

DRBC Shepherd Statement Concerning Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Church Membership, and Children

When a young man or woman turns from sin and casts their faith upon Jesus and His finished work for salvation, we have good cause for rejoicing. Jesus proclaimed, "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Our church, and the parents in our church, prays that there will be much rejoicing over the converted souls of the children in our midst.

With this prayer, we must also pray for wisdom to navigate our cultural context. It can actually be an easy thing for a child to affirm the basic truths of the gospel and profess a love for Jesus Christ at Del Ray Baptist Church. The children raised in our church families are taught from an early age that Jesus is to be exalted and beloved. They are encouraged to honor and esteem Him. They are raised in a setting in which a public profession of faith does not lead to serious persecution or death. Their contemporaries may be getting baptized and taking the Lord's Supper.

At the same time, parents of professing children will face a myriad of thoughts. They will surely be hopeful that their child's desire for the ordinances is rooted in life given by the Holy Spirit. This could lead to a sense of urgency for baptism as a way to encourage their child's budding faith. Other parents may feel apprehensive about their children partaking of the ordinances and prefer a slower pace.

While the conversion of young people is a wonderful blessing, discerning conversion and shepherding young children who profess faith in Christ present genuine challenges for the elders and congregation. The Scripture is strikingly silent on the topic of children's involvement in the ordinances, which presses us to develop practices rooted in biblical prudence.

Texts such as Acts 15:28-29 show that it is permissible to add pastoral requirements, not to the Gospel, but to the application of the Gospel in particular ministry contexts. This statement aims to apply the Word of God to our particular context and describe our convictions about the administration of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership; particularly as it relates to children.

A young man or woman will be invited to Baptism and the Lord's Supper at Del Ray Baptist Church, who has established a credible profession of faith upon the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, in both word and deed, proving a proper understanding and reverence of these ordinances, such that the congregation can affirm the genuineness of faith over time, the church elders can administer the ordinances in faith, and the church can receive them into membership, with such membership being mediated by the oversight of their faithful member parents until the time when their connection to the church should be free and independent from parental direction.

This statement avoids setting a particular age for the administration of these ordinances, but rather focuses the conversation on how we intend to shepherd children, parents, and our members through a mature conversation about how to rightly assess each child's spiritual condition as it relates to this matter. What follows is an explanation of the statement given above.

A credible profession of faith, means the expression of trust, repentance, and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ is a work of the Holy Spirit, not of themselves (Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Corinthians 10:9-10). This faith is birthed from belief in the biblical gospel, not social pressure. It is bound by godly conviction, not any other worldly motivation, including the desire to please parents, pastors or friends.

This faith is tested by time and temptation, not assumed merely because of one's profession. The genuineness of the profession is not to be challenged or belittled, but observed and confirmed, so that no young man or woman should live under a deception of a false profession (Matthew 7:22-23, 13:3-8). As with any person who will be baptized and invited to the Lord's Table, we must be reasonably certain that the child's profession of faith flows from a regenerate heart.

That the congregation can affirm the genuineness of their faith is essential, because it is the congregation who is receiving them into the covenant community as believers. The church must be able to affirm their profession on the grounds that they are regenerate and able to fulfill the responsibilities of church membership. It is also important because the elders of the church are called by God to administer the ordinances in faith to its members "as those who will have to give an account" (Romans 14:23; Hebrews 13:17).

While it is true that an honest faith can ebb and flow in strength, and fruitful deeds can be much or little across seasons, there is a basic trajectory and perseverance of saving faith, which we must be able to confirm in the life of those who profess Christ. Discerning this, especially when the ordinances are being offered for the first time, requires great care.

While we do not desire to cause anxiety or despair to the soul of a young person, we do believe their faith must be of the kind that perseveres through the tempests of social scorn and the waves of youthful passion. This happens over time, and includes testing outside the safe harbors of family and friends who have rightly rewarded and praised their expressions of belief. We believe a young person's faith can be encouraged and guided, while at the same time observed and tested for a season that does not yet include partaking of the ordinances and membership.

The oversight of their faithful member parents is critical in the process of encouraging the faith of both children and adolescents. Parents have a unique ability to confirm the presence of genuine repentance as a pattern of life since they see their children's faith lived out each day. They also are in a prime position to teach children the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and preparing them for membership in the covenant community.

Parents should be willing to patiently observe the spiritual growth of their children until that day when the church can be called upon to affirm their faith, celebrate their rebirth, and wholeheartedly invite them to the ordinances of the church without serious concern for their spiritual condition.

On those occasions when a young man or woman of unbelieving parents seeks baptism, the Lord's Supper, and membership at DRBC, we will receive the situation on a case-by-case basis.

In addition, when a young person has been baptized and received the Lord's Supper at another church before coming to DRBC, the elders will consider that situation with prudence and care. The prior church may have exercised great wisdom and diligence in the teaching and administration of the ordinances, or perhaps it did not. The young person may give clear indications of regeneration and a clear understanding of the ordinances, or perhaps not. The elders will need to consider these circumstances before inviting the young person to the Lord's Supper and membership at DRBC, which we also consider for adults wishing to become members at DRBC.¹

The point is not to challenge and cast doubt upon genuine professions of faith, but to establish a clear doctrine of regeneration from the Scripture in the life and practices of the church, and to emphasize the role of the church in affirming the faith of young people when receiving them into membership.

With this in mind, we offer the following questions and considerations for parents and children:

1. How long has it been since your son or daughter professed faith in Jesus Christ, and what kinds of transformation have you witnessed in his or her life?

Regeneration shows itself in both subtle and substantial changes to attitude and action. Parents have a unique advantage of observing these changes. At the same time, discerning the difference between a child maturing socially and maturing spiritually requires much prayer and patience. We ask parents to consider these issues and discuss with the elders how they are processing them.

2. Have you had the opportunity to see your son or daughter deal with sin, suffering, and relationships in a qualitatively different way over time?

As you stand back, love your son or daughter, and watch him or her live before God and others, are you seeing new patterns of thought, attitude, and action as evidence of a transformed heart? Do you see godly sorrow for sin (2 Corinthians 7:10-11)? Do you see a new eagerness to repent, forgive, and grow?

¹ The DRBC governing documents give a clear explanation of this thinking (The Constitution and Bylaws, 3.1).

3. Do you see your son or daughter pursuing the Lord Jesus Christ and communion with God through His Word, prayer, and other means without being heavily pushed and externally motivated?

We all need encouragement from other Christians to walk faithfully with Jesus. Your son or daughter will as well. There is a difference, however, between needing encouragement and needing consistent pressure or constant prodding to open the Bible, seek God in prayer, or consider eternal things. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership require a personal, ongoing commitment to live faithfully before God with the primary power coming from the Holy Spirit within (Philippians 2:12-13).

4. Have members of the church had the opportunity to witness the outworking of genuine faith and God's power in the life of your son or daughter? Are they ready to affirm faith and receive your son or daughter into membership?

Paul was able to say this to the Thessalonians: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). The report of their faith spread through all the churches because, "they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9). Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy could affirm the faith of the Thessalonian Christians and so could many other saints, because they had loved the brothers, turned from idolatry, and served God in a culture where such commitment was very costly. What is the testimony of your child among their peers and among other members?

5. Does your son or daughter have a biblical, clear understanding of the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and what it means for someone to partake rightly of those ordinances, as well as what it means to abuse them?

A young person does not need to be a theological expert before they can step into the waters of baptism or share in the Lord's Supper, but they must be able to understand what they are doing. To be baptized, a young person must be able to testify of their "good conscience" that comes through their union with Jesus' death and resurrection (Romans 6:4; 1 Peter 3:21).

To take the Lord's Supper, they must also be able to "examine themselves" and "discern the body" so they do not "eat and drink judgment on themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). Again, we do not think that a young believer must fully grasp these truths to be saved, but the New Testament does assume a person will understand these basic realities before they partake of the ordinances.

We encourage parents to use the church's celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to discuss with their children the Gospel realities they are witnessing, and how they should be thinking about their application in their own lives. The elders are willing and able to give guidance in this important part of family discipling.

6. To what degree is your son or daughter ready to assume the responsibilities of church membership at Del Ray Baptist Church, including an informed willingness to participate in church matters and exercise church discipline when needed?

Membership in a local church involves various privileges and responsibilities. These responsibilities go far beyond mere administrative elements of the church. Membership responsibilities are the very essence of the spiritual life and health of local congregation. A young person seeking membership at DRBC will need to be prepared to receive ministry from and minister to the other members of the church.

We stress that we do not believe a child's salvation rests on their understanding of ordinances or church membership. And it is that very fact that gives us great encouragement to be wise in the way we administer these elements. Because there is no saving grace given through baptism, Lord's Supper, or Church Membership we are happy to evaluate each of the children under our care and recommend adequate time, potentially years, after an initial profession of faith to sufficiently answer these questions before offering the ordinances and encouraging membership.

At the time this statement was composed, the elders of DRBC had families that together consisted of over two dozen children, most under the age of 15. We share this to make clear that this statement is not birthed out of an ivory tower, but from men who are facing these considerations in their own lives. Much prayer, study, and discussion occurred over the two years of developing this position. If nothing else, this should encourage parents with disagreeing positions to develop their own convictions with a similar posture and not out of hasty responsiveness.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. Is this a new doctrine?

No. We believe the doctrines of believers' baptism, regenerate church membership, and believers partaking of the Lord Supper is evident from the Scriptures.

2. Why does this statement matter?

There are four main reasons we consider this type of statement to be of utmost importance.

1. *For the good of the children.* Each child has a personal responsibility before God to respond to Him through faith in Christ. This statement and its applications are aimed at shepherding their soul through the early days of considering Christ's call.

While it is true that some children may experience anxiety or discouragement by being encouraged to wait, we also think that hastiness can lead to deeper anxiety and discouragement in later days. Our churches have been marked in recent times by many "rebaptisms" of people who thought they were converted at a young age, but later discerned they were not. We find good reason from Scripture and church history to suggest that patience in this area serves the souls of the children.

2. *For the good of the parents.* Any parent who loves God and loves their children desires to think well about this topic. No parent is exempt from their need for assistance in knowing how to shepherd young people toward God, so this statement seeks to prescribe appropriate encouragements, cautions, and corrections to enable parents to better lead and love the children under their care. By helping parents know what questions to ask, what issues to consider, and how better to engage their children in spiritual leadership, we think parents will be better able to lead their children with Christ-honoring care.
3. *For the good of the church.* We desire our church to think clearly about conversion and regeneration. We believe this document, and the conversations that will result because of it, can only be used by God to help us prayerfully consider and delight in the glories of salvation. We do not think this approach places the topic of conversion too high for our young ones to grasp, but rather holds it high before all of us so that we are equally humbled before God's gracious gift of new life through His Son.
4. *To promote the glory of God.* By highly valuing God's work in conversion, and encouraging a church culture of humble thoughtfulness, we believe God is greatly honored. Avoiding both

skepticism and carelessness toward one another, brings pleasure to God and helps each of us look to Him as our full and final hope.

3. Why are we addressing this now?

As elders who are charged by God to lead His church, we recognize that it is pastoral negligence to adopt a “whatever” position on this important topic. God has providentially blessed our congregation with many children and we recognize that helping parents train up their children is part of our responsibility before God. We pray fervently that God will continue to add children to our midst and convert each one of them. In hopeful preparation for that work, we submit this statement to aid the conversation of how we as elders intend to shepherd children and parents in the days ahead.

4. How much influence do parents have in determining whether or not a young person will be baptized, invited to partake in the Lord’s Supper, and received into membership at Del Ray Baptist Church?

Parents are given the charge by God to instruct, model, evangelize and disciple their children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21). Parents are given great influence over their children as the primary authorities in their lives. But when it comes to baptism, Lord’s Supper, and membership, we believe God has given these to the church (cf. Matthew 16:18-19).

What that means is that Jesus has given the church authority to baptize people as disciples of Jesus, to invite people to the Lord’s Supper, and to receive them into membership. No one baptizes himself or herself or serves themselves the Supper. Rather, these ordinances are given to them by Jesus through a local church that is overseen by elders the congregation elects and submits to (Hebrews 13:17).

Parents’ input will be greatly valued as part of process, but in the end, the elders and the congregation must make the decision as to whether any person, including young professing children, are ready to be baptized and offered the Lord’s Supper.

5. As a parent, what should I do if my believing son or daughter wants to be baptized and take the Lord’s Supper at DRBC?

You should encourage your child for their good aspiration and then after prayerful consideration, arrange a time for one of the elders to sit down with your child and discuss their request.