

Teenagers and even younger children may have genuine sorrow over sin, genuine faith that Christ has paid for their sins, and genuine commitment to Christ, and they may be baptized. Will some of them eventually change their minds and fall away? Perhaps, but that happens with adult professions of faith, too. Will some of those childhood conversions turn out to be mistaken? Perhaps, but that happens with adults, too.

If the person is repentant and has faith in Christ, as best as the pastor can determine, then the person may be baptized. It is not our practice, however, to baptize minors without the consent of their parent or legal guardian. If the minor's parent objects to baptism, then the child who has faith in Jesus is no less a Christian for waiting until he or she becomes a legal adult to be baptized.

It is not our practice to baptize infants or children too young to express faith for themselves, since we understand baptism to be an expression of faith, and no one is saved by their parents' faith. We do not, however, condemn as unchristian those who do practice infant baptism.

By immersion

It is our practice in the Worldwide Church of God to baptize by immersion. We believe that was the most likely practice in first-century Judaism and in the early church. We believe that complete immersion pictures death *and burial* better than sprinkling does.

However, we do not make the method of baptism an issue to divide Christians. The important thing is that the person forsakes the old life of sin, and has faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. To use the analogy of death again, we might say that the old person died with Christ, whether or not the body was properly buried. Cleansing was pictured, even

if burial was not. The old life is dead, and the new life is here.

Salvation does not depend on the exact method of baptism (the Bible doesn't give us many details on procedure, anyway) nor on the exact words, as if the words had some magical power of their own. Salvation depends on faith in Christ, not on the depth of the baptismal waters.

A Christian who was baptized by sprinkling or pouring is still a Christian. If such a person wishes to become a member of the Worldwide Church of God, we do not require a new baptism, unless the person believes it appropriate. Christianity is based on faith, not on performance of a ritual.

The big picture

Let us focus on the larger picture, provided to us by the apostle Paul: Baptism pictures our old self dying with Christ, our sins being washed away, our new life being lived in Christ and in his church. Baptism is an expression of repentance and faith, and a reminder that we are saved by the death and life of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel in miniature drama — the central truths of the faith being reenacted every time another person enters the kingdom of God.

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If you have come to faith in Christ and would like to be baptized, we'd like to help.

The Meaning of Baptism

In a religion based on faith, why have any rituals at all? What does this have to do with the gospel?

Rituals were a prominent part of **Old Testament** worship. Christianity, in contrast, has only two basic rituals: baptism and the Lord's Supper — and there are no detailed regulations for either observance.

In a religion in which faith is primary, why have any rituals at all?

The primary reason, I believe, is that these two rituals **picture the gospel of Jesus Christ**. They rehearse the fundamental elements of our faith. Let's see how it works for baptism.

Pictures the gospel

How does baptism picture the central truths of the gospel? The apostle Paul wrote:

“Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore 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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (Rom. 6:3-5).

Paul is saying that baptism *unites* us with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. These are the primary points of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Our salvation depends on his death and on his resurrection. Our forgiveness — being cleansed of sin — depends on his death; our Christian life and future depend on his resurrected life.

Baptism symbolizes the death of the old self — the old person was crucified with Christ — died with Christ — buried with Christ in baptism (Rom. 6:8; Gal. 2:20; 6:14; Col. 2:12, 20). It pictures our identification with Jesus Christ — we cast our lot in with him. We accept that his death was “for us,” “for our sins.”

We acknowledge that we have sinned, that we have a tendency to sin, that we are sinners

in need of a Savior. We acknowledge our need to be cleansed, and that this cleansing comes through the death of Jesus Christ. Baptism is one of the ways in which we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Raised with Christ

Baptism pictures even better news — in baptism we are *raised* with Christ so that we might live with Christ (Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 2:12-13; 3:1). In him, we have a new life, and are called to live a new way of life, with him as Lord leading and guiding us out of sinful ways and into righteous and loving ways.

In this way we symbolize repentance, a change in the way we live, and also the fact that we cannot make this change in ourselves — it is done by the power of the risen Christ living in us. We identify with Christ in his resurrection not just for the future, but for life right now. This is part of the symbolism.

Jesus did not invent the ritual of baptism. It developed within Judaism, and was used by John the Baptist as a ritual to show repentance in which the water symbolized cleansing. Jesus continued this practice, and after his death and resurrection his disciples continued to use it. It dramatizes the fact that we have a new basis for life, and a new basis for our relationship with God.

Paul saw that since we are forgiven or cleansed through the death of Christ, baptism pictures his death and our participation in his death. Paul was also inspired to add the connection with Jesus' resurrection. As we rise from the baptismal waters, we picture rising to a new life — a life in Christ, with him in us.

Peter also wrote that baptism saves us “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21). However, baptism itself does not save us. We are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Physical water removing physical dirt cannot save us, Peter said. Baptism saves us only in the sense that it is “the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” It is a visible representation of repentance,

faith in Christ, forgiveness and new life, and those are what actually save us.

Into one body

We are baptized not only into Christ Jesus, but also into his body, the church. “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). That means that a person cannot baptize himself — it must be done within the context of the Christian community. There are no secret Christians, people who believe in Christ but no one knows about it. The biblical pattern is to confess Christ before other people, to make a public acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord.

Baptism is one of the ways in which Christ may be confessed, in which all a person's friends may see that a commitment has been made. It may be a joyous occasion in which the congregation sings hymns and welcomes the person to the family. Or it may be a smaller ceremony in which an elder (or some other authorized representative of the congregation) welcomes the new believer, rehearses the significance of what is being done, and encourages them in the spiritual disciplines that will assist the person to live in Christ.

Baptism is basically a ritual recognizing that a person has already repented of sin, already accepted Christ as Savior, already begun to grow spiritually — is in fact already a Christian. Baptism is generally done soon after a person has made a commitment, but occasionally it may be done much later.

Teens and children

After a person has come to faith in Christ, he or she is eligible for baptism. This may be when the person is quite old, or when quite young. A young person may explain faith differently than an older person does, but young people may have faith nonetheless.