valid decisions about church matters.” See John Warren Withers, “Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), 128.

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APPENDIX 1

BAPTISMS BY AGE: 1966-2012¹

Year	Total	Under 6	6-8 Years	9-12 Years	13-16 Years	17-24 Years	25 or Older
1966	360,959	1,146	34,026	139,211	59,569	46,980	80,027
1967	378,937	37,515		209,931		131,491	
1968	373,025	1,463	36,867	140,967	65,332	48,603	78,713
1969	368,225	1,422	35,168	136,705	67,736	49,469	76,477
1970	368,863	1,278	35,432	130,292	70,881	52,382	77,648

Year	Total	Under 6	6-11	12-17	18-29	30-59	60+
1971	409,659	1,899	150,188	126,127	71,845	53,623	5,977
1972	445,725	2,323	157,447	137,667	81,964	57,962	8,362
1973	413,990	1,465	143,099	119,844	83,112	57,734	8,736

Year	Total	Preschool (Under 6)	Children (6-8)	Children (9-11)	Youth (12-17)	Young Adult (18-29)	Adult (30-59)	Senior Adult (60+)
1974	410,482	1,708	34,237	97,955	115,317	90,176	61,267	9,822
1975	421,809	1,812	35,723	99,052	116,564	91,951	66,919	9,788
1976	384,496	2,061	33,501	81,613	103,981	88,757	64,465	10,118
1977	345,690	1,704	33,892	74,027	88,838	76,444	61,826	8,959
1978	336,050	1,825	34,747	72,399	85,138	73,856	58,678	9,407
1979	368,738	2,087	37,307	80,360	93,142	82,497	63,778	9,567
1980	429,742	2,377	40,295	92,168	108,633	100,260	75,462	10,547
1981	405,608	2,519	37,367	84,364	101,076	95,731	73,837	10,714
1982	411,554	2,631	37,690	80,719	102,259	99,460	77,982	10,813
1983	394,606	2,556	36,568	72,623	97,984	95,537	78,400	10,938
1984	372,028	2,541	36,700	69,323	91,431	86,865	74,572	10,596
1985	351,071	2,455	36,764	66,190	86,499	78,816	69,885	10,462
1986	363,124	2,987	37,979	68,602	86,387	82,674	73,376	11,119
1987	338,495	2,938	37,115	63,836	79,900	75,282	69,135	10,289
1988	346,320	2,738	40,591	66,936	80,391	75,459	69,641	10,564
1989	351,107	3,043	42,181	68,821	80,704	74,755	71,192	10,411
1990	385,031	3,320	45,870	75,818	89,596	80,595	78,358	11,474
1991	396,668	3,671	47,088	78,095	89,595	82,516	84,020	11,683
1992	367,847	3,405	43,910	70,035	85,473	74,257	79,495	11,272
1993	349,073	3,386	43,854	66,648	80,438	67,416	76,356	10,975
1994	378,463	3,610	46,041	70,923	89,085	71,448	85,986	11,370
1995	393,811	3,262	50,594	72,638	92,032	71,275	93,583	10,427
1996	379,344	3,873	47,705	70,964	87,653	68,203	88,917	12,029

¹This data was provided to the author by Mrs. Paula Hancock. Mrs. Hancock works at Lifeway Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention. Lifeway is responsible for sending out, collecting, and compiling the data associated with the Annual Church Profile.

1997	412,027	4,133	51,051	75,238	93,593	76,406	98,948	12,658
1998	407,264	4,516	52,509	74,739	94,341	71,194	96,796	13,169
1999	419,342	4,574	52,788	76,510	93,757	74,060	103,620	14,033
2000	414,657	4,403	51,654	74,994	93,100	70,466	105,024	15,016
2001	395,930	4,364	49,138	71,607	86,928	66,104	101,805	15,984
2002	394,893	4,386	49,287	70,882	84,056	65,906	102,680	17,696
2003	377,357	4,139	48,954	67,846	81,246	61,394	97,968	15,810
2004	387,947	4,207	49,767	67,591	84,040	63,772	102,180	16,390
2005	371,850	4,272	49,683	65,479	81,708	60,362	94,130	16,216
2006	364,826	4,179	49,487	65,075	79,587	58,099	91,754	16,645
2007	345,941	3,878	45,825	61,792	75,989	55,929	87,733	14,795
2008	342,198	3,840	44,741	61,233	75,215	56,041	84,667	16,461
2009	349,737	3,891	44,162	63,040	76,442	57,331	87,611	17,260
2010	331,008	3,356	42,302	59,815	73,118	54,326	81,730	16,361

Year	Total	Children (Birth-11)	Youth (12-17)	Young Adult (18-29)	Adult (30 & Up)
2011	333,341	102,649	78,600	51,555	100,537
2012	314,956	97,867	75,181	53,106	88,802
2013	310,368	93,756	73,201	51,599	91,852

APPENDIX 2

THE PERCENTAGE EACH AGE GROUP CONTRIBUTES TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SBC BAPTISMS¹

Year	Total	Under 6	6-8 Years	9-12 Years	13-16 Years	17-24 Years	25 or Older
1966	360,959	0.32%	9.43%	38.57%	16.50%	13.02%	22.17%
1967 ²	378,937	9.90%		55.40%		34.70%	
1968	373,025	0.39%	9.88%	37.79%	17.51%	13.03%	21.10%
1969	368,225	0.39%	9.55%	37.13%	18.40%	13.43%	20.77%
1970	368,863	0.35%	9.61%	35.32%	19.22%	14.20%	21.05%

Year	Total	Under 6	6-11	12-17	18-29	30-59	60+
1971	409,659	0.46%	36.66%	30.79%	17.54%	13.09%	1.46%
1972	445,725	0.52%	35.32%	30.89%	18.39%	13.00%	1.88%
1973	413,990	0.35%	34.57%	28.95%	20.08%	13.95%	2.11%

Year	Total				Young		Senior	
		Preschool (Under 6)	Children (6-8)	Children (9-11)	Youth (12-17)	Adult (18-29)	Adult (30-59)	Adult (60+)
1974	410,482	0.42%	8.34%	23.86%	28.09%	21.97%	14.93%	2.39%
1975	421,809	0.43%	8.47%	23.48%	27.63%	21.80%	15.86%	2.32%
1976	384,496	0.54%	8.71%	21.23%	27.04%	23.08%	16.77%	2.63%
1977	345,690	0.49%	9.80%	21.41%	25.70%	22.11%	17.88%	2.59%
1978	336,050	0.54%	10.34%	21.54%	25.33%	21.98%	17.46%	2.80%
1979	368,738	0.57%	10.12%	21.79%	25.26%	22.37%	17.30%	2.59%
1980	429,742	0.55%	9.38%	21.45%	25.28%	23.33%	17.56%	2.45%
1981	405,608	0.62%	9.21%	20.80%	24.92%	23.60%	18.20%	2.64%
1982	411,554	0.64%	9.16%	19.61%	24.85%	24.17%	18.95%	2.63%
1983	394,606	0.65%	9.27%	18.40%	24.83%	24.21%	19.87%	2.77%
1984	372,028	0.68%	9.86%	18.63%	24.58%	23.35%	20.04%	2.85%
1985	351,071	0.70%	10.47%	18.85%	24.64%	22.45%	19.91%	2.98%
1986	363,124	0.82%	10.46%	18.89%	23.79%	22.77%	20.21%	3.06%
1987	338,495	0.87%	10.96%	18.86%	23.60%	22.24%	20.42%	3.04%
1988	346,320	0.79%	11.72%	19.33%	23.21%	21.79%	20.11%	3.05%
1989	351,107	0.87%	12.01%	19.60%	22.99%	21.29%	20.28%	2.97%
1990	385,031	0.86%	11.91%	19.69%	23.27%	20.93%	20.35%	2.98%
1991	396,668	0.93%	11.87%	19.69%	22.59%	20.80%	21.18%	2.95%
1992	367,847	0.93%	11.94%	19.04%	23.24%	20.19%	21.61%	3.06%
1993	349,073	0.97%	12.56%	19.09%	23.04%	19.31%	21.87%	3.14%
1994	378,463	0.95%	12.17%	18.74%	23.54%	18.88%	22.72%	3.00%
1995	393,811	0.83%	12.85%	18.44%	23.37%	18.10%	23.76%	2.65%
1996	379,344	1.02%	12.58%	18.71%	23.11%	17.98%	23.44%	3.17%

¹This data was derived from the data in Appendix 1.

²In 1967 only three age categories were queried: 8 and under, 9-16, 17 and up.

1997	412,027	1.00%	12.39%	18.26%	22.72%	18.54%	24.01%	3.07%
1998	407,264	1.11%	12.89%	18.35%	23.16%	17.48%	23.77%	3.23%
1999	419,342	1.09%	12.59%	18.25%	22.36%	17.66%	24.71%	3.35%
2000	414,657	1.06%	12.46%	18.09%	22.45%	16.99%	25.33%	3.62%
2001	395,930	1.10%	12.41%	18.09%	21.96%	16.70%	25.71%	4.04%
2002	394,893	1.11%	12.48%	17.95%	21.29%	16.69%	26.00%	4.48%
2003	377,357	1.10%	12.97%	17.98%	21.53%	16.27%	25.96%	4.19%
2004	387,947	1.08%	12.83%	17.42%	21.66%	16.44%	26.34%	4.22%
2005	371,850	1.15%	13.36%	17.61%	21.97%	16.23%	25.31%	4.36%
2006	364,826	1.15%	13.56%	17.84%	21.82%	15.93%	25.15%	4.56%
2007	345,941	1.12%	13.25%	17.86%	21.97%	16.17%	25.36%	4.28%
2008	342,198	1.12%	13.07%	17.89%	21.98%	16.38%	24.74%	4.81%
2009	349,737	1.11%	12.63%	18.02%	21.86%	16.39%	25.05%	4.94%
2010	331,008	1.01%	12.78%	18.07%	22.09%	16.41%	24.69%	4.94%

		Children	Youth	Young Adult	Adult
Year	Total	(Birth-11)	(12-17)	(18-29)	(30 & Up)
2011	333,341	30.79%	23.58%	15.47%	30.16%
2012	314,956	31.07%	23.87%	16.86%	28.20%
2013	310,368	30.21%	23.59%	16.63%	29.59%

APPENDIX 3

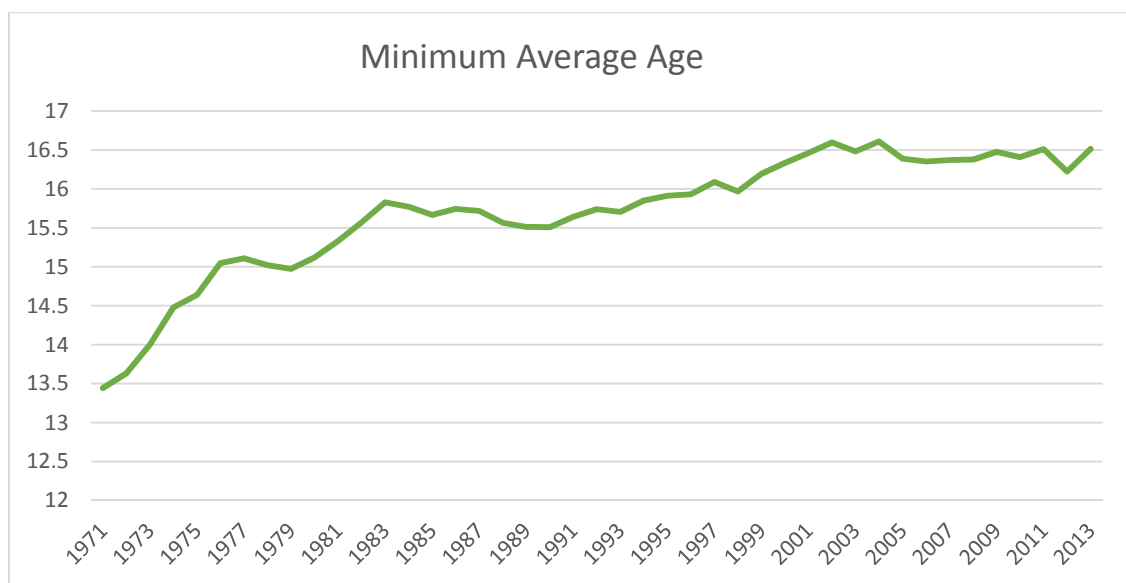
THE AVERAGE AND MEDIAN AGES OF SBC BAPTISMS

Mark Dever recently claimed that, “Whatever the appropriate age for baptism is, the average age of actual baptisms among Baptists has definitely been declining during the last century.”¹ As noted above in chapter 3, Dever’s claim is not new. It is also not true. While the usefulness of “averages” in measuring actual trends is disputable, it is clear that the average age of baptism has actually been going up since the early 1970s. This is true because the percentage of overall adult baptism has risen from just over 9% in 1971 to well over 29% in 2013. Given that the ACP uses age groups, calculating a precise average age of baptism is impossible. Still even assuming that all noted individual in a particular age group were baptized at the lowest possible age² (so as to reduce the distorting effect of adult baptisms), it is still clear the average age has still been increasing. Table A3-1 plots the average minimum age of baptism over the last 40 years.

¹Dever, “Baptism in the Local Church,” 336.

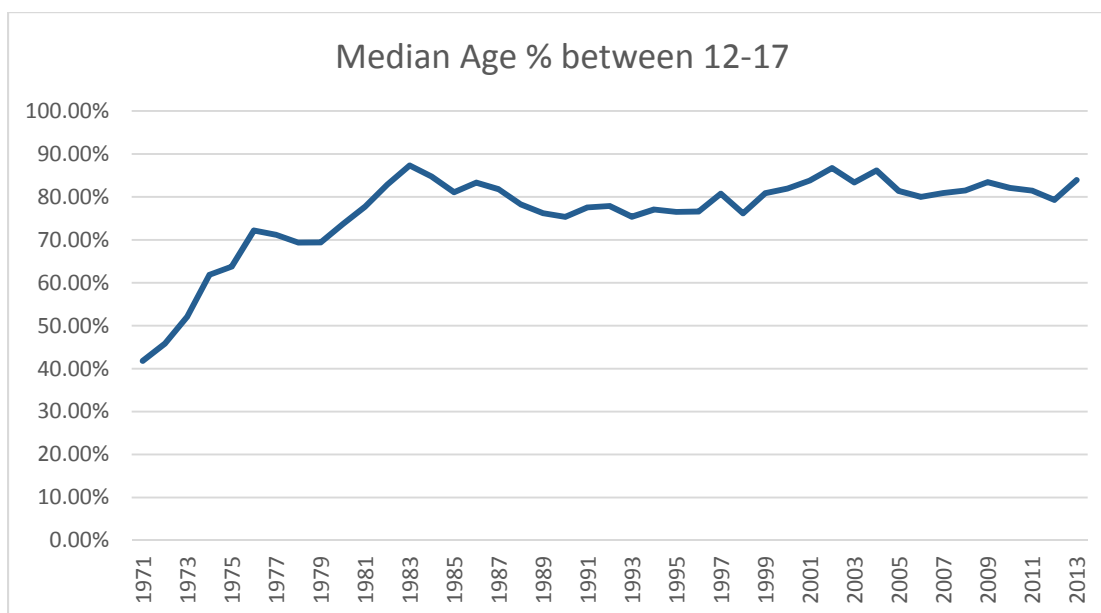
²So, for the birth to 11 category all persons are assumed to be 6, 12-17 all are assumed to be 12, 18-29 all are assumed to be 29, and 30+ all are assumed to be 30.

Table A3-1



A slightly more meaningful number than the average of conversion is the median age of conversion. Given assumptions about a specific age are not necessary the position of the median age as it relates to age categories can be calculated. The median age has always fallen in the 12-17 age category. Table A3-2 plots the percentage point in the 12-17 age group at which the median age falls. It steadily rose to a higher point within this age category from 1971 until 1983 and has remained at a similarly high level ever since.

Table A3-2



Year	Minimum Average Age	Median Age % between 12-17
1971	13.44351278	41.82%
1972	13.63104156	45.83%
1973	13.9994396	52.09%
1974	14.47820367	61.87%
1975	14.63842166	63.76%
1976	15.04810973	72.20%
1977	15.10988458	71.17%
1978	15.01990775	69.36%
1979	14.9741117	69.37%
1980	15.11973696	73.67%
1981	15.33031893	77.72%
1982	15.56898487	82.87%
1983	15.82868988	87.32%
1984	15.77076457	84.71%
1985	15.66503642	81.07%
1986	15.74402683	83.34%
1987	15.71642122	81.80%
1988	15.56564449	78.24%
1989	15.51207467	76.21%
1990	15.50750459	75.35%
1991	15.64190204	77.55%
1992	15.73864134	77.89%

1993	15.70445723	75.40%
1994	15.85150464	77.07%
1995	15.91270432	76.51%
1996	15.93045363	76.59%
1997	16.08908154	80.77%
1998	15.9678194	76.18%
1999	16.19438549	80.85%
2000	16.33420876	81.93%
2001	16.46081883	83.81%
2002	16.59586268	86.72%
2003	16.4804628	83.38%
2004	16.60759331	86.16%
2005	16.38831787	81.38%
2006	16.35092345	80.00%
2007	16.37099968	80.90%
2008	16.37660653	81.48%
2009	16.47509414	83.43%
2010	16.40701131	82.10%
2011	16.50920229	81.45%
2012	16.22239932	79.29%
2013	16.51359032	83.92%

APPENDIX 4

EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE

Regarding SBC Baptismal Data Data

From: Paula Hancock [mailto:[paula.hancock@lifeway.com](mailto:Paula.Hancock@lifeway.com)]

Sent: Monday, March 30, 2015 9:39 AM

To: Robert Matz

Subject: Re: Baptisms by Age Group Historical data

Yes, that is fine. It is a report that we make available publicly on request. Glad I could be of help. Good luck with your dissertation!

Paula Hancock
LifeWay Christian Resources
One LifeWay Plaza
Nashville, TN 37234-0127

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and were increased in number daily.” Acts 16:5

On Sat, Mar 28, 2015 at 9:45 PM, Robert Matz <rmatz@mbts.edu> wrote:

Mrs. Hancock,

You have been an incredible blessing to me in sending me this data. I did want to make sure it was okay for me to reproduce the data within my dissertation (with proper attributions of course).

Blessings,



ROBERT MATZ | DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAM, ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PREACHING

5001 N. Oak Trafficway • Kansas City, MO 64118 • w) mbts.edu • t) twitter.com/mbts

From: Paula Hancock [mailto:[paula.hancock@lifeway.com](mailto:Paula.Hancock@lifeway.com)]

Sent: Monday, March 9, 2015 3:49 PM

To: Robert Matz

Subject: Re: Baptisms by Age Group Historical data

Hello Robert,

Nice to hear from you.

I have attached the 2013 SBC Baptisms by State Convention and Age Group report to this email. You will need the Acrobat Reader installed on the computer to open and print the report. If you do not have the Reader you can download a copy for FREE at www.adobe.com.

We are still in the collection phase of the 2014 ACP data and it will be later this summer before the next baptisms by age group report will be available.

Thanks for your interest in denominational statistics!

Paula Hancock

LifeWay Christian Resources

One LifeWay Plaza

Nashville, TN 37234-0127

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and were increased in number daily.” Acts 16:5

On Sat, Mar 7, 2015 at 1:03 PM, Robert Matz <rmatz@mbts.edu> wrote:

Mrs. Paula,

My name is Robert Matz and I teach at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Last summer you and I corresponded about the baptismal data as classified by age found within the Annual Church Profile. You sent me the breakdown of the baptismal data by age from 1966-2012.

I so appreciate the data you sent over to me last summer. It has been incredibly helpful to me in my research. When we last corresponded you mentioned that you had not had a chance yet to compile the baptismal data broken down by age for the 2013 annual church profiles. Before I put the finishing touches on the project I am working on, I was wondering if you had been able to compile the baptismal breakdown by age for 2013 and/or 2014? If so would there be any way you could send that to me?

Again, you have been an immense help to me and please know that I am grateful for your help to me and for your service to the churches through your work at Lifeway.

Blessings,



ROBERT MATZ | DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAM, ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PREACHING
5001 N. Oak Trafficway • Kansas City, MO 64118 • w) mbts.edu • t) twitter.com/mbts

From: Robert Matz

Sent: Saturday, June 14, 2014 2:01 PM

To: Paula Hancock

Subject: RE: Baptisms by Age Group Historical data

Paula,

Again, thank you so much for this data. I did have a follow up question.

The recent task force report mentioned that baptisms were down in every area except for children under 6. These numbers do not reflect that, as baptism have declined fairly steadily in that age since 2005 with the highest year for that category being 1999.

I am wondering if the reason for the discrepancy is the declining number of Annual Church Profiles being filled out. If so, does Lifeway have projections of what the numbers would be with all profiles being filled out? If so, could I trouble you for this data as well.

Again, I greatly appreciate your time.



ROBERT MATZ | DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAM, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PREACHING
5001 N. Oak Trafficway • Kansas City, MO 64118 • w) mbts.edu • t) twitter.com/mbts

From: Robert Matz

Sent: Saturday, June 14, 2014 2:51 PM

To: 'Paula Hancock'

Subject: RE: Baptisms by Age Group Historical data

Paula,

I greatly appreciate you getting this information to me.

Blessings,



ROBERT MATZ | DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAM, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PREACHING
5001 N. Oak Trafficway • Kansas City, MO 64118 w) mbts.edu • t) twitter.com/mbts

From: Paula Hancock [mailto:paula.hancock@lifeway.com]

Sent: Friday, June 13, 2014 10:50 AM

To: Robert Matz

Subject: Baptisms by Age Group Historical data

Hello Robert,

My name is Paula Hancock and I work with the Annual Church Profile at LifeWay and so your email was forwarded to me. I have attached a report of the age group information for baptisms from 1966-2012. You will notice that the age group categories have changed some over time. I do not find any age group information available prior to 1966 and I have not yet compiled the information for 2013.

Hope this information helps provide what you need

Thanks,

Paula Hancock

LifeWay Christian Resources

One LifeWay Plaza
Nashville, TN 37234-0127

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and were increased in number daily.” Acts 16:5

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Robert Matz** <wordpress@www.lifewayresearch.com>

Date: Sat, Jun 7, 2014 at 6:57 PM

Subject: New Message from LifeWayResearch.com

To: kevin.walker@lifeway.com

Hello,

My name is Robert Matz. I am a faculty member at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I am working on some research on baptism and the age of accountability. I was needing some help in obtaining some research from the Annual Church Profiles (ACP). Specifically, I am wanting to look at the historical data on baptisms by age for the convention as a whole broken out by year. Can you help me get a table of this?

Specifically, I am wanting to look at the trends as well as a total by age for each year for the entire convention for as long as this statistic has been tracked.

I know that the ACP has asked for this information since at least 1966 as the 1967 Southern Baptist Quarterly Handbook had a report on it. If the question has been asked since before this, that data would be extremely helpful as well. Further, I was unclear if the ACP has asked for this information since 2011 as I did not see this question on the reports in the SBDS website surveys from 2012 forward. However, I did notice the recent Pastor's Task Force on SBC Evangelistic Impact & Declining Baptism reference a more recent statistic.

I appreciate any help you can offer with this matter. My cellphone is 816-XXX-XXXX and I look forward to visiting with you about this as you have time.

Blessings,

Robert Matz

Regarding Ministry Student Ages Study

Greetings Dr. Matz,

You have permission to reproduce the figures from the above referenced article out of the Christian Education Journal. We just request you provide the proper citation for the article.

Blessings on your dissertation process.

Sincerely,

Joy Bergk
Academic Publications Manager
University Communications & Marketing

Biola University

Journal of Psychology & Theology
Christian Education Journal
Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care
Great Commission Research Journal
562/944-0351 ext. 5321
562/906-4547 (fax)



On Mon, Jul 20, 2015 at 8:50 AM, Robert Matz <rmatz@mbts.edu> wrote:

Greetings,

My name is Robert Matz. I teach at Midwestern Baptists Theological Seminary and am getting ready to submit my Ph.D. dissertation to the library at Liberty University.

My dissertation is titled "Should Baptist Baptize their children?" I am offering a critique (Biblical, historical, theological, psychological, etc.) of delayed baptismal practices for converted children within baptistic settings.

I am writing to request permission to reproduce tables from an article appearing in the Christian Education Journal. The article is "Ministry Student Ages of Conversion with Implication for Childhood Evangelism and Baptism Practices" by Dennis Horton. It appeared in the Spring 2010 issue of the journal.

I have corresponded with Dr. Horton and he seems favorable to this request. You can see my correspondence with him below.

My dissertation will be digitally available through the ProQuest dissertations and abstract service.

I appreciate your kind consideration of this request.

Blessings,



ROBERT MATZ | DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAM, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PREACHING

5001 N. Oak Trafficway • Kansas City, MO 64118 • w) mbts.edu • t) twitter.com/mbts

From: Horton, Dennis [mailto:Dennis_Horton@baylor.edu]

Sent: Monday, March 23, 2015 12:45 PM

To: Robert Matz

Subject: RE: Your article on Ministry Student Ages of Conversion

Hi Robert,

I'm glad to learn of your interest in this important topic. I would certainly be interested in reading your dissertation after it's completed. As for the permissions on reproducing the figures, you will need to contact the journal about that. They now have the copyright on all of the material published in that article. May God bless your research and writing as you complete your work. All the best! Dennis

Dennis Horton | Assoc. Director and J. David Slover Professor of Ministry Guidance

Office [254-710-6323](tel:254-710-6323) | Cell [254-495-7366](tel:254-495-7366) | Fax [254-710-3740](tel:254-710-3740) | [Baylor Ministry Guidance Program](#)

Baylor University | Department of Religion | One Bear Place #97284 | Waco, TX 76798-7284

From: Robert Matz [<mailto:rmatz@mbts.edu>]

Sent: Monday, March 23, 2015 10:13 AM

To: Horton, Dennis

Subject: Your article on Ministry Student Ages of Conversion

Dr. Horton,

My name is Robert Matz. I teach at Midwestern Baptists Theological Seminary and am currently in the last stages of completing my Ph.D. dissertation from Liberty University.

My dissertation is titled "Should Baptist Baptize their children?" I am offering a critique (Biblical, historical, theological, psychological, etc.) of delayed baptismal practices for converted children and arguing that children should be baptized when they confess faith. Your article in the

Christian Education journal on “Ministry Student Ages of Conversion with Implication for Childhood Evangelism and Baptism Practices” has proven immensely helpful to me. In many ways my own research provides a second line of justification to your assertion that “early conversions are a relatively common occurrences among credobaptistic ministry students who have grown up within a nurturing Christian context.” (43)

As a result, I wanted to write to you to ask your permission to reproduce (with proper attributions of course) the four figures from your article. My dissertation will be digitally available through the ProQuest dissertations and abstract service. As a result, I need your permission for such reproduction. If you still have the original digital versions of the figures and would be willing send them to me, this would be extremely helpful to me as I am currently working from the scanned pdf of the article available on ATLA service.

I incredible appreciate your research and scholarship on the conversion experiences of children.

Blessings,



ROBERT MATZ | DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAM, ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PREACHING
5001 N. Oak Trafficway • Kansas City, MO 64118 • w) mbts.edu • t) twitter.com/mbts