



# Baptism

## Introduction

When people consider the topic of baptism, they often ask one of two questions. The first is a very basic one: What is the spiritual significance of baptism? The second has to do with traditions from the past, specifically pre-conversion baptism. The issue in that case is: Why be baptized as an adult believer if I was baptized as a baby?

While recognizing other churches have the right to practice infant baptism if it conforms to their theologies, Willow Creek Community Church understands the Bible teaches only professing believers qualify for baptism.

## Biblical Basis and Guidelines

Scriptural teaching on baptism may be summarized as follows:

- Baptism is an act of obedience to the command of Christ, fulfilled by individuals who subject themselves to His sovereignty.
- Baptism symbolizes the spiritual cleansing through divine forgiveness and newness of life experienced by believers by virtue of their identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.
- Baptism provides an opportunity for believers to make a formal profession of their faith before the church.

Although the old-covenant practice of infant circumcision is sometimes adduced as a rationale for infant baptism, the biblical definition of the functions of circumcision and of baptism shows those two institutions fulfilled different purposes in their respective covenants. The equation is never made in the Bible between the circumcision of male infants in the old-covenant and the baptism of Christ-following believers – much less of infants – in the new-covenant through Jesus Christ.

However, Willow Creek Community Church encourages Christian parents to present their child for the ceremony of dedication, whereby God's blessing is formally invoked upon the child and parents publicly commit themselves to raise the child in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

The Elders require that children be in Grade 6 or older to be baptized.

Willow Creek Community Church offers the options of baptism through both sprinkling and immersion, on the basis of a sacramental view of the ordinances whereby their value lies in the symbolism they convey and in the faith of the participants, rather than the nature or amount of the elements used (bread and wine for Communion, and water for Baptism).

### ***Specific Passages Concerning Baptism***

At Willow Creek, the Bible is the source of our beliefs, including our views on baptism. A few key passages can help us see what purpose baptism plays in the life of a believer.

In Matthew 28:19 (NASB) Jesus commands His followers, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”* Baptism is the means by which disciples of Christ are identified. Because Christ commanded it, Christ followers willingly submit to baptism.

In passages such as Acts 2:41, 8:12 and 10:47–48, it is evident the act of baptism came after an individual’s decision to trust Christ for salvation. It was an outward sign of something that occurred in the person’s life (usually quite recently). No one would dream of being baptized unless he or she made a decision to identify with Christ. And no one else could make that decision for him or her. The New Testament records the baptisms of adults who were believers, but never of infants. Baptism can’t give a person anything, spiritually speaking; It can only signify something that has already happened.

In Romans 6:1–11, the Apostle Paul explains how Baptism by immersion identifies the believer with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Going under water symbolizes Christ’s death while emerging from the water illustrates His resurrection. Although the immersion mode of Baptism best illustrates the work of Christ, this passage does not mandate how much water should be used. The value of the sacrament of baptism is in the life and heart of the believer, not in the amount of water used. Because of this, Willow Creek affirms both sprinkling and immersion as acceptable methods of baptism.

### ***The Wedding Illustration***

One way to grasp the meaning of baptism – as well as what it does not mean – is to imagine a wedding. The bride and groom stand side by side before the church. They take turns promising “til death do us part.” This bride and groom do not look any different on the outside but in a few moments they will be married – united for life by invisible cords. In order to signify that unseen union, the bride and groom exchange rings. These bands of gold tell the world they are now married. A permanent change has happened to them.

Now imagine an unmarried couple is watching. They decide they want to be married, too. So they give each other rings right where they sit. No public commitments, no vows made, just the symbols of union exchanged. As they walk from the church, their hands, like those of the bride and groom, bear the accepted token of lifetime love. But only the couple that has made a public commitment to each other is really married.

The point is obvious. Symbol is not substance. Marriage depends on a public commitment, not on bands of gold. The same is true of becoming a Christian. What may outwardly identify you as a believer does not make you one. The wedding rings do not marry the couple. They are fitting symbols, but without the reality of commitment, a ring – like baptism – is void of meaning. Therefore, you must choose Christ, and you must choose baptism, for the sacrament to have the meaning intended by the Bible.

Of course, you do not have to be baptized to have Christ, any more than you must exchange rings to be pronounced man and wife. But if the inner commitment to trust Christ alone for salvation has been made, then the outward symbol of baptism should be as valued and as visible as the gold ring on a newlywed's finger.

### ***Infant Baptism***

If the purpose of baptism is to publicly identify a new believer in Jesus Christ, the question may be asked, "Why are so many people baptized as babies?"

In the Bible, we find parents bringing their children to Jesus. He held them, prayed for them and told His disciples to welcome them. But He did not baptize them, and He did not tell anyone else to baptize them. Baptism is appropriate only for those who have made a personal decision to trust Christ alone for their salvation. If you were baptized as a child, it was no doubt the intent of your parents that you would one day be a follower of Christ. Your baptism as an adult can be viewed as the fulfillment of your parents' wishes. It in no way repudiates or disrespects the baptism you received as a child.