

Early Baptism

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There has been a strong emphasis in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America to baptize young people prior to reaching high school as it is believed this practice may be associated with membership retention within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, it is unknown how these young people, upon reaching early adulthood, feel about early baptism and if they have a comprehensive knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism.

The Beyond Beliefs study Cohorts 1 (Beyond Beliefs 1), 2 and 3 (Beyond Beliefs 2) identified that there may be an unforeseen consequence of early baptism in that young adults possess a limited knowledge of the official 28 Beliefs of Adventism and factors other than personal conviction contribute to their decision to be baptized prior to age 14. A number of participants expressed negative feelings relating to the practice of early baptism and 62.5% of those baptized prior to age 14 expressed that if they could do it again, they would have waited until they were older to be baptized.

Paternalism and the potential implementation of an alternative practice for children, teens, and early teens, other than baptism, are discussed. The Beyond Beliefs study is an ongoing study and this issue will be investigated further in Cohorts 4 and 5 (Beyond Beliefs 3) which are scheduled for Spring 2014.

Method

The Beyond Beliefs study is a major research project being undertaken over three semesters at Andrews University to investigate how Millennial young adults really feel about each and every one of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism. Until now it has only been anecdotally assumed that a Millennial young adult (age 18 - 32) who identifies as a Seventh-day Adventist and is baptized or attends an Adventist educational institution, has a comprehensive knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism and endorses them fully. As a part of this study, participants were asked to write a 150+ word response to each of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism including *Belief 15 - Baptism*. Participants were asked to describe what they liked/disliked about the belief, if they felt it was important/unimportant, and if they felt it was relevant/irrelevant. Participants were sourced from the General Education class RELT225 Doctrines of Adventist Faith. Over 930 written responses were collected from the Spring 2013 cohort (Beyond Beliefs 1) from a sample of 37 participants belonging to the North American Division. They submitted each response after reading the belief statement and commentary as outlined in the publication *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* but prior to undertaking a class related to the associated belief. This was to minimize peer and teacher influence. Participants also completed two demographic inventories which collected demographic and religious attitudinal data in two separate surveys, one taken at the beginning of the study and one at the conclusion. In the Spring 2013 cohort (Beyond Beliefs 1) the demographic inventories included questions relating to the age a participant was baptized (if baptized), self-reported knowledge of the 28 Beliefs, why they decided to be baptized, if they could do it again would they be baptized, and if they were not baptized what reason best described why.

In the Fall 2013 Cohorts (Beyond Beliefs 2, which includes 303 participants) the demographic inventories asked the same questions as above, but asked additional questions relating to whether they would have waited to be baptized until they were older if they were baptized before age 18 and their attitudes toward rebaptism.

The focus of this poster will relate to findings on Baptism for the Spring 2013 and Fall 2013 cohorts of the Beyond Beliefs study (Beyond Beliefs 1 and 2). More information about the Beyond Beliefs Research Project, comprehensive commentary, and findings relating to all 28 Beliefs from the Spring 2013 cohort (Beyond Beliefs 1) can be found in the *Beyond Beliefs - Full Report, Cohort 1* which is available through www.amazon.com.

Baptism Results

Most participants in the Spring 2013 cohort of the Beyond Beliefs study expressed in their written responses that they liked *Belief 15 - Baptism*, and nearly all (90%) were baptized members. However, more than a third (36%) of the participants specifically expressed some reservations and concerns regarding how baptism is being practiced within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. One participant suggested, "I have seen people be treated differently in a negative way because they aren't baptized and they are looked down upon by other members of the church." The sentiment of the remaining participants focused predominantly on the practice of baptizing people at an early age (prior to early adulthood). Given the most prominent theme identified in the Beyond Beliefs participant responses regarding *Belief 15 - Baptism*, was "baptismal candidates must be able to understand this decision and its importance," (44%) this sentiment is not surprising.

Some participant comments relating to this issue are as follows:

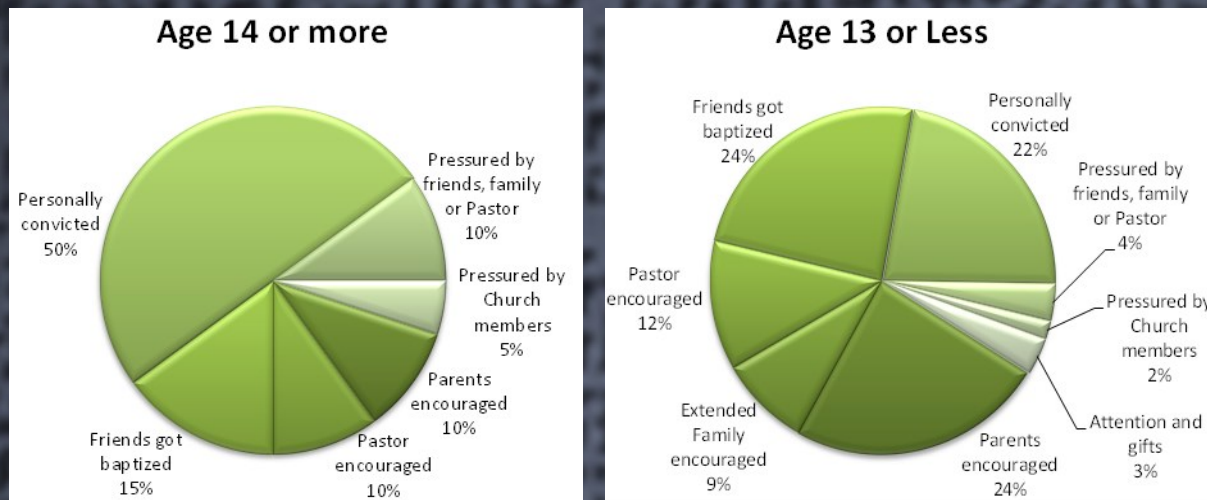
"I personally wished that I would have waited to be baptized until I was about the age that I currently am. I feel like so many kids are shoved into the baptismal pools at churches because their parents want them to be 'saved' or because it is 'time.'"

"I took a class from my pastor about baptism and he explained to me why I was getting baptized, but honestly, I don't think I was ready."

"I got baptized when I was 13 years old and I realize now that I was too young. I didn't really understand life (not that I completely understand life) but at 13 years old there isn't much I understood about life. If I could rewind and get baptized again, I would do it in late high school or even in college."

"What I don't like about this concept is how it is pushed for in the Adventist church while people have no clue about it. I feel as though people do this just because of the pressure from parents or others, especially at a young age and then wonder why they left the church or why Adventism really did not attract them."

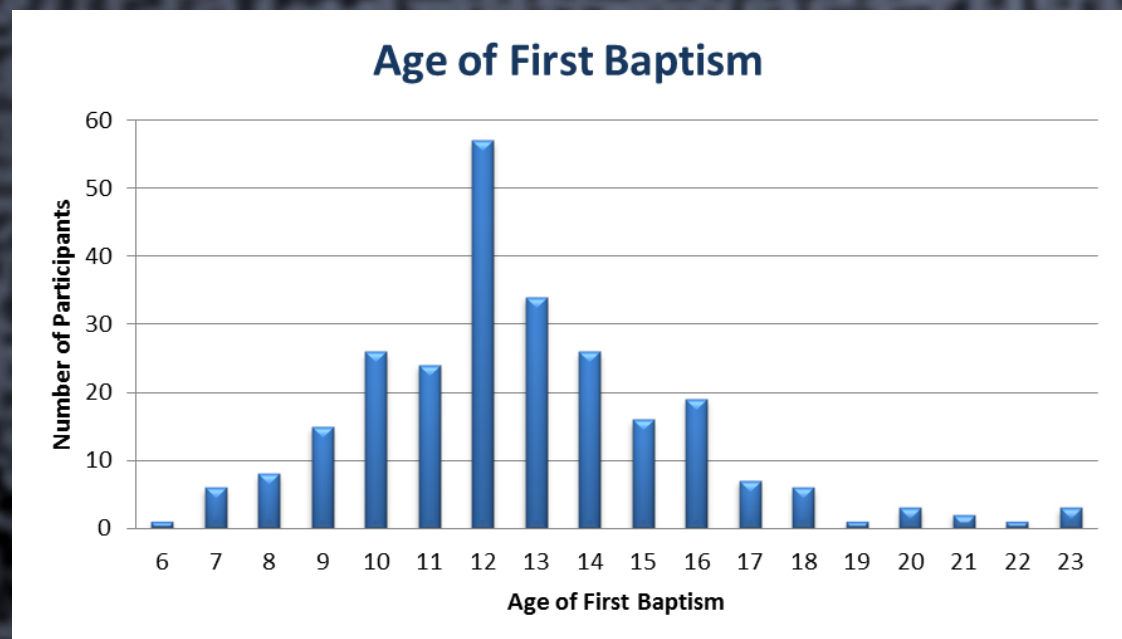
In the Spring 2013 cohort there seemed to be a peak at ages 11-13 and again, to a lesser extent, from ages 16-18. The majority of participants were baptized before age 14, prior to entering high school. There are a number of reasons participants gave for why they decided to be baptized. For comparison and to look more closely at the two identified age group clusters, the researchers have divided participants into two groups - those who were baptized at age 14 or more and those who were baptized at age 13 or less. The results are as follows:



The most prominent difference in these two charts is the disparity between personal conviction with regard to a baptism decision. For those who were aged 13 or less, personal conviction only accounted for 22% of the reason given for why they decided to be baptized, while for those who were aged 14 or more, it accounted for 50%. The influence adults have on the decision to be baptized for those aged 13 or less (45% from parents, family and pastors) could be evidence of "helicopter-baptism" where a young person is propelled into baptism by influential adults because it is "time" or they believe early baptism is correlated with retention within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While well intentioned, there is often little regard for personal conviction, or consideration for how helicopter-baptism may impact the long-term spiritual walk of that young person and the development of their spiritual maturity. Interestingly, pressure to be baptized from others increased with those aged 14 or more, and encouragement decreased. Because of this, baptizing early may seem advantageous, even easier, but given so many other factors other than personal conviction play a prominent role, this practice may be questionable - particularly when the most prominent theme expressed by participants for *Belief 15 - Baptism* is "baptismal candidates must understand the meaning of this decision and its importance."

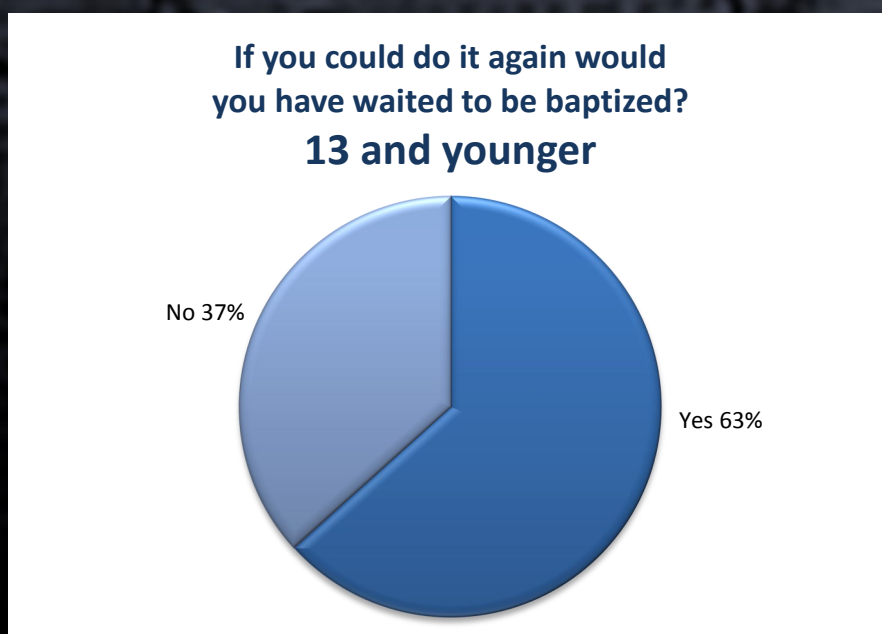
It would seem a number of young adults in this sample wished they had not been baptized so early. Early baptism was even described by one participant response as though others "don't care for the individual's relationship and walk with Christ." One of the reasons the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not practice infant baptism is due to their belief that a person has the right to make an informed choice about their faith, endorsement of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism and membership within the church organization. However, the practice of helicopter-baptism might be negating this belief. This issue was explored further in the Fall 2013 cohorts (Beyond Beliefs 2) of the Beyond Beliefs study.

In the Fall 2013 cohorts, there were 303 participants who provided input relating to baptism. Of this group 86.4% were baptized with the mean age being 12.7 and the range being 6-23 for a first baptism.



It may seem from the chart above that baptism propensity declines after age 12 where less and less young people are baptized as they age. However, one should keep in mind that if significant numbers of young people are baptized early (in this case 67% of this sample was baptized before or at age 13) the pool of potential baptismal candidates remaining within a church population is also shrinking which may provide an explanation of lower numbers at older ages. There were 14 participants who identified as being re-baptized but there were 67 participants (or 25.6% of all of those who identified as being baptized) who stated they would like to be re-baptized. The second survey in Beyond Beliefs 2 will be administered at the conclusion of the Fall 2013 semester and will explore the reasons for why young adults who are already baptized feel the need for re-baptism.

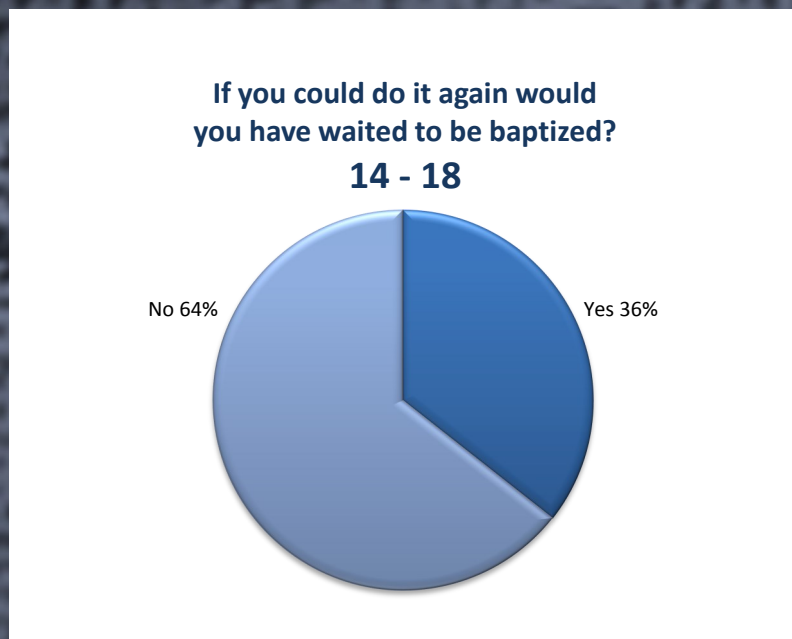
Those who were aged 13 or younger when they were baptized were asked if they could do it again, would they have waited until they were older to be baptized. The results were as follows.



It would seem a large number of young adults who were baptized prior to high school may feel that they were baptized too early. The ramifications of this are yet to be determined, however, in the quest to "suffer the little children to come unto me" the Seventh-day Adventist church may have created a genera-

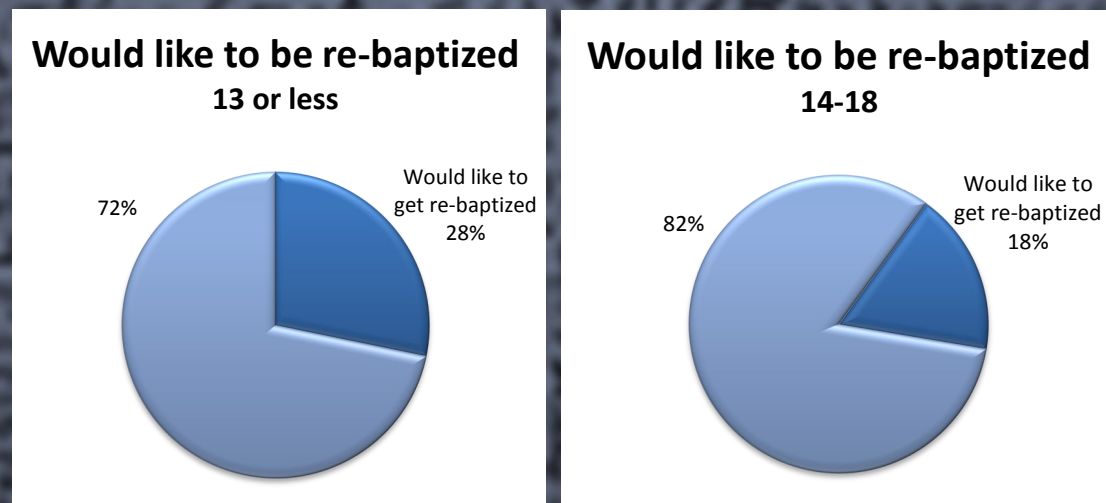
tion that wished they had waited with baptism. It should still be noted however, that 37% did not regret their early baptism, and the factors that are associated with this are yet to be determined. This will be explored further in Beyond Beliefs 3 in Spring 2014.

Those who were baptized between the ages of 14-18 were also asked the same question. The results were as follows:

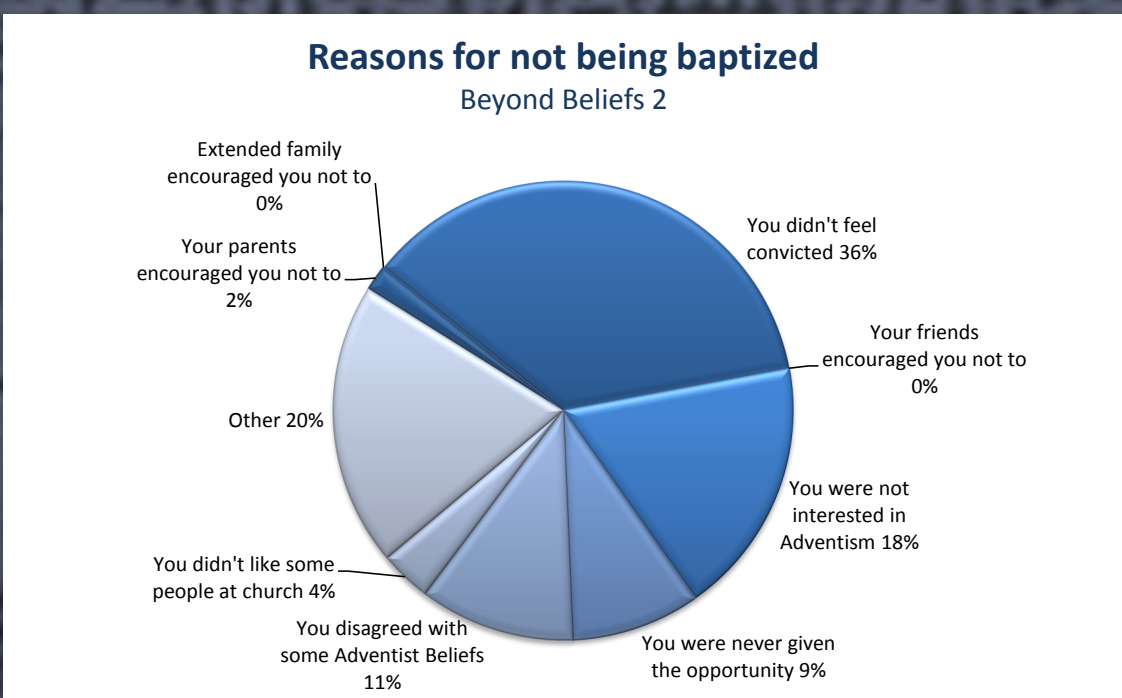


It seems it is a reversal, where the majority of young people do not feel they were too young to be baptized. The ramifications of this are still yet to be determined and this will be explored further within the context of Beyond Beliefs 2 which will conclude at the end of the Fall 2013 semester.

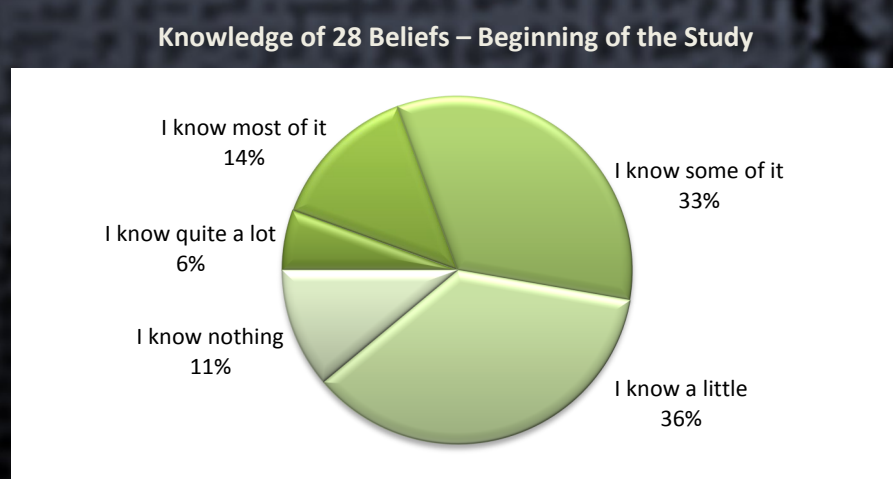
With regard to rebaptism, those who were aged 13 or less were slightly more likely to desire rebaptism than those aged 14-18, as the chart below demonstrates. However, it would seem the difference is not all that great. Interestingly, a desire for re-baptism if one was baptized after age 18 was not identified in this sample. This could be due to the demographic factors, like smaller numbers who are in fact baptized after age 18 (10 participants only) and given the range of ages in this sample (18-32 years of age) a baptism after age 18 may not have been that long ago.



Of those who were not baptized, the reasons given are as follows.



It may be suggested that it is efficacious to baptize children, teens, and teens, even though they may not be personally convicted or have an adequate understanding of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism, contending that they can always learn these things later in "post baptism nurture." This attitude may be perceived as paternalistic and is highly problematic as the relatively low self-reported knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism from Beyond Beliefs 1 (see chart below) indicates that this type of nurture has either not taken place, or has been largely ineffective.



After baptism, there may be little benefit or motivation for a busy church pastor to conduct this type of nurture as they have already received a statistical reward for baptizing a new member, and must spread

his/her limited time among a number of members of their church. The young adult may not have any incentive either, as they have already been baptized and may not possess the maturity to perceive the need for further study. The Beyond Beliefs 1 study identified at even at a university level very few young adults signed up for classes like RELT225 Doctrines of Adventist Faith in order to learn more about the 28 Beliefs of Adventism. The demographic inventory showed that the overwhelming majority took the class simply because they needed a Religion General Education class (56%) that fit their schedule (21%).

"Post baptism nurture" contradicts the predominant theme expressed by young adults in relation to *Belief 15 - Baptism*, which is "baptismal candidates must understand the meaning of this decision and its importance." Also, if "post baptism nurture" is the current strategy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, some may wonder why not practice infant baptism? Making a mature and informed choice reasoned with young adults, and early baptism may contradict this and cause suspicion that numbers or paternalism is the motivating factor, rather than personal conviction and what is best for an individual's long-term spiritual experience. (Paternalism is when an individual or authority figure/group/organization, male or female, makes decisions for what is best for another group - often without consultation with this group. It is problematic because authority figures making these decisions will often not experience any negative consequences of their decisions should they prove erroneous.) Thus, it may also be timely to investigate the issue of paternalism within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, focusing on its actual efficacy, ethical considerations, and the potential negative ramifications it may have, particularly with regard to the retention of young adults in North America.

Conclusion

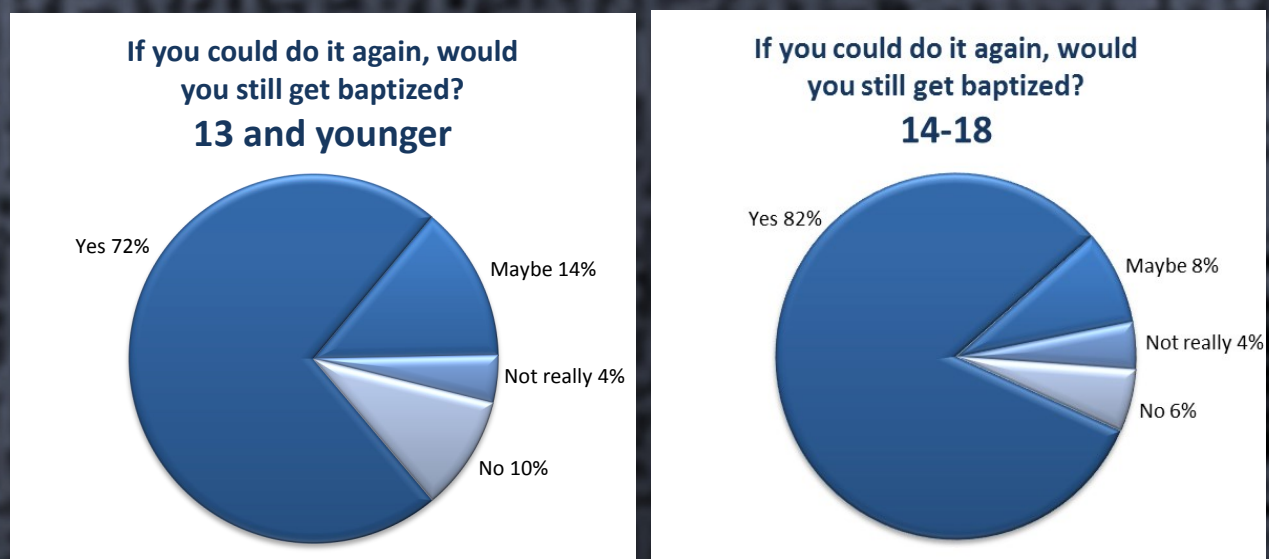
It may be appropriate for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to perhaps consider introducing a different symbolic practice for children or teens other than baptism, one that would allow them to feel included, make a public declaration of their commitment to God/Jesus, while still respecting that they may not be at an age where they fully understand the ramifications and rationale of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism.

It must be noted that Jesus was not baptized until age 30 (Luke 3:1-22), at the beginning of his ministry (this should not be confused with the regular practice of Mikvah performed multiple times during a Jewish person's life). He was however, presented at the temple as an infant by his parents (Luke 2:22-40), a practice that is mirrored in the Seventh-day Adventist Church through baby dedications. We can also assume that at age 12 he participated in a bar mitzvah (an event alluded to in the Gospels when Jesus impressed the religious leaders in the Temple, Luke 2:41-52), which is when a Jewish child makes a personal commitment to adhere to God's laws and does so publicly. Thus, a symbolic practice for Seventh-day Adventist children or teens, other than baptism, may mirror Christ's life while reserving baptism for an age when they can make a mature decision regarding their faith and their endorsement of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism.

While some may ask, "When will a young person, or any church member for that matter, be able to understand the 28 Beliefs of Adventism?" Conversely, if written in clear language with examples and a focus on an application in everyday life, one could also ask, "Why wouldn't a literate adult understand them?" If literate adult church members of any age are unable to understand the 28 Beliefs of Adventism, this would suggest that, in their current form, they are unintelligible and may require revision. Such revision may also have the added benefit of making them more understandable to children, teens, and teens, with personal conviction perhaps becoming a more prominent part of their decision to be baptized.

Given the issue of paternalism discussed above, if an additional symbolic practice other than baptism is introduced for younger Seventh-day Adventists, it is done in consultation with a number of children, teens and teens from a diverse range of ethnic, family and social backgrounds so as to identify a practice that is meaningful to them and their spiritual walk - not necessarily what their parents or church leaders believe should be meaningful to them.

The Beyond Beliefs demographic inventory also asked participants if they could do it again, would they still have chosen to be baptized. The results for Beyond Beliefs 2 are represented in the chart below. Again, they have been divided into two groups, 13 and younger (pre high school) and 14 to 18 (high school):



This outcome is interesting as it would seem the majority would choose again to be baptized or would at least consider it. Thus, early baptism may not be as necessary as once thought. More study regarding baptism and young people that investigates factors other than its correlation with retention may be timely. The focus of future researchers, given the findings of this study and the issue of paternalism, should always be the spiritual wellbeing of that young person; respect for their personal walk with God both now and in the future; and their right to make an informed decision regarding baptism and membership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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