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BIBLICAL WARRANT

It has been emphatically asserted that “every person who gives credible evidence of true conversion should be baptized irrespective of age.” The first twelve words of the assertion actually make the last three superfluous. If it can be demonstrated biblically that “every person who gives credible evidence of true conversion should be baptized,” then such a criteria necessarily includes children as well as adults in the same way that it would include black, white, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, employer, employee, American, Chinese, etc. In fact, the Bible does clearly teach that all who give credible evidence of true conversion not only may or ought to be baptized, but with regard to obedience to Christ, must be baptized. The Great Commission cannot be misunderstood. Words could not be clearer. “Make disciples . . . baptizing them” (Matt. 28:19).

A disciple, by biblical definition, is any person who turns in godly sorrow from his sins to rely upon the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ and to live a life of obedience to Him as his rightful master. Are children ca-

pable (mentally and with regard to moral consciousness) of becoming brokenhearted for their sinfulness and of understanding their desperate need of forgiveness from God? Are they capable of understanding that their sinfulness requires punishment from the holy and just God whose law they have willfully violated? Are they capable of understanding that Christ came to live the perfect, sinless life they have totally failed to live? Are they capable of understanding the simple truth that the sinless Lord Jesus suffered the wrath of God in the place of sinners while He hung on the cross? Are they capable of understanding the straightforward promises of the gospel revealing that God's gracious forgiveness is theirs for the asking? Are they capable of understanding that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)? Questions like these can be easily multiplied. The answer to all of them is a resounding "yes!" Admittedly, children, as well as adults, are incapable of coming to any saving understanding of the gospel apart from divine illumination and regeneration. That is not the issue. The concern of the preceding questions has rather to do with the mental and moral capabilities of children. The fact of the matter is that children are very capable of such an understanding. Much of that ability resides in their nature as image bearers of God. By virtue of creation, they know God exists and in their unconverted state, they have to work hard at suppressing the truth and subduing their consciences (Rom. 1:18). By the same virtue of being image bearers, they know that they are sinners. It is also a matter of fact that where the gospel is con-

sistently, clearly and passionately presented by parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, etc., young people and children often understand it, embrace it, and experience true conversion. What God literally creates in such cases are new disciples—they are simply young ones.

If indeed He has brought about a “new creation,” that infused spiritual life will begin to manifest itself in several discernible and positive ways. Obviously, it will not become apparent by a turning from gross external sins such as vulgarity, drugs, promiscuity, and violence. These sins most likely never came to characterize the young convert we have in mind. He was born into a Christian home where the Lord is feared and served—where the dynamics of common grace have been operative in a restraining way. But what will become increasingly clear are the positive evidences of grace. There will now be a new tenderness of conscience manifesting itself in increased obedience to mom and dad, more spontaneity in seeking their forgiveness, better attitudes, a new kindness, patience and sharing with brothers and sisters, a new interest in family worship, the beginnings of a desire to read the Scriptures and pray, etc. Will this new behavior pattern be seamless and uninterrupted in its progress? Of course not! It isn't perfect in his parents' or anyone else's post-conversion experience either. The point is simply this: Where there is truly new spiritual life, regeneration will progressively manifest itself. And when it does so in a way that makes the profession of faith credible, that young disciple, his parents and his pastors have a biblical command to obey. That command is for him to be baptized.

Reformed Baptists occasionally enjoy stimulating dialogue with their paedobaptist brethren. When we are misunderstood or misrepresented as those who practice adult baptism as opposed to infant baptism, we quickly correct our friends by reminding them that the issue is not adult versus infant, but believer versus unbeliever. It is precisely at this point, however, that we may not be as consistent with our theology as we profess. While we resolutely affirm faith as the prerequisite for baptism, we may deny this conviction in our practice by not baptizing some who give encouraging and sustained evidence of saving faith. We may do this under the apparent pressure of two arguments. First, it seems too difficult to determine the genuineness of childhood conversion and second, children surely are not mature enough to meet all of the requirements of church membership. These two concerns are respectable and need to be addressed. However, the point being presently stressed is simply that while we confess to practice believer's baptism, in many cases we actually practice what could more appropriately be called adolescent believer's baptism or adult believer's baptism. Our confession of faith clearly states, "Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance" (29.2, 2LBCF). The statement "only proper subjects of this ordinance" does not negate the fact that children who give encouraging and sustained evidence of saving faith are "proper subjects" of the ordinance and should therefore be baptized.