

Baptism FAQ

Willowdale Chapel's Perspective

What is the real purpose of baptism?

We can sum it up in two words:

Identification: Baptism identifies you with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It says that by his death, sin has died in you. It is no longer your master. That doesn't mean you're utterly sinless; but rather you are no longer dominated or defined by your sinful past. In the same way, you identify with Christ's resurrection. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, you testify that you have been raised to new life. Resurrection power is within you.

Initiation: Baptism also initiates you into the church, the body of Christ. It signals to everyone that you're "one with us," because you've made the same commitment, both in your heart and in public, that we have made. Biblically speaking, it is the one requirement for church membership.

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Romans 6:3-4

Do you have to be baptized in order to be "saved" and go to heaven?

It depends on what we mean by "baptism." When you place your faith in Christ, you are "baptized" into him; that is, your life is immersed in his. This is "spiritual baptism" and it is necessary for salvation.

Water baptism, on the other hand, is the sign of your spiritual baptism; the visible follow-up. It's not utterly necessary for salvation—after all, we can imagine a case in which a person would place his faith in Christ but then die before he could be baptized. Of course, that person's salvation would be secure.

But that doesn't mean water baptism is optional. Jesus commanded it, so it's still mandatory. In fact, choosing not to be baptized might say grave things about the reality of one's faith. In New Testament times Christians faced serious threats for declaring their faith. Following Jesus often meant ostracism, imprisonment, or even death. Yet Jesus insisted that his followers declare their allegiance to him publicly in baptism.

So what would you think of a person who wanted to be "saved" but didn't want to get baptized? You would think their loyalties were divided; you would think they weren't really committed; you would think they hadn't truly grasped what it means to be a Christian. And so the genius of baptism is that it forces the issue; it makes a person choose definitively for Christ. That alone makes it an excellent sign and testimony of legitimate saving faith.

So we must nuance our answer. Water baptism is not necessary for salvation yet it is still required.

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Matthew 10:32-33

Is it important to be immersed?

We think so. We wouldn't utterly denounce sprinkling, but we think immersion represents "best practice" for at least two reasons: First, it coheres with the definition of baptism; the word itself means "to immerse."

Second, immersion most accurately symbolizes what happens when you are spiritually baptized into Christ. Your whole life — body and soul — are placed in Christ. Your whole existence is now "in him." You don't just get a sprinkling of God's grace; you get soaked in it!





What about those who were baptized as infants?

Typically, when parents have a baby baptized, they are expressing a sincere hope that their child will be under God's grace, and become a Christian and go to heaven. Whether Catholic or Protestant, this is what parents want.

Yet one of the basic truths of the faith is that you have to receive Christ on your own. There's no borrowing on someone else's faith; no way of entering God's kingdom on someone else's coattails. Ultimately you must make your own commitment.

So for people coming out of an "infant baptism" tradition, the practice of "believer's baptism" provides the perfect follow-up. It's your way of declaring that your parents' hopes and dreams have been fulfilled. You actually have become a Christian, and you obey the word of Christ. So your baptism will testify to your own faith, but it will also affirm your parents' faith.

When is the right time for a child to be baptized?

We believe children are capable of understanding the Gospel and receiving salvation at a young age. And once a child does this, there is nothing to prohibit him or her from being baptized.

However, we encourage children to wait until they can articulate their faith for themselves and "own" it more maturely. We all know that kids are easily influenced and susceptible to a pack mentality. So it's easy for a child to "receive" Christ and want to be baptized just because it looks like fun and others are doing it.

Why not wait until a child comes to own the faith for himself? Why not wait until he or she can articulate the Gospel and demonstrate its impact in real life? By waiting — at least until the late elementary or middle school years — we not only lend legitimacy to the baptism, but we offer the child a rite of passage that can be a significant and memorable step in their ongoing growth.

Should a person ever be re-baptized?

Possibly. The acid test is whether you were a legitimate Christian at your first baptism. If you know that you were not, be baptized again. And if you're unsure or have doubts, there's nothing wrong with being re-baptized for the sake of your own conscience.

Baptism is not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.

1 Peter 3:21

How does Willowdale feel about people who still don't want to be baptized?

We recognize that there's a process involved in making any serious commitment. Whether it's a commitment to Christ, to baptism, to serving, or to being in a small group, we all need time. And so we would say to anyone not yet ready to be baptized, "We love you. We care about you. We welcome you. And we want very much for you to be a full member of our church. So walk with us a little longer and let your commitment grow. And when you're ready to get in the water, let's celebrate!"