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## *The Cognitive Abilities of Children and Southern Baptist Baptismal Restrictions<sup>1</sup>*

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In the latter half of the last century, Southern Baptists developed a heightened interest in their own evangelistic and baptismal practices as related to children. As part of the resulting discussions, several Southern Baptists scholars argued that the Bible presented an at best inconclusive picture as to the appropriateness of child evangelistic and initiatory practices.<sup>2</sup> As a result, numerous Southern Baptist scholars turned to psychology and its corresponding insights on child development to ascertain when children can cognitively grasp the specific elements required for conversion and are then in turn ready for baptism and initiation into the faith community.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This article is drawn in part from Chapter 4 of Robert Matz, “Should Southern Baptists Baptize Their Children? A Biblical, Historical, Theological Defense of the Consistency of the Baptism of Young Children with Credobaptistic Practices” (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>For example, William Hendricks assumes such, stating that “Bible references to children are descriptive rather than theological.” William Hendricks, “The Age of Accountability” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. by Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970), 93. Warren Withers makes a similar argument, “I have attempted to show that neither the New Testament nor early Baptist theology included the baptism of children. The only explicit New Testament texts regarding baptism report the baptism of adults. It is my contention that there is a trend in Southern Baptist churches in which children are being baptized prematurely.” John Warren Withers, “Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 7. See also, Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), Chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup>The appropriateness of engaging psychology in this discussion has been challenged. For example Danny Akin asserts that, “psychological arguments carry no weight in this discussion.” Yet, the fact remains that many Southern Baptists have and continue to make arguments from developmental psychology to justify their unwillingness to accept children as converts. For example, John Hammett states “developmental psychologists agree that children reach full moral decision making ability around the age of twelve.” John Hammett, “Regenerate Church Membership,” in *Restoring Integrity within Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 40.

Such hesitations regarding “psychological arguments” are often based on a skeptical attitude towards the compatibility of psychology with the Christian faith as a whole as well as certain soteriological presuppositions about the effectual nature of the Holy Spirit’s role in calling individuals to salvation. While from a Christian and Baptist perspective, caution is wise in terms of a wholesale acceptance of all psychological models of faith development,

Through their study of child development, many Southern Baptist scholars concluded that children were cognitively incapable of being converted. Such contributed to a growing backlash against child baptisms in Southern Baptists churches. This paper will first examine the assertions of many Southern Baptists regarding the cognitive abilities of children. After surveying these cognitive objections to the conversion of children, it will offer a series of cognitive-developmental, faith-developmental, and statistical rejoinders to these objections. It will then close by offering a series of criteria for evaluating childhood conversions based on these rejoinders.

### **The Psychological Argument against the Baptism of Children**

In discussion of the baptism of children, the cognitive inability of children to grasp the gospel is often assumed without an actual engagement with cognitive research.<sup>4</sup> Actual sustained engagement with cognitive research is less common in articles addressing the conversion or baptism of children. Still, four doctoral dissertations from Southern Baptists have been written that deal directly with cognitive-developmental research. The findings of these four dissertations are outlined below.

there are cognitive elements to the gospel. Further, while Christian orthodoxy as a whole affirms the sovereignty of God, from a Baptist perspective, which emphasizes conversion as an essential element in orientation to the faith, the Spirit of God's sovereign work occurs within the context of individuals' normal cognitive and volitional abilities. Therefore, this paper, while presupposing the Scriptures as normative over psychology, remains open to the contributions of psychologists exploring child development.

In regards to the assertion that conversion occurs within the context of normal cognitive processes the Abstract of Principles of Southern Seminary is helpful. It notes that God's sovereign work occurs in such a way as "not in any wise ... to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures." "Abstract of Principles," The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, last modified 1858, accessed 8 March 2015, <http://www.sbts.edu/about/truth/abstract/>. For more on the relation between faith and psychology see Timothy E. Clinton and George W. Ohlschlager, *Competent Christian Counseling* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2002); Daniel Akin, "Ten Mandates for Today's Southern Baptists," in *The Mission of Today's Church*, ed. R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 9.

<sup>4</sup>Hammett's assertion mentioned in the previous footnote is an example of such. Temp Sparkman makes similar argument based on cognitive development without direct interactions with the research. He argues that since the science of "growth and development will not admit that the young child is capable of abstract reasoning [or] that he is old enough to accept a philosophy of life," non-sectarians such as Southern Baptists should not baptize their children. G. Temp Sparkman "The Implication of Conversion among Young Children," *Religious Education Journal* 68, no. 541 (July 1965): 300-02, 313. For Sparkman, if children are baptized before coming to a "full awareness" of themselves, such children should be re-baptized. If this does not happen, Baptists become Bushnell-ian in their thought process. Sparkman does not directly interact with or cite any studies of cognitive development, but instead simply assumes that "science" clearly shows that children cannot reason abstractly or possess self-awareness. Robert Proctor offers a similar line of argument. He states that "the consensus of psychological opinion would be that one is not an autonomous self, capable of making commitments of one's self, until early adolescences." Yet like Sparkman, Proctor also fails to interact with a single psychological source. Robert A. Proctor Jr., "Children and Evangelism," *Review and Expositor* 63, no. 1 (Winter 1966): 62.

### Lewis Craig Ratliff

The first major objection to children's cognitive ability to respond to the gospel in a way that is indicative of regeneration is found in the dissertation of Lewis Craig Ratliff.<sup>5</sup> Ratliff argued that the Baptist belief in lordship precludes children from salvation. Specifically, in his dissertation, Ratliff argues that to be a disciple of Jesus one has to be able to follow Jesus as Lord.<sup>6</sup> To follow Jesus as Lord, one must be capable of grasping abstract concepts relating to sin, repentance, and the atonement of Christ, and one must be able to function independently, in the sense of being able to self-criticize, and must be able to function autonomously in the social setting of the community of faith. In light of such, Ratliff questions if children are able to follow Jesus as Lord. To answer this question Ratliff turns to the theories of child development based upon the research of Jean Piaget.<sup>7</sup>

Ratliff notes that the beginner child (ages 4–5) “is extremely concrete minded,” which he defines as lack of an ability to grasp symbolic meaning. Such children ask “inappropriate” (or heretical) religious questions, understand God through an entirely parental lens, and are characterized by a blind faith independent of reality (as seen in an adamant belief in Santa). Thus, Ratliff reasons that at such an age, “children cannot find their fulfillment in personalized religion.”<sup>8</sup>

As with the beginner, so also with the primary child (ages 6–8), Ratliff asserts that these children cannot respond to the gospel. He argues that they have “little mental facility to deal with abstraction.” Specifically, children at this age do “not possess enough experience to reason clearly or strongly.”<sup>9</sup> Such children, Ratliff argues, have “no responsibility because [they are] not capable of having it. [As a result, such children possess only] rudimentary knowledge of God and the world, but comprehend very little of its real meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while Christian education and nurture are of utmost importance for such children, Ratliff reasons that they cannot be converted.

In the junior years (ages 9–12) the child's development turns sharply according to Ratliff. Children disassociate from parents as their primary source of identification, learn to love unselfishly, and develop a true morality.

<sup>5</sup>Lewis Craig Ratliff, “Discipleship, Church Membership and Children among Southern Baptists: An Investigation of the Place of Children in a Baptist Church in View of Christ's Teaching on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963).

<sup>6</sup>Ratliff summarizes his argument on the nature of conversion and discipleship as, “The argument thus far has been that one is accountable for his eternal destiny according to his relation to Christ. The relation between the Christian and his Lord is the Lordship-discipleship relation.” Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 132.

<sup>7</sup>For example, see Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic, 1969); Jean Piaget, *Possibility and Necessity: Volume 1* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 153–54.

<sup>9</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 155–56.

<sup>10</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 156.

Further, it is in the junior years that children begin to apply “abstract principles of fairness and unfairness, right and wrong.”<sup>11</sup>

Ratliff therefore argues that children begin to move towards a readiness for faith at the end of the junior years (12 at the earliest) and even more so as the child moves into the intermediate years (13–16). Yet, Ratliff cautions about seeing twelve year-olds as genuine converts. Instead, he notes that at twelve, while a few children begin to grasp concepts abstractly and emerge from parental sway in their thinking, none are responsible before society.<sup>12</sup> Thus, “as a general rule, twelve does not have the necessary maturity to become a disciple.”<sup>13</sup>

It is only by the age of 14 that “the adolescent has gained the power of abstract thinking. Now he can understand what it means to take Jesus as his Lord. He can comprehend repentance [*sic*], faith, sin, and discipleship. By these criteria, fourteen has reached the age of disciple-ability.”<sup>14</sup> It is at 14 then that Ratliff argues that persons enter a point of independence in which self-criticism is possible. Ratliff reasons that self-criticism is essential for a person to be converted because “self-criticism precedes repentance. Fourteen has this ability.”<sup>15</sup> Further, it is at 14 that Ratliff believes a person is capable of becoming a church member who can enter the mission of Jesus and be responsible for discipline. In order to do such, one must have reached a point of social maturity in which one can contemplate “the basic choices that must soon be made and at the same time have competence in determining one’s present social life.”<sup>16</sup>

So to summarize, based on the out-workings of the cognitive theories of Piaget, Ratliff argues that individuals become accountable before God and are thus fit persons for discipleship around the age of 14. Ratliff reasons that 14 is the age at which a person can be converted because only at 14 are individuals able to reason abstractly, self-criticize, and think about the future as well as their present social standing within the community of faith. Only once an adolescent can function in these ways does the adolescent become an independent person capable of conversion, submission to the lordship of Jesus and disciple-ability.

### **Douglas Clark**

Douglas Clark’s dissertation from 1970 offers a second insight into the psychological justifications used to restrict the baptism of young children. Clark also relies on Piaget’s stages of cognitive development as well as Erik Erikson’s stages of personality development. Clark asserts that work of Piaget and Erikson harmonize and reveal a picture of the young children as

<sup>11</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 161.

<sup>12</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 162–67.

<sup>13</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 167

<sup>14</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 172.

<sup>15</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 174.

<sup>16</sup>Ratliff, “Discipleship,” 177.



unable to grasp the gospel.<sup>17</sup> From such, Clark is able not only to argue that children are not ready to grasp the cognitive concepts of the gospel but also isolates a reason for false childhood conversions.

In regards to childhood conversions, Clark explains that beginning at the age of 5 or 6, children develop “a capacity for guilt.”<sup>18</sup> Children growing up within the Southern Baptist context will almost certainly “have this latent capacity awakened.” As a result, childhood faith decisions are built upon “a sense of guilt and a need to find forgiveness and reconciliation.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, Clark believes that a sense of guilt alone is not sufficient for a child to be viewed as a convert. Rather, baptism and a church affirmation of such children as converts should be delayed. Instead, these children should be given the Lord’s Supper.<sup>20</sup>

### Gary Thomas Deane

Clark closes his dissertation noting that additional research is needed regarding “the nature of [children’s] religious experiences,” as well as a “conceptual development of children’s” cognitive skills. Gary Thomas Deane’s dissertation from Southwestern Seminary accepts Clark’s call to additional research in these areas.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, Deane applies Piaget’s stages of development to the faith development of children. In order to do this, Deane surveyed children attending a summer Vacation Bible School at the Glorieta Conference center in New Mexico in 1980. His survey took place over eight weeks during which he interviewed 819 children.<sup>22</sup> The children he surveyed were evenly distributed across ages.<sup>23</sup> From both a cognitive and biblical perspective, Clark argues that children should not be viewed as valid candidates for conversion.<sup>24</sup>

Deane’s methodology was to survey children’s conceptions of Christian conversion, baptism, and church membership. The children in question were all Southern Baptists and had just completed between grade levels three and six. Deane’s survey was vetted by a panel of experts.<sup>25</sup> The children surveyed

<sup>17</sup>Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969), 227–28.

<sup>18</sup>Clark, “The Evangelism of Children,” 230–31.

<sup>19</sup>Clark, “The Evangelism of Children,” 231.

<sup>20</sup>Clark, “The Evangelism of Children,” chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup>Gary Deane asserts that his research is the logical outgrowth of a rising concern regarding the baptism of children in specifically citing Ingle’s collection of essays in *Children and Conversion* as well as Clark’s dissertation arguing for delaying the baptism of children. Gary Thomas Deane, “An Investigation of the Child’s Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development” (Ed.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 1–10; Clark, “The Evangelism of Children,” 248–49; Clifford Ingle, et al., eds., *Children and Conversion* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1970).

<sup>22</sup>Deane, “An Investigation,” 56.

<sup>23</sup>Deane, “An Investigation,” 60.

<sup>24</sup>Deane, “An Investigation,” chapter 1.

<sup>25</sup>Including theology professors, senior pastors, and children’s ministry leaders.

were highly churched; 80.9% had been baptized, with the average of baptism being 7.8.<sup>26</sup> Deane shows that in line with Piaget's model, older children will reason more abstractly in regards to the domains of Christian conversion, language of Christian conversion, church membership, and baptism.<sup>27</sup> Additional analysis of Deane's data will be offered in the section of responses below.

### John Warren Withers

Following Deane, John Warren Withers completed his Ph.D. dissertation from Southern Seminary in 1997.<sup>28</sup> Withers's dissertation has been utilized by those arguing against the baptism of children as it provides a potential rationale for why pastors have increasingly viewed younger children as valid candidates for baptism.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Ratliff and Clark, who directly argue that children are not cognitively capable of grasping salvation, Withers concedes that "children can, and do, experience personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>30</sup> Even when this is the case, Withers asserts that discernment of the cognitive-faith development of children is almost impossible. As a result, the baptism of children should be delayed until children can clearly express faith, which he argues normally happens during adolescence.<sup>31</sup> Such delay will help to assure that children are genuine converts and preserve a regenerate membership.<sup>32</sup>

In arguing for the inability of adults to discern child conversion, Withers present a series of psychological arguments derived from the cognitive work of Piaget as well as the faith-development work of James Fowler.<sup>33</sup> As a primer for his discussion on the ability of children to respond to the gospel

<sup>26</sup>Deane, "An Investigation," 62–63.

<sup>27</sup>Deane, "An Investigation," 82.

<sup>28</sup>John Warren Withers. "Social Forces Affecting the Age at which Children are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997).

<sup>29</sup>For example, Mark Dever cites Withers approvingly in his critique of child baptismal practices. He asserts that, "in 1996, John Withers submitted a doctoral dissertation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in which he noted this trend (of rising child baptisms) and suggested that it occurred in the twentieth century largely due to social pressures on the pastor." Mark Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible 2 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 346; see also Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*.

<sup>30</sup>Withers, "Social Forces," 5.

<sup>31</sup>Withers, "Social Forces," 118ff.

<sup>32</sup>Withers expresses a strong concern regarding false conversion and an unregenerate membership in his introduction. He states, "From my perspective, the danger of baptizing young children is to imply that salvation has occurred in their lives" and "If children are being baptized without being converted the churches can have a growing number of unregenerate church members. Premature baptism could help account for increasing numbers of Southern Baptist church members who cannot be located or have become inactive." Withers, "Social Forces," 5, 7.

<sup>33</sup>Withers, "Social Forces," chapter 3. See also, James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1981).

in a way that adults can discern, Withers notes the cognitive requirements that the gospel presents for salvation.

The two human responses involved in salvation are faith and repentance. For a child there is no problem regarding faith. All believers must have faith like a child. Jesus described the faith of children as exemplary. The problem area in childhood understanding is repentance. Repent means simply “to turn.” When applied to one’s relationship with God, repentance involves a mature understanding of turning away from anything displeasing to God and turning to everything that pleases God. It indicates a rational choice has been made to co-operate with God in the transformations of one life [*sic*] that are necessary to please him. The message of repentance is depicted by Paul as a death. Mature thinking capacity is needed *in* order to understand repentance.<sup>34</sup>

With this in mind, Withers turns towards Piaget, Fowler, and cognitive developmental research as it relates to faith development.

He first interacts with Piaget’s four successive stages of cognitive development.<sup>35</sup> In applying Piaget to the conversion of children, Withers argues that children must “be taught to think through problems.” If they make decisions without doing such, “they are being encouraged so as to ‘erect a verbal superstructure that may crumble under even minimal cognitive stress.’”<sup>36</sup> If children simply learn to recite facts about the gospel without a cognitive understanding of such facts, then when these children are challenged they will be far more inclined to reject the gospel.

Withers also highlights Piaget’s understandings of guilt, lies, and moral failures as relevant to his thesis that the baptism of children should be delayed. He argues from Piaget’s studies that, “this research indicates that children up to age 10 are in a precarious position with regard to understanding the nature of sin.”<sup>37</sup> Only during middle childhood (ages 7–11) does a child begin to “understand intentionality regarding right and wrong.”<sup>38</sup>

Withers continues noting the implications of Piaget’s work as applied to the children’s ability to be introspective and to reflect on their reasoning processes. Before age 11 or 12, children’s ability to do such is limited. Withers reasons, “If one does not know why salvation is needed, is it possible for one to receive it? The directions of one’s own thoughts deal with the processes of logic and reason. If children are not yet capable of thinking through and

<sup>34</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 35.

<sup>35</sup>They are sensorimotor, birth to age two; preoperational, age two to seven; concrete operations, age seven to 11; and formal operations, age 11 through adulthood. Withers, “Social Forces,” 81.

<sup>36</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 83–84.

<sup>37</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 86.

<sup>38</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 88.



understanding a commitment of life, children cannot understand sufficiently the concept of salvation.”<sup>39</sup>

Withers believes that Piaget’s research clearly shows that “children before the age of 7 or 8 do not follow logical patterns” and that children are not capable of real logical experiment prior to 11 or 12.<sup>40</sup> Only when they reach age 12, the fourth stage of Piaget’s developmental schema, are children capable of formal thought and logical assumptions. Therefore, Withers argues that “It would be an error to move children too quickly on their faith journey during a time when they are arranging their thoughts so as to be able to make decisions based upon good judgment and sound reasoning.”<sup>41</sup>

Withers also looks briefly at the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, David Elkind, and Herbert John Klausmeier. From Kohlberg he notes that children do not volitionally embrace the beliefs that they practice until around the age of 13.<sup>42</sup> From Elkind, Withers argues that children ages seven through 11 have an inability to recognize the truth.<sup>43</sup> From Klausmeier, he notes that young children are able to gain simplistic understandings from which a greater truth can be understood later in life. Withers states, “Young children who see a picture of Jesus and are taught “Jesus loves you” may be capable of transferring the concept of love that they experience from their father and mother to the concept of love from this person, Jesus, which does not mean that children understand salvation.”<sup>44</sup> As a result of the work of these psychologists, taken together with the formative work of Piaget, Withers argues that the baptism of children is at best unwise because of their cognitive inability to grasp the abstract reality that is Christian salvation.

Withers closes his discussion of child development with an in-depth treatment of James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*. Withers finds Fowler’s six stages of faith development particularly helpful to his overall argument, outlining each in detail.<sup>45</sup> From Fowler, Withers notes that children struggle to distinguish between fantasy and reality before the age of eight. It is only as the child enters the synthetic-conventional faith stage “that cognitive awareness is sufficiently developed in children for them to question the authority of the beliefs they have been taught and either adopt or reject them for themselves.” This occurs in early adolescence.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 89.

<sup>40</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 91.

<sup>41</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 92.

<sup>42</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 95.

<sup>43</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 99.

<sup>44</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 104.

<sup>45</sup>Stage 0 is primal faith age 0–3. Stage 1 is intuitive projective faith ages 3–7. Stage 2 is mythic-literal faith ages 7–early adolescences. Stage 3 is synthetic conventional faith that occurs during adolescence. Stage 4 is individuate-reflective occurs in late adolescences or early adulthood. Stage 5 is conjunctive faith, which does not occur prior to mid-life. Finally, stage 6 is universalizing faith, which only occurs in a rare number of individuals. Withers, “Social Forces,” 105–10. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

<sup>46</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 119.

Withers asserts that Fowler research is complimentary to his thesis, specifically “that salvation in children is progressive and should not be validated through baptism prematurely.”<sup>47</sup> Since Fowler argues that both the home and the church play a key role in the faith development of children throughout childhood, Withers notes that the home and church should play this role. Baptism then becomes “the more dramatic step in the conversion process for children.”<sup>48</sup>

While Withers concedes that the faith Fowler has in view is not the saving faith of the Bible, but rather is a type of human faith that tries to make sense out of life, Withers is undeterred. Withers argues from Fowler that when children have premature conversion experiences, such experiences have a stunting effect on their faith development. Teaching children about hell and the devil at a young age will often lead to an early faith commitment “in which the child takes on adult faith identity” but such leads to “a very rigid and authoritarian personality in adulthood.”<sup>49</sup> Following Fowler, Withers then argues that “people who take on prematurely the patterns of adult faith modeled by their church will not go through the normal processes and stages of faith development and remain in that stage of non-faith development for life.”<sup>50</sup> Withers believes such individuals are common in Southern Baptist churches based upon his own experiences. Therefore, Withers argues for baptismal delay of child converts because there is no way to discern if children are genuinely converted. Withers reasons that it is only in early adolescence that a child can apply faith to themselves.

### **In Response to the Psychological Arguments against the Baptism of Children**

Three significant responses can be offered to the psychological objections of Withers, Deane, Clark, and Ratliff. Specifically, a study of contemporary theories of cognitive development, of the assumptions related to theories of faith development, and the relationship between age of conversion and life-long faith commitment provide ample warrant for rejecting the dated psychological arguments offered above against the conversion and baptism of children.

#### **Cognitive Development**

While Withers, Clark, and Ratliff present a mostly unified narrative that psychology has shown the cognitive development of the child means that children cannot grasp the truths of Christianity at an early age, such claims fail to account for advances in cognitive research from the mid-1970s forward. It is widely acknowledged today that children can learn far more

<sup>47</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 116.

<sup>48</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 117.

<sup>49</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 118.

<sup>50</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 118.

than Piaget originally thought. Even those who agree with the major features of Piaget's approach have modified major aspects of his theory. Specifically, as even basic textbooks of child development now acknowledge, these Neo-Piagetians "retain the idea that the acquisition of knowledge goes through stages, but they believe that individuals' passage through the stages occur at different rates in different domains. A child may be a demon chess player or a precocious musician, yet solve typical Piagetian tasks no better than his peers."<sup>51</sup>

This idea that children learn different skills at different rates was first explored in the research of Michelene Chi and Randi Koeske in 1983. They studied the cognitive abilities of a 4 ½-year-old boy who "had been exposed to dinosaur information for about 1 ½ years. Like many children of his age, he was very interested in dinosaurs and was highly motivated to learn about them. His parents read dinosaur books to him often during this period (an average of 3 hours per week), and he had a collection of nine dinosaur books and various plastic models for use in play."<sup>52</sup> Chi and Koeske then probed the child's knowledge of dinosaur names as well as various characteristics about these dinosaurs in order for "information [to be] obtained about the child's recognition and spontaneous generation of a subset of the dinosaurs and their properties."<sup>53</sup> After observing the child, two lists were generated, one consisting of 20 names the child mentioned most frequently and another of 20 names he mentioned less frequently. The child was able to memorize twice as many names from the list of names he mentioned more frequently than from the list he mentioned less frequently. Further, the child was able to generate attributes about the dinosaurs when given their names.<sup>54</sup> From this, Chi and Koeske concluded that the more a young child knows about a topic, the easier it is for the child to recall items pertaining to that topic.<sup>55</sup>

Chi followed up on her research in 1986 and again in 1988. These later studies examined more specifically how one's knowledge of a domain affected one's ability to reason about that domain (the domain here was dinosaurs).<sup>56</sup> In these studies, Chi explored the differences in reasoning abilities between children who had an "expert knowledge" of dinosaurs and children who had a "novice knowledge."<sup>57</sup> She found that those with an expert level knowledge of the domain (dinosaurs) could successfully classify dinosaurs that they had

<sup>51</sup>Michael Cole and Sheila R. Cole, *The Development of Children*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth, 2000), 350.

<sup>52</sup>Michelene T. Chi and Randi D. Koeske, "Network Representation of a Child's Dinosaur Knowledge," *Developmental Psychology* 19, no. 1 (1983): 31.

<sup>53</sup>Chi and Koeske, "Network Representation of a Child's Dinosaur Knowledge," 31.

<sup>54</sup>Chi and Koeske, "Network Representation of a Child's Dinosaur Knowledge," 31-35.

<sup>55</sup>Chi and Koeske, "Network Representation of a Child's Dinosaur Knowledge," 36-38.

<sup>56</sup>Michelene T.H. Chi, Jean E. Hutchinson, and Anne F. Robin, "How Inferences about Novel Domain-Related Concepts can be Constrained by Structured Knowledge," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 35 no. 1 (1989): 27-62.

<sup>57</sup>Chi, Hutchinson, and Robin, "Inferences," 38-39.

previously never seen before because they could reason about the dinosaur's physical features. Of this finding Chi and her team then note:

It seems that young children often reason in a naive way because they lack the relevant domain knowledge. But the direct evidence of our present study shows that 4- to 7-year-olds can reason deductively for domains (such as dinosaurs) in which they have acquired an independent and coherent theory. These young experts reason much like the way 10 year-olds and adults reasoned in the [another] study.<sup>58</sup>

Chi also argues from her study that “background knowledge per se can enable the expert children to learn new domain-related concepts more readily, despite the fact that both expert and novice children have the same fundamental learning skills.”<sup>59</sup> The conclusion of her studies is “that one reason that children generally display global inadequacy across a number of domains is that they lack the relevant knowledge in a number of domains. By selecting a domain that some children know something about, qualitatively superior abilities that can be attributed only to domain-specific knowledge and the way that it is organized have been demonstrated.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus, from Chi's research the idea that even young children can develop “islands of competence” when children know something about a specific areas has arisen. As a result of Chi's study among young children, a whole body of literature on these islands of competence has developed exploring all the various ways children's cognitive abilities can advance more rapidly than Piaget projected.<sup>61</sup>

As was noted above, Clark, Deane, Ratliff, and Withers all apply the four-stage cognitive development model of Piaget to the conversion of children. As a result, all (to lesser and greater extents) argue that children are cognitively incapable of either grasping (Ratliff, Clark, Deane) or applying (Withers) the gospel. Therefore, they universally conclude that it is at best unwise to baptize younger children. Yet, this application of Piaget fails to

<sup>58</sup>Chi, Hutchinson, and Robin, “Inferences,” 50.

<sup>59</sup>Chi, Hutchinson, and Robin, “Inferences,” 59.

<sup>60</sup>Chi, Hutchinson, and Robin, “Inferences,” 61.

<sup>61</sup>The idea of islands of competence does not come directly from Chi. Rather as Cole and Cole note, it is one relevant domain demonstrating that children are capable of understanding more than Piaget previously understood. These domains, Cole and Cole label as “islands of competence.” Cole and Cole, *The Development of Children*, 344–54, 359–63. Environmental-learning accounting for increased knowledge and reasoning abilities within a domain has also been applied to gifted children's science reasoning skills. K.H. Kim, et al., “Assessing Science Reasoning and Conceptual Understanding in the Primary Grades Using Standardized and Performance-Based Assessments,” *Journal of Advanced Academics* 25, no. 1 (March 2014): 47–66. It has also been applied to children's reading skills. Paul Broek, Elizabeth Puzles Lorch, and Richard Thurlow, “Children's and Adults' Memory for Television Stories: The Role of Causal Factors, Story-Grammar Categories, and Hierarchical Level,” *Child Development* 67, no. 6 (December 1996): 3010–28.

account for the fact that children can develop islands of competence about subject matters and as a result are able to reason and communicate about such matters in ways that are beyond what their age-level would otherwise anticipate. As a result, one would expect that children growing up in environments in which they were educated about Christianity, the Bible, and the gospel message in a way that caused the child to take an interest in such matters would comprehend the gospel message and conversion at a much younger age.

At this point it is appropriate to look further into the research of Gary Deane. As noted in the last section, his dissertation from Southwestern deserves a second look in light of this idea of islands of competence. Deane argues that his survey of children at Vacation Bible School at Glorieta reveals that older children reason more abstractly about conversion, baptism, and church membership than younger children.<sup>62</sup> While the necessity of abstract reasoning for a correct conception of conversion is open to debate,<sup>63</sup> Deane does not interact with a significant finding of his research, namely that even the young children he surveyed were able to successfully reason abstractly on several of his questions.

Deane classifies his questions of children into four domains (concepts of conversion, language of conversion, church membership as understood by Southern Baptists, and baptism as practiced by Southern Baptists). The responses to Deane's questions pertaining to the conception of Christian conversion<sup>64</sup> showed that even younger children possessed a high level of

<sup>62</sup>At this point several weaknesses of Deane's study should be noted. Specifically, Deane does not ask about a conversion experience in his biographical survey. He (possibly) assumes that baptism implies a conversion experience. Yet, since he is exploring the reasoning skills of children as it pertains to the separate domains of baptism and conversion, such an omission in his survey stands as a significant weakness in its application to child conceptions of conversion.

Further, while Deane acknowledges that 19.1% of the children had not been baptized and that the younger children were less likely to be baptized, he does not distinguish between baptized and unbaptized children in his results. Since, Deane never examines the significance of baptism (and potentially correspondingly conversion) for abstract versus concrete reasoning skills as it applies to his four measured domains. It is quite possible that baptized children reason more abstractly about conversion, baptism, and church membership than do unbaptized children, however Deane does not look for statistical significance or correlation between these measures. Arguably, since nearly 20% of the children are unbaptized, this important population could be affecting his measures significantly. While this was outside the purpose of his study, such limits the application of his study. Deane, "An Investigation," 91, 62, 64.

<sup>63</sup>Elsiebeth McDaniel states, "At six or seven, many children are ready to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. At this age, a child begins to put together a connected story." Salvation is grasped by such children through the use of "supportive concrete ideas, such as being set free from a prison, being bought like a gift, or receiving a prize or gift." Elsiebeth McDaniel, "Understanding First and Second Graders (Primaries)," in *Childhood Education in the Church*, ed. Robert E. Clark, Joanne Brubaker, and Roy B. Zuck, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 132; Edward L. Hayes, "Evangelism of Children," in *Childhood Education in the Church*, ed. Robert E. Clark, Joanne Brubaker, and Roy B. Zuck, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 410.

<sup>64</sup>Deane does note that this domain, "discriminated the least between the age groups," but he does not go beyond this to examine the significance of this result or to explore what



abstract reasoning skills on three of the five questions he asked.<sup>65</sup> This is true even though Deane failed to isolate for the fact that 19.1% of respondents were unbaptized and that a significant number of these unbaptized persons were in the younger age groups.<sup>66</sup> Despite the limitations of Deane's study, it remains noteworthy that Deane found that 94.1% of all children surveyed responded to the question "To Become a Christian a person must \_\_\_\_\_" with the abstract response of "decide to choose God's way instead of your own."<sup>67</sup> While Deane does not break down the responses to any of his questions by age,<sup>68</sup> the fact that the overwhelming majority of children at this Vacation Bible School responded to his question with the correct abstract response indicates that even young children reasoned abstractly about the idea of Jesus's lordship.<sup>69</sup> Given the contention of Ratliff's dissertation was that children could not grasp lordship until they reached the age of 14, Clark's finding at this point throws much of Ratliff's argument for baptismal delay into doubt.

Deane also found that 95.8%<sup>70</sup> of all children surveyed responded to the question "A Christian is \_\_\_\_\_" with the abstract answer of "a person who has placed his faith in Jesus."<sup>71</sup> This indicates that the majority of young children gave an equivalent verbal response as to the appropriate object of faith as older children. It further reveals that even young children recognized that conversion requires a total commitment of oneself to Christ.

it means that young children were able to reason abstractly. Deane, "An Investigation," 80.

<sup>65</sup>Deane also asked questions about sin and faith. Specifically he asked "Sin is \_\_\_\_\_" with the abstract answer being "choosing your own way instead of God's way" of which 70.3% responded, the middling answer being "doing something when you really know you shouldn't" of which 18.0% responded, and the concrete answer being "doing something bad" of which 11.7% of all the children responded. While from a theological perspective the first answer is the most complete, all three answers reflect a sufficient understanding of sin for a person to respond properly to the gospel.

He also asked "To have faith in Jesus means \_\_\_\_\_" of which 71.4% responded with the abstract answer of "you trust Jesus to forgive your sins," 26.8% responded with the middling response of "you believe what the Bible says about Jesus," and only 1.8% responded with the concrete response of "doing something good." Both answers 2 and 3 are theologically acceptable definitions of faith. As a result, even those questions which were asked by Deane which supposedly show that younger children reasoned more abstractly than older children, the questions themselves do not reveal that the younger children did not have a proper grasp of the topic in view (in this case sin and faith), but rather that all the children had theologically correct understandings of sin and faith. Deane, "An Investigation," 68, 92, 101.

<sup>66</sup>Unfortunately, Deane never examines the significance of baptism (and potentially correspondingly conversion) for abstract versus concrete reasoning skills as it applies to his four measured domains.

<sup>67</sup>Deane, "An Investigation," 68.

<sup>68</sup>Rather, he simply notes that there was even distribution of responses by age between the ages of 8 and 12. Deane, "An Investigation," 60.

<sup>69</sup>Which is even more significant given Clark's failure to isolate for the fact that 19.1% of his respondents were unbaptized.

<sup>70</sup>Deane, "An Investigation," 68.

<sup>71</sup>Deane, "An Investigation," 92.

Additionally, Deane notes that 92.4%<sup>72</sup> of all children surveyed responded to the question “that the best reason for becoming a Christian and being baptized is because \_\_\_\_\_” with the abstract answer “you have faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.” Taken together, the responses Deane records to these three questions reveals that a majority of these young children were abstractly reasoning about the nature of conversion.

Understanding Deane’s research within the context of islands of competence, it becomes clear that young children can reason abstractly about conversion. The vast majority of his participants were from highly church backgrounds, and, as a result, it is reasonable to assume that many would have a significant exposure to the criteria for conversion prior to taking Deane’s questionnaire. Within this context, despite Deane’s failure to isolate for the fact that a significant percentage of his younger respondents were unbaptized, it follows that many of his younger respondents would have developed islands of competence about conversion.

Applying Deane’s results to arguments against baptizing young children that state that young children cannot abstractly reason about conversion, such arguments should be at least partially rejected. In fact, for children being raised in environments in which there is significant exposure to the idea of conversion, Deane’s results understood through the lens of Chi’s research indicate that even young children are able to reason abstractly and grasp the nature of conversion if they have significant knowledge of conversion as result of living in an environment in which they are frequently exposed to this concept.

### **Faith-Development**

Despite Withers’s caveats, applying Fowler’s stages of faith development to Christian conversion is highly problematic. Specifically, Withers acknowledges that the faith Fowler has in view is not the saving faith of Christian conversion. Rather the faith he has in view is of a more humanistic variety that allows a person to find meaning in life. While Withers still believes that Fowler’s stages are applicable, in reality Fowler’s vision of faith as presented by Withers is incompatible with Southern Baptist doctrine.

As noted above, Fowler argues that children can be converted at the synthetic-conventional stage of faith development.<sup>73</sup> Fowler notes of this stage that a person experiences “disillusionment, [and a] questioning [of] the authority of the stories they once took literally.”<sup>74</sup> Further, at this stage, faith development lacks an objective ideology, lacks an independent perspective, and is unsure of itself to the extent that it cannot make independent

<sup>72</sup>Deane, “An Investigation,” 68.

<sup>73</sup>The descriptions of Fowler’s views are understood through the lens of Withers’s dissertation. The reason that Fowler is being interpreted through this lens is because it is only Withers’s interpretation of Fowler that is germane to the research questions of this paper.

<sup>74</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 108.

judgments.<sup>75</sup> It is surprising then that in this time of supposed personal uncertainty Withers argues that children should be baptized and affirmed as converts since it is at this stage that children can “cognitively embrace for themselves the faith they have been taught.”<sup>76</sup> Based on Withers’s description of the synthetic-conventional stage of faith-development, he implies that faith should be embraced with uncertainty.

Withers description of Fowler’s final three phases of faith development amplify this impression. The individutive-reflective stage begins as early as late adolescence. Fowler notes that this stage is characterized by a movement from “the absolutes of previous faith stages.” Instead, these absolutes “become more relative and individualized by people in this stage of faith development.”<sup>77</sup> Conjunctive faith follows, normally in mid-life, in which the individual “sees truth in apparent contradiction.”<sup>78</sup> Faith then reaches its zenith in a universalizing faith. This type of faith is described as a quasi-universalism in which the individual transcends their own tribe and instead “relinquish themselves for the sake of love and justice at the moral and religious levels. They live with a felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world. They embrace a universal Community.”<sup>79</sup>

It impossible to reconcile Withers’s understanding of Fowler’s stages of faith progression with the description of faith offered in the Baptist Faith and Message. This document, which serves as the confessional doctrinal statement of Southern Baptists, defines faith as “the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Saviour.”<sup>80</sup> From adolescence forward, the faith Withers argues for from his understanding of Fowler’s research is increasingly a relativized faith rooted in a sense of progressing doubt about absolutes. Since Southern Baptists argue that faith involves a total commitment, Withers’s understanding of Fowler’s progression for faith development provides an inadequate rubric by which to judge the validity of childhood faith commitments.

### **Age of Conversion and Faith Commitment of Adults**

Third, as noted above, the overarching concern underlying attempts to delay the baptism of children is based on the belief that such children are not capable of cognitively committing to a lifetime of Christian service.<sup>81</sup> Yet, there is a growing body of research that indicates that people who come to faith as children (as opposed to as adolescents or adults) go on to become the most committed Christians later in life. In a 2004 survey, the Barna group offered a significant support to this line of thought. Specifically, based on

<sup>75</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 108.

<sup>76</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 119.

<sup>77</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 109.

<sup>78</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 109.

<sup>79</sup>Withers, “Social Forces,” 110.

<sup>80</sup>Baptist Faith and Message, 1963 Article IV.

<sup>81</sup>See footnote 32.

a phone survey of 992 born again Christians from across the country, they found that 43% of adult born-again Christians became born again prior to the age of 13. Barna found that “People who become Christian before their teen years are more likely than those who are converted when older to remain ‘absolutely committed’ to Christianity” while those who convert as high school or college students were the least likely to describe their faith as deeply meaningful. The determining factor for the majority of those individuals converting at a young age was their family. Barna notes, “Among Christians who embraced Christ before their teen years, half were led to Christ by their parents, with another one in five led by some other friend or relative.”<sup>82</sup>

In a follow-up study in 2009, Barna found that early-life spiritual experiences within the local church context played a key role in church attendance as adults. Barna notes, “among those who frequently attended [church] programs as a child, 50% said they attended a worship service in the last week.” Further, Barna found that “weekly activity as a child ... [was] connected with the lowest levels of disconnection from church attendance” as an adult.<sup>83</sup>

Within a specifically Baptist context, Baylor University’s Dennis Horton’s 2007 study, which examined the relationship between age of conversion and long-term faith commitment through a nationwide survey, is particularly noteworthy.<sup>84</sup> Horton anonymously surveyed ministry students from over 50 different theological schools and found that a disproportionate percentage of Baptist ministry students were converted at a young age in comparison with overall baptisms.<sup>85</sup> Horton states, “While only about 1 % of the Baptist congregants reported a preschool age [conversion], about 8% of the Baptist ministry students noted that they became a Christian during their preschool years. The percentage of early elementary conversions (ages 6–8) was about three times higher for the ministry students (26%) than for [typical] congregants (9%).”<sup>86</sup>

Two additional findings of Horton’s study are relevant to this discussion on the cognitive ability of young children to grasp the gospel. First, the

<sup>82</sup>The Barna Group, “Evangelism is Most Effective among Kids,” Barna Group, 11 October 2004, accessed 30 June 2014, [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids#.VQR\\_tI54pcR](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids#.VQR_tI54pcR).

<sup>83</sup>The Barna Group, “New Research Explores the Long-Term Effect of Spiritual Activity among Children and Teens,” Barna Group, 16 November 2009, accessed 30 June 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/family-kids/321-new-research-explores-the-long-term-effect-of-spiritual-activity-among-children-and-teens#.VQSAFo54pcS>.

<sup>84</sup>Horton’s survey included a significant number of adherents from other credobaptist denominational contexts. Still, a plurality of his respondents (1,054 out of 2,604 total) were Baptists. Further, Horton isolates Baptists from other groups in many of his findings. Dennis Horton, “Ministry Student Ages and Implications for Child Evangelism and Baptism Practices,” *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 30–51.

<sup>85</sup>Given that Horton is surveying ministry students, it follows that the typical age of conversion among such persons is lower than as ministry students as a populace skew younger than the general populace.

<sup>86</sup>Horton, “Ministry Student Ages,” 38.

younger the age of a Baptist ministry student's conversion, the more regular they were in church attendance during their teenage years.<sup>87</sup> Second, the younger a Baptist person's conversion was, the more likely the individual was to come from a household in which one or both parents were active Christians.<sup>88</sup> Thus, Horton concludes from his research that young "children need not be discouraged from making a decision about their faith if they have committed Christian parents who will provide an environment for their faith to flourish."<sup>89</sup> Assuming perseverance and a lifetime of committed ministry service are evidence of genuine Christian conversion, it follows that many individuals baptized at a young age were genuinely converted. Therefore, "while parents and church leaders should not rush their children too quickly through spiritual milestones, they should make room for spiritual experiences, even conversion in some cases, at a young age."<sup>90</sup>

Taken together, these three studies reveal that the most involved and engaged church members as adults were the most involved and engaged church attendees as children. Further, a young conversion experience does not in and of itself lead to an unregenerate church member later in life. Rather, if the parents of a converted young child are Christians, such children are more likely to remain involved in a local church as adults.

### **Conclusions and Applications Regarding the Cognitive Abilities of Children**

Over the last fifty years a narrative has developed among some Southern Baptists that children are not cognitively capable of coming to or acting upon a faith commitment until they reach a particular age. This narrative fails. It is based on outdated or inapplicable child-developmental research.

Specifically this narrative is outdated when it applies a rigid understanding of Piagetian stages of cognitive development (as all four dissertations interacted with above do). More recent research has shown that some children can (and perhaps even should be expected to) cognitively grasp salvation at a young age. Applying Chi's research and the resultant theories about islands of competence to children growing up in Christian households, one would expect that such children will cognitively grasp what it means to be converted at a younger age than children not growing up in such a

<sup>87</sup>At least 95% of those with preschool conversion experiences attended worship services on a weekly basis during their preteen or adolescent years. Weekly worship attendance ranged from 89-95% for those with conversion experiences during their early elementary years (ages 6-8). Participants with later elementary age conversions (ages 9-11) had weekly worship attendance ranging from 80-91 %. After age 12, the weekly attendance rate drops to about 70% through age 17. Less than 40% of those with later conversions (ages 18+) had weekly attendance during their preteen or adolescent years." Horton, "Ministry Student Ages," 40-41.

<sup>88</sup>Horton, "Ministry Student Ages," 40.

<sup>89</sup>Horton, "Ministry Student Ages," 43.

<sup>90</sup>Horton, "Ministry Student Ages," 44.



context. Further, those children growing up in households in which they are taught about the nature of the Christian gospel from an early age will develop a competence about the Christian message (including ideas of lordship, faith, repentance, etc.) that exceeds what the Piagetian stages would otherwise dictate.

Additionally, this narrative has relied at times on inapplicable research. Withers's dissertation stands as an example of such in its application of Fowler's stages of faith development to the conversion process. As was argued above, Withers application of Fowler's stage of faith development cannot be applied to Southern Baptist understandings of faith development. Specifically, Fowler's understanding of faith is incompatible with Southern Baptist conceptions of faith.

Thus the assertion that "developmental psychologists agree that children reach full moral decision making ability around the age of twelve" cannot be supported.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, cognitive developmental studies do not provide justification for restricting baptism from children.

Still, the cognitive sciences should inform discussion of child conversion. Specifically, Chi's assertion that even "4- to 7-year-olds can reason deductively for domains ... in which they have acquired an independent and coherent theory" is applicable.<sup>92</sup> In light of Chi's research, parents, teachers, church leaders, and pastors who are confronted with children claiming conversion have an obligation to seek to discern if these children actually cognitively grasp the gospel and desire to personally submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

One possible way to discern if such a commitment is present would be through asking open-ended questions to see if the child can independently reason about the Christian gospel, repentance, faith and conversion and in turn apply such concepts to their own life.<sup>93</sup> Adults asking these questions should also seek familiarity with the amount of previous exposure the child has had to Christian message. In so doing, adults can discern both a young child's understanding the gospel message and such a child's willingness to repent and recognize Jesus' lordship in their lives.

Children who cannot reason about Christianity on their own should be affirmed in their interest in Christianity, but told directly they are not yet ready to make a faith commitment. Children who can independently reason about faith, repentance, the Christian gospel and conversion and who can

<sup>91</sup>Hammett, "Regenerate Church Membership," 40.

<sup>92</sup>Chi, et al., "Inferences," 55.

<sup>93</sup>For example, of the child expressing a desire for salvation and baptism, one could ask questions such as, "why do you want to be baptized?" or "why do you want to be saved?" Such questions force the child to express in his or her own words what is taking place in the child's life. If the response of the child seems scripted, other questions could be asked about the nature of repentance or lordship. The point of such questions is to see if the child can express salvation on his or her own, independent of adult pressures. Therefore, while parents should be present for such discussion it is of vital importance to let the child express himself in his own words.

explain how such concepts apply to themselves personally should be affirmed as converts and baptized.<sup>94</sup> Such a methodology addresses the concerns of Withers and others that one cannot simply assume from a recitation of verbal facts by a child that a child has been converted,<sup>95</sup> while at the same time acknowledges the reality that children are cognitively capable of grasping and applying the gospel message to their lives and adults can discern such.

<sup>94</sup>Conversion should be contemporaneous with water-baptism. See Matz, "Should Southern Baptists Baptize Their Children?" Chapter 1.

<sup>95</sup>Withers, "Social Forces," 83–86. Such a practice is also compatible with the exhortation of Hayes who argues that adults should "avoid making the invitation so easy that acceptance is not genuine. Some response is necessary." Hayes, "Evangelism of Children," 409.