

# **CHILDREN AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE JAMAICA BAPTIST UNION**

## **Introduction**

The confusion surrounding the age at which baptism should take place is a complex global challenge that the Christian Church has inherited. Should baptism be for new born babies or should it be reserved for children and youth at a particular stage in their development? Should this rite be for persons in their "riper years" who are able to testify personally of saving grace?

This is just one of the complex issues associated with the debate on baptism. In this age of ecumenism, there is the need to guard against positions of arrogance and intolerance and find a way to be respectful of the varying positions that are posited with equal vigour and commitment. For sure, the response to this troubling subject cannot be one of abandonment of the practice of baptism nor can it be one of a uniform approach. Given the current climate of pluralism and diversity, the appropriate response has to be one of celebration of the diversity of baptismal practices with a view of discovering new meanings that will aid the enrichment of one's tradition. This approach will take us beyond the question about who is right and who is wrong and help us to see the Baptist baptismal tradition as one among many, each with its own integrity.

This is the backdrop against which the issue of the minimum age for church membership within the context of the Jamaica Baptist Union will be explored. In addressing this subject, special attention will be given to the theological understanding of baptism in Baptist churches. An attempt will also be made to establish an understanding of children with special reference to the scriptures as well as to recommend factors to be considered in determining the readiness of a child for baptism.

## Theological Understanding of Baptism in Baptist Churches

Traditionally, Baptists preferred the word “ordinance” rather than “sacrament” to speak of baptism. The term “ordinance” is preferred in some Baptist circles because it implies that baptism was commanded or ordained by Jesus and given to the disciples, as well as, by extension, the church. The rite of baptism is therefore regarded as an act of obedience to the command of Christ, both on the part of the baptized and the church. In recent times, however, Baptists have become increasingly comfortable with referring to baptism as a sacrament with a particular understanding of the term in mind. Christopher Ellis posits the following meaning of ‘sacrament’:

**“The term ‘sacrament’ suggests the power of symbols to link us to the depths of reality, and points us to the use by God of material means to mediate His saving action”.**

Baptism, understood as sacrament as defined by Ellis, is a **proclamation** of the Gospel of Christ. It proclaims and enacts the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, the believer’s union with Christ and incorporation into His Body. As a sacrament, baptism is a celebration of a **partnership** in which God partners with the church and the person being baptized through the work of the Holy Spirit. The theological value of the partnership is underscored by the profound mystery of collaboration within the Trinity. As a sacrament of **presence**, the symbolic act of baptism celebrates the unity of creation and the redemption in God’s saving action. The relationship between baptism and incarnation is seen in the way nature is incorporated into the whole scheme of God’s plan. God’s presence in the sacrament of baptism can be affirmed only insofar as it points to his sacramental presence in the world that Christ died to save.

Baptism is also a sacrament of **prophecy** because it enables the church to be a sign of the kingdom, pointing beyond the here and now, to that that

which is yet to come. It gives visibility to the contradiction of the cross in discipleship, since union with Christ, through baptism, promises a cross as well as a crown. As a sacrament of **promise**, baptism is not to be seen as a delivery mechanism of assurance and certainty, but as a sign and seal of God's covenant promises. It offers not so much certainty of salvation but union with Christ whose promises can be trusted.

When the word 'sacrament' is properly understood as defined above, there should be no difficulty in speaking of baptism as a sacrament of proclamation, partnership, presence, prophecy and promise.

Christian baptism assumes the experience of conversion, pardon and cleansing on the part of an individual. It signals the participation in Christ's death and resurrection, incorporation in the Body of Christ, the sign of the Kingdom and the gift of the Spirit. It is through Christian baptism that the baptized enters into union with Christ. In the New Testament, the granting of the Spirit is normally within the context of the event of Baptism (Acts 2:38; 19f; Titus 3:5). The union with Christ that is symbolized by baptism is in fact the gift of the Spirit. **Baptism is therefore an initiatory event in which all that forms the foundation of the Christian life is symbolically realized in union with Christ, the gift of the Spirit, regeneration, and membership in the community of faith.** Most Baptists agree that immersion is the mode that best captures the full meaning of baptism and that believer's baptism is the most clearly attested practice of baptism in the New Testament. Therefore, the personal faith of the recipient and continuous participation in the life of the church are essential for the full fruit of baptism. Does this view of baptism only qualify adults and disqualify children? Examining the teachings of Jesus about children will certainly assist in answering this question.

## **An Understanding of Children in the Teachings of Jesus**

In the gospel of St. Matthew, children are presented as a model of humility. In responding to the question as to who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples and instructed them to emulate the child's character. (St. Matt. 18:1-4 para.) By such action, Jesus challenged Jewish assumption that the child was not merely raw material for education but the symbol of true discipleship and moreover a true representative of himself.

Identification with the child, as well as solidarity with the humble, are marks of greatness in kingdom ministry. This is so because such identification and solidarity in Jesus' times exposed one to ridicule, suffering and persecution. The action of Herod in ordering the slaughter of innocent children in his ruthless pursuit of the Christ child, supports the claim that to be a child was, in those days, to be at the mercy of the powerful. The attempts by the ruling elite to keep children quiet in the temple (Mt 21:15f), showed how children were despised by the worldly wise. While children may not have the sophistication of the learned and prudent, they do have insights that must be cherished and not repressed or despised. It is of interest to note that it was not the powerful or the wise, nor even the disciples who recognized Jesus in Jerusalem, but the children, the blind and the lame in the temple. They were the 'little' ones who believed in him (Mt. 18:5ff) and were referred to as the oppressed whom Jesus summoned to himself in Matthew 11:27ff. They were able to identify the one who was in solidarity with them.

Children are therefore among the category of the marginal and humble who are privileged to receive insights into the divine wisdom; something hidden from the wise and sophisticated. It is clear that the child does not only

represent the humble in the teachings of Jesus but also the chosen people of God. Identification with the category of the excluded, particularly with the child, is an imperative for discipleship. This undoubtedly raises serious questions about the nature of the provision that is made for children in the liturgy and common life of the church, as well as the extent to which adults recognize children as persons of importance within the Christian fellowship.

### **Indicators of Readiness for the Baptism of Children**

Given the emphasis of Baptists on the importance of personal faith in the baptismal reality the question of intellectual capability arises. At what age would a child be intellectually capable to make such confession? The purpose of this paper is not to suggest a minimum age, as this would be most difficult given the variations in cognitive development, among other factors. At best, one can only suggest some factors to be considered in determining the readiness of a child for baptism. The assumption of this paper is that a child is capable of personal faith, although such faith may not be as developed as that of an adult. However, this should not pose too much of a problem when baptism is considered as an event within the process of initiation. This implies that nurturing in the faith for both the child as well as the adults is of paramount importance and is to be considered as an ongoing exercise. In determining the readiness of a child for baptism, each case would have to be examined separately because of the various factors to be considered. These include the home environment, the faith of the parents/guardians, the understanding level of the child and the openness of the church community to nurture the faith of the child.

## **Spiritual Influence**

Spiritual influence is critical for determining the readiness of an individual for baptism. The home is a primary agent that influences values. This is the first place where children are exposed to value formation. There is generally speaking, a greater propensity for children who are supported by an environment of Christian principles and values to be nurtured into the Christian faith. This expression does not preclude a child from a non-Christian environment from being so influenced. However, knowledge of the home setting will enable those of the church community to determine the most effective preparatory programme needed to ensure the readiness of the prospect. Therefore, every effort should be made by those of the church community to acquaint themselves with the circumstances of the home environment within which the child lives. Such an environment should take into consideration the faith of the caregiver.

Christian caregivers are often more likely to fulfill a complementary role in the process of preparation and the ongoing nurturing of the child. The child could benefit from the Christian virtues exemplified by parent/guardians. However, important as this is in determining the readiness of a child, it should not be used as a basis to exclude children of non-Christian parents / guardians from baptism. Children of non-confessing Christian parents / guardians should also be considered for baptism upon request. It may require the provision of more support on the part of the church for the child and the child's family, for example, the assigning of spiritual mentors / sponsors.

## **Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development varies from child to child given the differences in a number of contributory factors, for example, heredity, environment, opportunities, etc. While it is important to ensure that the child has a basic understanding of the fundamentals of the faith, one has to be careful about the extent to which such is required. This is against the awareness that there are persons - both adults and children - who have peculiar challenges that undermine their intellectual capability. Should intellectual capability be insisted on, these persons would be automatically disqualified. The point is, although this is desirable, provision will have to be made for exceptional cases. In these circumstances, the faith of those surrounding the child along with the faith of the Christian community must be taken into serious consideration in arising at a decision.

## **The Community of Faith**

The openness of Baptist churches to recognize the importance of the place of children in the life of the church varies from church to church. Some churches are more willing than others to create ministry opportunities for children. If the church is not at the place theologically to embrace children as authentic members of the Christian community, they could do more harm than good to those who have the desire to become members of the church. A deepening theological understanding of the place of children in the kingdom of God will assist the church in preparing and nurturing children in the Christian faith. Such a church will understand the importance of having in place the requisite support mechanism to ensure the spiritual growth and development of the child.

It must be admitted that the list of factors is not exhaustive as others might become contextually relevant. Reflection on the ones mentioned, however, should be useful in helping to determine the readiness of the child for

baptism. These factors might not be all applicable to every situation; therefore an analysis of each individual case should be done to determine those that are relevant.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of the Baptist church considering this subject at this time cannot be overemphasized. The church community has an awesome responsibility to assist in the nurturing, growth and development of our children. One of the ways to fulfill this responsibility is to receive them into the membership of the church so that they can benefit from direct pastoral oversight, Christian guidance and congregational support. Based on our faith and practice, baptism is one of the avenues through which children can be initiated into the Christian family.

The need for personal faith as a prerequisite for baptism ought not to be limited to adults because children also have the intellectual capability for personal faith, notwithstanding the possibility of it not being as developed as that of an adult. Although Baptists regard confession of personal faith as important, it must be admitted that there are persons, including children, who might be incapable of making or giving expression to such, due to various health and wellness challenges. These persons ought not to be disqualified from baptism. Instead, the church should ensure that adequate provision is made to facilitate the growth and development of their faith.

While a minimum age is not recommended for children to be baptized into the churches of the Jamaica Baptist Union, at least three factors are suggested for consideration in making a determination relative to the readiness on the part of the child. In determining so, each case should be treated on its own merit.

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