

Baptism FAQ's

Frequently Asked Questions about Holy Baptism

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Neenah, WI

How do we even get started?

If you're asking the question, you've already started! Next, contact one of the pastors. We'll be glad to discuss this with you further – preferably in person. We'll make an appointment to meet with you. We can also talk over the phone or answer questions through e-mails. (See contact information below.)

Do we have to be members of the church in order to have a baptism?

No. We will gladly baptize you even if you are not a member of this congregation.

Why do you baptize people?

Jesus commanded us to do so. He said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” We see it as a requirement for salvation, for scripture says, “The one who believes and is baptized shall be saved.”

Can we have a private baptism?

Generally, no. Baptism is a public ceremony that recognizes our new life in Christ. Thus, Christian baptism occurs within the context of the worship service. It is important that the church be there as witnesses; it is also important that the family is aware of the larger faith community into which we baptize.

How much does it cost?

There is no charge for a baptism. This is a service we provide. Sometimes families will wish to make a special thank-offering to the church, but this is completely optional.

When can we have the baptism?

As a general rule, we schedule baptisms every month on the second Sunday of the month. This is because the first and third Sundays of the month are communion Sundays. On rare occasions where there are scheduling conflicts or special circumstances, such as people coming from out of state, we will work with you to explore another option. You may choose either the early service (8:00 a.m.) or the late service (10:30 a.m. / 9:30 a.m. during the summer). Another appropriate date for scheduling a baptism is our Easter Vigil service (6:30 p.m. on Easter Eve).

Where does the baptism take place?

Although any body of water will do, for the sake of convenience and good order, a baptism takes place in the church sanctuary on a Sunday morning, at the font.

What's a font?

“Font” is another word for “fountain.” It refers to the bowl that holds the water for baptism. While in some churches this is a large receptacle made of stone or brick, or even built into the floor, the font used at St. Paul is a large basin set on a stand.

At what age should someone be baptized?

Typically, Lutherans are baptized in infancy, within the first several weeks or months of a child's life. But we can baptize a person at any age – childhood, youth, adulthood, old age.

Why do Lutherans baptize infants?

The majority of baptisms in our tradition are infant baptisms. We emphasize infant baptism because it underscores that this is God's activity, not our own. Martin Luther explains, “I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in my Lord Jesus Christ, or come to him.” Rather, the Holy Spirit makes the first move. So it is the Spirit, working through the faith of others (parents, sponsors, congregation, Biblical witnesses) that in turn brings us to faith. Infant baptism reminds us that it is God who moves towards us. It is God who establishes His covenant with us – rather than the other way around.

Once we get our kid “done,” are we done?

By no means! Baptism is the beginning of a life-long relationship with the church.

So what is my responsibility as a parent?

Parents make serious promises at the baptismal font. Basically, parents promise that they will continue to bring their children to church, teach them about God, and raise them in the Christian faith. It is a big commitment to be a Christian parent! Here is what the pastor will say to the parents: “As you bring your children to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities: to live with them among God's faithful people; bring them to the Word of God and the Holy Supper; teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; place in their hands the Holy Scriptures; and nurture them in faith and prayer – so that your children may learn to trust God; proclaim Christ through word and deed; care for others and the world God made; and work for justice and peace.” While parents are devoted to their children forever, these baptismal promises are especially crucial during the formative years, until their children are better able to articulate the faith for themselves. At St. Paul Church, this usually happens at or around ninth grade, when we celebrate the Rite of Confirmation. Another name for this is “Affirmation of Baptism,” for it is at that time students affirm / confirm the baptismal covenant that their parents and sponsors made on their behalf when they were little.

That's a lot for parents to take on! Will the church help us out with this?

Yes! The congregation also makes promises. We promise to encourage and support you in raising your children and in growing your faith. Specifically, here are some of the things we do: We give you gifts to help you remember this day. We do follow-up with families. We maintain a nursery ministry. We offer family fellowship events. We teach Sunday School classes, Confirmation classes, and Adult Bible studies. We provide a gift of a Bible to all of our Third Graders. We offer continuing opportunities for weekly worship and learning. We continue to pray for you and for one another. We provide counsel and resources to help you through other life transitions.

Why is baptism so important?

Baptism is the Holy Sacrament where God claims us as His own. "I will be your God," says the Lord, "and you will be My people." In this ceremony, we have the assurance that we are made right with God. We are children of God and therefore heirs of the inheritance of eternal life. In baptism, we are "drowned" to the old sinful self, and mystically united with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might have the hope of our own resurrection from the dead. Martin Luther explains, "It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it." That is positively life-transforming!

Will my child be a member of the church now?

Everyone who is baptized here automatically becomes a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church. He or she is placed on our rolls as a Baptized Member of the congregation. Very often, if the parents of a child are not yet members themselves, they may also wish to join the congregation by going through a New Member Class. Talk with one of the pastors. This could be one of the greatest things you could do for your family's well-being!

How wet do you get?

Although some denominations practice immersion, which is certainly acceptable, Lutherans traditionally pour water over the forehead three times ("in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"). Here at St. Paul we use a shell to pour the water, as this is an ancient symbol of baptism.

Can an adult be baptized?

Absolutely; yes! You can be baptized at any age. Adult baptisms follow a period of instruction in the Christian faith. They can be powerfully significant events for the candidates involved. The added bonus of adult baptism is that the candidates are likely to vividly remember the event for the rest of their lives.

Is baptism the same as a "christening"?

Essentially, yes. Baptism is sometimes called a christening because it is a naming ceremony at which a candidate receives his or her Christian name.

What about sponsors?

Sponsors are official witnesses of the ceremony, and function as advocates for the person being baptized.

How many sponsors should we have?

Generally, two or three sponsors are chosen, sometimes four.

Who should they be?

It is considered an honor to be chosen as a baptismal sponsor, so give careful and prayerful consideration to the selection of your sponsors. They should be people with whom you expect to have an ongoing relationship, because you want them to be involved with the family for years to come. For this reason, often relatives or long-time friends are chosen. Sponsors need not necessarily be Lutheran, but they must be active Christians who are practicing members of a church somewhere, for their own faith life is important in helping to form the faith of the baptismal candidate.

Is a sponsor the same as a godmother / godfather?

Yes, essentially. They take on the role of being “spiritual parents.” In former times, godparents might have been called upon to actually raise the child if something happened to the parents. Now that is no longer the case, unless the parents have so designated that in their will. (And if they have not done so before, parents should draw up a valid Last Will and Testament for the sake of their children.)

What is the sponsor’s role?

The sponsor’s role is to support the biological or adoptive parents as they raise their child in a Christian home, and to encourage that child in Christian growth and faith. This is why they are also called “godparents” – they are a second set of adults who will love and care for this child. Many sponsors like to remember the anniversary of the baptismal date with a card or a call. The most important thing sponsors can do is to pray for the child, and to share their Christian faith with that child.

What if one of my sponsors can’t be here for the baptism?

Ideally, the sponsors will be physically present for the baptism, so that they can be witnesses. But if a person is unable to attend due to the travel distance required, or because of an emergency, they could still be a sponsor.

Do I need sponsors even if I’m being baptized as an adult?

Yes, absolutely! Choose people who model the Christian life for you, who will pray for you over the years, who can help instruct and encourage you and answer your questions and share their own faith with you.

What should my infant wear?

White. The traditional garb for infant baptism is a white baptismal gown or dress (this is true whether the child is male or female). Sometimes these days a boy will be dressed in a little white suit. White symbolizes the purity of our new life in Christ. Very often a child will wear a garment that is an heirloom or has been used by others in the family. Sometimes a grandmother will make a special garment for the child. If the baptismal candidate is an adult, again, white is the color of choice.

Can we take pictures?

Yes; it's a great way to record and remember this special day. Video-taping the whole ceremony is also a possibility. We discourage the use of flash photography during the baptismal service itself, since it is disruptive of worship, but after the service, we encourage the family to pose for pictures around the font. These pictures will help you commemorate this sacrament over the years to come.

What makes baptism a sacrament?

Holy Baptism is one of two sacraments in the Lutheran Church, the other being Holy Communion. Three things make these sacramental: (1) Jesus commanded us to do this. (2) This is a means of grace – a way for God to show He forgives us and blesses us. (3) There is a physical element associated with it. (For baptism, it is the water; for communion, it is the bread and wine.)

We have a family member or friend who's a pastor – could they be involved in the service?

This can be a wonderful and meaningful touch. Yes, we'd be happy to work with you in this case, to include such people in the ceremony.

When in the worship service does the baptism happen?

While the order of service may vary, we often schedule the baptism early on in the service, just after the opening hymn.

Where does the baptismal party sit?

Often people sit in the front pews on the left side of the sanctuary, so that they can be closer to the font, but the baptismal party and other family members are welcome to sit anywhere they wish.

Should I be baptized more than once?

We do not re-baptize. However you may have been baptized the first time, be assured that it is sufficient. We are baptized only once – and then we spend the rest of our Christian lives growing in understanding of what that all means.

So even if I was baptized in another church, I don't need to be re-baptized?

Any baptism in any Christian church is valid. It makes no difference what Christian denomination it was; it makes no difference what age you were at the time; it makes no difference just how it was done – whether by sprinkling or by immersion. It is the water and the Word of God that are at work within you. There is no need to be baptized a second time in order to somehow “do it right.”

I'm not sure I was ever baptized – so now what?

We want all our members to be sure that they are baptized. If there is any doubt about whether you were ever baptized, we will baptize you, so that you have that assurance and hope. In one instance here at St. Paul, a child was adopted from an orphanage in another country, and the adoptive parents had no record that their child was ever baptized. In another instance, an older gentleman was unable to find any record of his baptism, and any family members who might have been able to remember it were long since dead. In both cases, we made no assumptions; we did have a baptism here, so that we were absolutely sure.

Why does St. Paul have two baptismal fonts?

Several years ago one of our pastors designed a new font made of wood, with a metal bowl, that matches the rest of the “furniture” in the sanctuary – the altar, the lectern, and the pulpit – and, like them, it can be easily moved. The historic font, made of heavy white marble, in which many of our people were baptized, now stands in a place of honor in the prayer chapel to the side of the sanctuary. Whenever you see either one, remember your baptism!

How can I find out more?

Join us for worship on a Sunday morning or a Monday evening. Talk with a pastor or another staff member. Ask questions of our members. Search our website for our baptismal link. (See contact information below.) Visit our nursery. Meet our Nursery Assistant. Get one of our informational booklets on baptism. Read the New Testament.

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