

## Real-life Child Converts

Jim Elliff & Steve Burchett

*Even younger children may be converted.* That may seem like a strange statement in our day when supposedly tens of thousands of children are coming to Christ at younger and younger ages. This seeming explosion in childhood conversions is evidenced in one denomination where, between 1977 and 1997, there was a 250% increase in the number of baptisms of children under the age of six.<sup>1</sup> However, in the history of the church and evangelism, people have believed that children *could* be converted because “Whatever the LORD pleases, He does” (Psalm 135:6), but they have alleged that it was almost impossible to *know* if a child had been converted at a very young age.



God *has* converted younger children. For example, Jonathan Edwards tells the story about a 4 year-old girl he knew named Phebe Bartlett.<sup>2</sup> Phebe was born in 1731, and at the age of four, though her parents didn't think she would be able to understand the gospel at such a young age, her eleven-year-old brother began telling her about Jesus. Soon thereafter she professed to have peace with God through Christ, and her profession of faith was accompanied by a changed life. For instance, highlighting Phebe's love for meeting with the church on Sundays, Edwards writes, “Her mother once asked her, why she had such a mind to go—whether it was not to see fine folks? She said, ‘No, it was to hear Mr. Edwards preach.’”

Phebe's love for God and His Word lasted—58 years later (1789) she was still showing forth the character of a true follower of Jesus Christ. Examples could be multiplied throughout church history of boys and girls whom God saved at young ages. But throughout the entirety of the Bible, it seems that there is only one childhood conversion mentioned. Who? Samuel.

The common way to think about Samuel is as a just-weaned child being dedicated to the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest (cf. First Samuel 1), yet most Old Testament scholars believe that by First Samuel 3, Samuel is already somewhere between 11-16 years old. This is significant because *Samuel does not become a child of God until chapter three.* First Samuel 3:7

<sup>1</sup> Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 346-7.

<sup>2</sup> For the historical account of Phebe, see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, ), Chapter VIII.

says, “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor had the word of the LORD yet been revealed to him.” The next few verses of First Samuel 3 include the record of God saving Samuel. So Samuel at his conversion wasn't even a very young boy!

Since the Bible contains only this one example of the conversion of a child, this should lead us to be extremely cautious about reports of large numbers of children coming to faith in Christ at a church camp or Vacation Bible School. We live in a “statistic hungry” day, and we often determine the success of our ministry to children by counting the number of professions of faith. Too often, these statistics are based on hands raised, aisles walked, or prayers prayed, but we would be wise to recognize with our forebears that really knowing if a child has been saved is quite difficult.

Occasionally, we might see potential signs of spiritual life within our children, like the boys and girls George Whitefield mentions in a letter written in 1742. Whitefield, describing a hostile environment he found himself preaching within (nearly losing his life), wrote a “Mr. L—” and he included this postscript about the children present, “I cannot help but adding, that several little boys and girls who were fond of sitting round me on the pulpit, while I preached, and handing to me people's notes, though they were often pelted with eggs, dirt, etc. thrown at me, never once gave way; but on the contrary, every time I was struck, turned up their little weeping eyes, and seemed to wish they could receive the blows for me.”<sup>3</sup> When similar affections for the Lord are evidenced in the lives of our children, it *might* be an indication that God is at work in their lives and has potentially saved them, yet knowing for certain will be difficult. In the meantime, we should pray earnestly for our children as Whitefield did for these boys and girls, that God would truly “make them in the growing years great and living martyrs” for Jesus.

We yearn for our children to come to Christ early in their lives, and then fearlessly stand for Him all of their days. The conversions of Phebe and Samuel should give us hope. God's work in their lives confirms that children, even younger children, may be converted. Keep preaching the gospel to the children in your life, and God may be pleased to open their hearts to receive the truth you proclaim (cf. Acts 16:14).

[Adapted from a forthcoming book on childhood conversion by Jim Elliff and Steve Burchett]

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J.P. Gledstone, *George Whitefield: Supreme Among Preachers*, (Greenville, South Carolina: Ambassador, 1998), 184-5.