

Baptism: How young is too young?

by [Jeff Brumley](#) in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue

Something just clicked for Charity Roberson, and she knew it was time for her to be baptized. Roberson, now the pastor at Sharon Baptist Church in Smithfield, North Carolina, was nine at the time.

Some of the memories are vivid. “I clearly remember leaving church one Sunday and looking up at my mom and saying, ‘When do I get to go down front?’” Other memories are more hazy. “I think later that afternoon I had a long conversation with my dad,” she said. She recalls a meeting with her pastor, but not much of the conversation.

Fuzzy memories around baptism form a core argument against allowing child conversions in many churches—but not for Roberson, who baptized her five-year-old nephew, Caleb, in 2011.

She may not have understood the theological complexities and the depth of conversion at nine, but Roberson at the time knew her decision was Christ-centered. “I had always known that Jesus loved me and I always knew I belonged to him, so this was just a logical next step to take.”

That’s problematic for many in Baptist and other Protestant churches where believer’s baptism is the goal. Children’s ministry experts are reporting anecdotal evidence that the practice of baptizing younger children—kindergarten age and even younger—is on the rise and has been for years for reasons ranging from the impact of peer pressure to a desire to boost church membership.

The tricky part is what to do about the trend, and experts caution against fixing hard age limits. Instead they promote counseling designed to discern a child’s true motive in seeking conversion.

In many cases the trend is fueled by a church culture that overvalues growth, said John Starke, an editor for *The Gospel Coalition* and lead pastor of All Souls Church, a nondenominational congregation in Manhattan.

“The error in evangelical churches, post-World War II, is to make it as easy as possible to become baptized and affiliate with church culture,” he said. Civil religion has also played a part in congregations and denominations that equate “being a good American” with having a strong faith, he said.

But Starke is not opposed to the practice, and in 2011 he penned a blog arguing that the New Testament is silent on probationary periods or putting potential converts through extensive tests.

The proper safeguards will appear in congregations that feel responsible for their members and in which membership is viewed as a reflection of gospel values, Starke said. “You are going to have a greater caution of how quickly you baptize someone or how quickly you bring someone in.”

Starke recently baptized a ten-year-old, but only after speaking with the child’s parents and Sunday school teachers—and with the child. The key is not to be rigid, he added. “In scripture the pressure is more . . . to baptize those who profess—and then if necessary respond to false profession—rather than holding someone back.”

Yet ministers must be thorough in determining whether a child has come forward with spiritually healthy motivations, said Janice Haywood, adjunct professor of Campbell University Divinity School and director of its preschool and children’s ministry certification program.

Developmental issues must also be taken into account, said Haywood, the author of an instructional booklet titled *Children and Conversion: How to Talk with a Child about Salvation*.

The younger the children, the stronger their desire to want to please authority—such as parents and ministers—and also to impress or emulate other children, she said. If a popular child goes down the aisle, “then the next few Sundays others will follow,” Haywood said. “They want to be part of the crowd.”

They are also more susceptible to fear and pressure from adults. “There are some people who have manipulated children for their own numbers and anxieties, and parents in particular who don’t ever want their children to be lost,” Haywood said.

But Haywood said it’s a bad idea to set arbitrary age limits on conversion. “I don’t believe there is an age,” she said. “I believe there is a time.”

That time is when a child can express in his or her own words what a life of discipleship really means. “If you can’t give up what you want for what your little brother or sister wants, how can you give up your way for God’s way?” Haywood said.

That’s a principle that applies to teens and even adults seeking baptism, she added. “I don’t counsel adults much differently than I do children,” she said.

The experience of Pastor Charity Roberson with her nephew illustrated for her that age limits are a bad idea. It began when the boy began bringing up faith issues, such as sin and his love of Christ.

“The family had months of really in-depth conversations with him,” Roberson said, and she followed suit by asking her own questions and consulting with friends who minister to children.

Roberson said that as she grew older, she grew into deeper understandings of what her own conversion meant. Many concerns can be alleviated “if you look at baptism as part of the journey, not the end-all, be-all,” she said. —ABP