

CHILDREN AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE JAMAICA BAPTIST UNION

STUDY VERSION

LESSON 1

A. Introduction

Guidelines and Summary

This study, presented in two lessons, is based on an earlier paper “Children and Church Membership in the Jamaica Baptist Union”, which was produced by the Faith and Order Commission in 2012. **These lessons must be studied in conjunction with this paper, a copy of which is appended hereto.** The Glossary of Terms at the end of the second lesson should be consulted to get a better understanding of words and phrases used in the lessons.

The issue of a minimum age for church membership, within the context of the Jamaica Baptist Union, will be the focus of the study, and will include the following:

- a) The theological understanding of baptism in Baptist churches
- b) An understanding of children, with special reference to Scripture
- c) Consideration and recommendation of factors, which can determine the readiness of a child for baptism.

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Discussion Points

1) In the Christian Church, there seems to be confusion about the age at which a person should be baptized and allowed church membership. Do you agree?

2) State your opinion based on the following:

- Should newborn babies be baptized?
- Should baptism be reserved for children/youth at a particular stage in their development?
- Should this be a rite for individuals in their “riper years” because they might be able to testify personally of God’s saving grace better than children could?
- Should there be a minimum age for baptism and church membership? Give reasons for your answer.

3. Use the information contained the italicized paragraph below to answer the following question: In the existing age of ecumenism, how could the Church guard against arrogance and intolerance towards the varying positions about whether children should be baptized?

The response to whether children should be baptized should be to encourage a celebration of the diversity of baptismal practices, with a view to discover new meanings to help enrich one's tradition. Such an approach is not to determine who might be right or wrong but should help us to see the Baptist baptismal tradition as one among many, and each having its own integrity.

B. Use information from the section, “Theological Understanding of Baptism in Baptist Churches”, to answer the questions and to fill in the blanks.

Answer the following questions:

1) What is the significance of baptism?

2) Baptism by immersion “captures the full meaning of believers baptism”. Why?

3) Why is baptism considered a rite?

4) Why do some Baptists refer to baptism as a *sacrament* rather than an *ordinance*?

Fill in the missing words.

1) As a sacrament, baptism is a _____ of a partnership in which God partners with the _____ and the _____ being baptized, through the work of the _____.

- 2) As a sacrament of presence, the symbolic act of baptism celebrates the _____ of _____ and _____ in God's saving action.
- 3) God's presence in the sacrament of baptism can be affirmed only insofar as it points to God's _____ in the world that Christ died to save.
- 4) Baptism is also a sacrament of _____ because it enables the church to be a sign of the kingdom, pointing to that which is yet to come.
- 5) Baptism gives _____ to the contradiction of the _____ in discipleship, since union with Christ, through baptism, promises a _____ as well as a crown.
- 6) As a _____ of promise, baptism is not to be seen as a delivery mechanism of assurance and certainty, but as a _____ and _____ of God's covenant promises.
- 7) It offers not so much certainty of salvation but _____ with Christ whose promises can be trusted.
- 8) Baptism is a sacrament of _____, _____, _____ and _____.
- 9) Christian baptism assumes the experience of _____, _____ and _____ on the part of an individual.
- 10) It is through Christian _____ that the baptized enters into _____ with Christ.
- 11) The baptized believer's personal faith and his or her continuous _____ in the life of the church are essential for the full fruit of _____.

C. Based on Acts 2:38,40; Titus 3:5:

- 1) What does baptism symbolize? _____

- 2) What will be the special gift to the person who is baptized? _____

- 3) How does the "gift" work in the person who is baptized? _____

- 4) How does baptism relate to having membership in the church? _____

D. Read the section, “An Understanding of Children Based on the Teachings of Jesus”, and then complete the following:

In the gospel of Matthew, children are presented as a model of humility. Read Matthew 18:1-4.

1) In His response to the question regarding who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, what did Jesus instruct His disciples to do?

2) Jesus’ response challenged Jewish assumption that a child was not merely raw material for education but a symbol of _____ and a true _____ of Himself.

3) What are two marks of greatness in kingdom ministry? Give a reason for your answer.

4) Herod’s action in ordering the slaughter of innocent children in his ruthless pursuit of the Christ Child supports the claim that to be a child in those days was to be at the mercy of the _____.

5) With reference to Matthew 2:15, discuss the following: “While children might not have the sophistication of the learned and prudent, they do have insights which must be cherished, not repressed or despised”.

6) According to Matthew 18:5, why are children to be recognized as important? _____

7) Children are among the category of the _____ and the _____. They are privileged to receive insights into divine wisdom—something hidden from the _____ and _____. In the teachings of Jesus, they also represent the _____ people of God.

Note: 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 made for children in the liturgy and common life of the church, and the extent to which adults recognize children as persons of importance within the Christian fellowship.

Lesson 2

A. Read the section, “Indicators of Readiness for the Baptism of Children”, and respond to the following:

- 1) At which age is a child intellectually capable of making a confession of faith? _____
- 2) Given the variations in cognitive development, is there a minimum age? _____
- 3) List some factors which might be considered in determining the readiness of a child for baptism? _____

- 4) Give reasons for your answers.

B. Read the section, “Spiritual Influence”, and complete the exercise below.

1) Spiritual influence is _____ for determining the readiness of an individual for baptism. The home is a primary _____ influencing _____. The home is the _____ place where children are exposed to _____. There is a greater propensity for children who are supported by an environment of _____ principles and values to be nurtured into the _____. Knowledge of the home setting can help the church community to _____ the most effective preparatory _____ needed to ensure readiness of the prospect.

2) Christian caregivers are often more likely to fulfil a _____ role in the preparation process and the ongoing _____ of the child. The child could benefit from the _____ virtues

exemplified by parents/guardians. Important as this is in determining the readiness of a child, it should not be used as basis for _____ from baptism children of non-Christian parents.

3) What are some ways in which the church can help to support children of non-Christian and Christian parents/guardians when baptism is being considered?

C. Cognitive Development

Cognitive development varies from child to child, given the differences in a number of contributory factors. For example: heredity, environment and opportunities. While it is important to ensure that the child has a basic understanding of the fundamentals of the faith, care should be taken regarding the extent to which such an understanding is required. This is against the awareness that persons—adults and children—have peculiar challenges, which can undermine their intellectual capability. If intellectual capability is insisted upon, persons with peculiar challenges would be disqualified automatically. In light of this, provision should be made for exceptional cases. In such circumstances, the faith of persons relating to the child, coupled with the faith of the Christian community, must be considered seriously in arriving at a decision.

1) List some factors which contribute to the cognitive development of a child.

2) Can intellectual capability influence a person's (child and adult) faith? _____
If no, why? If so, how? _____

3) How does the writer suggest that the church deal with the idea of a possible requirement for intellectual capability? _____

4) Talk about intellectual capability versus faith.

D. The Community of Faith

Discuss: “If the church is not at the place theologically to embrace children as authentic members of the Christian community, it could do more harm than good to those who have the desire to become members of the church”.

Discussion should include:

- a) theological understanding of the place of children in the kingdom of God
- b) ways in which this understanding can assist the church in preparing and nurturing children in the Christian faith.

Conclusion

- 1) What is your church’s stand on baptizing children?
- 2) How will you approach this issue from now on?
- 3) Consider the development of a policy on baptizing children, or the modification of an existing one, for the guidance of your church.

Here are some things for reflection when considering the development/modification of such a policy:

- Review current church policy, if any, on Believers’ Baptism.
- No clear example of child baptism is found in Scripture; but consider Jesus’ response: “Let the little children come to me...” (Matthew 19:14; as well as Matthew 28:19, Acts 16:33 and Romans 1:16)
- Validate for soundness/maturity: Was the child’s decision made independently, did it come from an un-coerced desire?
- Verify that the child understands and can articulate at least the basics concerning the principal truths of the Christian faith.
- Avoid generalizations. Treat each request on its own merit - consider all variables such as readiness as it relates to maturity level, intellectual awareness/cognitive ability in order to ensure credibility of the child’s profession of faith. (Acts 16-29-34)
- Teach the meaning and significance of baptism. Preparation classes become critical for the child who has made a profession of faith and is to be baptized into church membership.
- Provide mentorship... create a nurturing environment of discipleship and training towards involvement as a member of the church.

- Involve parents in any decision regarding baptism of their child. They can provide confirmation/evidence of change in behavior. Where necessary, teach them the truths of Deuteronomy 6:5-9. Parents and mentors should work together.
- Leaders must pray for wisdom in making the right decision whether to baptize a child who has professed faith in Christ.
- In developing a policy on baptizing children, consider a step-by-step approach for pre-baptism and post-baptism.

Glossary of Terms

Baptism - Immersion in, sprinkling of, pouring on of water on an individual as a rite of initiation into the membership of a Church. The Churches of the Jamaica Baptist Union practice immersion of persons who have confessed personal faith in Jesus Christ, except where circumstances make this impossible. Based on the Christian doctrine that for our sins Jesus died, was buried and rose from the dead, Believer's Baptism indicates symbolically that the believer died and was buried with Christ and at the same time was raised again to a new life in Christ.

Cognitive development – A child's intellectual growth in terms of information processing, conceptual and perceptual skills, language learning and other abilities of the developed adult brain.

Community of faith – the Christian community (the Church) where the people of God have a shared faith in Jesus Christ: believing in His death, burial and resurrection, with each member seeking to offer loving care or service to one another and to participate in a common mission to evangelize.

Ecumenism – The movement or tendency toward Christian unity or cooperation in fulfilment of Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21 that his disciples then and in the future may all be one.

Incarnation – The embodiment of God the Son in human flesh as Jesus Christ. See John 1:14 (NIV) – “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ...”

Intellectual capability – the ability to understand, to reason and to apply knowledge appropriately.

Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven- Synonymous expressions (see Matthew 23:20) to mean the reign of God/Christ in the hearts and lives of all persons who have accepted God's salvation through Jesus Christ. The kingdom is a present reality (Matthew 3:2) but its consummation will be in the future (Matthew 6:10), after the return of Christ.

Nurturing – training, educating, supporting to encourage spiritual growth and development

Ordinance – An act/rite commanded or ordained by Jesus and given to the disciples, and by extension, to the Church.

Readiness – The preparedness of a child for Baptism. Facts to be considered in determining a child's preparedness include, for example, the cognitive development of the child, some evidence of personal faith and the home environment.

Rite – customary prescribed practice, act or procedure

Sacrament - a sacred Christian rite such as Baptism or the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion. Among Baptists, a sacrament is understood to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality.

Spiritual influence – Persons, activities, actions which can lead someone to accept God's grace and offer of salvation, or help someone to mature in his/her faith in Christ and to grow in a Christ-like lifestyle.

Theological understanding – An appreciation/awareness of God and His relationship with humankind through the revelation of Himself in creation, in Scripture and in particular, the life and teachings of His Son Jesus Christ.

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