

BAPTISM

First, let's begin with something followers of Jesus Christ can agree on. Most Christians baptize because Christ has commanded us to do so. In Matthew 28:19-20b Jesus says, "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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Jesus commands us to "go and make disciples," and he says to do this by "baptizing" and "teaching." Therefore, baptism is not given as an option but as something we are to do, specifically "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is also clear that water is to be placed on the person being baptized when these words are spoken by the example of John the Baptist's baptism of Christ and others, Phillip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-38), etc... However, it is not clear whether the water is to be sprinkled on the person, poured on them, or they are to be fully immersed, therefore Lutherans generally do not concern themselves with how the water is provided.

It would be a bit premature to now simply jump into infant baptism without explaining our understanding of baptism more fully. Therefore, we begin with what it means that we Lutherans understand baptism to be a "means of grace." It is the temptation of man to want God to meet us in places of our choosing. We want this to be a glorious and majestic meeting where we come to Him. Unfortunately, our sin has created a great gap between Him and us that we are unable to bridge.

God, on the other hand, generally chooses to do things quite differently than we would have Him do it. God chooses to meet us in a place of great pain, humility, and suffering, His Son's pain, humility, and suffering for us. He chooses to meet us at the cross. One of the ways He chooses to meet us at the cross is in baptism, by which God gives us a personal assurance of His good will toward us. What does this mean? Good question. Let's see if we can figure that out.

In Galatians 3:27 Paul says that all who "were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." He does not say that it symbolizes our putting on Christ but that we actually put on Christ. In verse 28, he says that this means there is no longer any distinction between those who are baptized because they are all "one in Christ Jesus, and that as Christ's they are "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." This leads to Galatians 4 where we learn that being "heirs according to the promise" means we are now, in baptism, adopted as children of God. In baptism, God says you are mine, my child, and that all my promises are for you!

Another great place to see what God gives us in baptism is Romans 6. Here we find that we have been "buried with Him by baptism into death," that we "walk in newness of life," and that we have the real hope of a bodily "resurrection like His." Because of this great gift, we must consider ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). Paul does not suggest that baptism is symbolic of God giving us these things but that it is "by baptism" that they are given.

Several other passages speak to the gifts received in baptism. For example, in Colossians 2:11-13 we find that the baptized are made alive and that their sins are forgiven.

In Titus 3:5-6, we find that it is not by our works that we are saved, but “by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ.” The important thing to note here is that these gifts of the forgiveness of sins, new life, and the Holy Spirit are not just symbolized by baptism but are given in it.

A baptism is valid then regardless of the disposition of the recipient. In other words, the baptism is valid regardless of the faith, or lack thereof, of the recipient. That is to say, Jesus command, His Words with the water, are always valid and do what they say. However, baptism does then require, by the Holy Spirit received in baptism (Matt. 3:16), a response of faith.

In baptism the person sees and feels the water upon them, hears the Words of Christ spoken to them, and receives the benefits, as a new child of God, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ, meaning deliverance from sin, death, and the devil. This water and Word provide the child of God tangible, visible signs of God’s favor to recognize and believe in. Having received the benefits of being made a child of God, with these tangible elements, he or she has something to respond to in faith. In this way baptism evokes, or creates faith.

Ultimately, it is not important whether or not the person has faith before they are baptized, as some clearly do by the Holy Spirit working faith in their hearts through the Gospel proclaimed to them, or they come to faith after their baptism, responding in faith to what they have received. What is important is that they take hold of the benefits given to them in baptism by faith.

Some thoughts from Pastor John David

Our understanding of baptism as a means of grace in which God comes to us and makes us His children, heirs to His promises, rather than an act of faith in which we make a promise to God is extremely important. This understanding is not necessarily important in that we can only be saved if we have it, but it is important when periods of doubt come into our lives.

A few years ago, a good friend of mine lost his ten-year-old son in a helicopter crash. He and I had several discussions and times of prayer in the months and years following. I was amazed at his faith in the midst of so much pain. Three years later, he and his wife adopted another child. Just weeks after the adoption, the infant died of SID’s in his crib just 30 minutes after my friend laid him down to rest. My friend was angry with God. I was angry with God. He had a lot of doubt about God’s love for him in that time. I could only remind him that he is baptized and that his two boys were as well. He said that is the only thing in which he finds hope and peace... That his two boys, his remaining son, his wife, and he are all baptized children of God. When he had nothing else to lean on, he placed his hope in the gifts of sins forgiven and the eternal life God promised them in their baptism.

I have counseled several youth and their families who were in the depths of despair and doubt because of their own sin and/or pain, or the sin and/ or pain caused them by others. Each time, real comfort was provided in the knowledge that their salvation did not depend on their perfection and works but on God’s promises to them.

I had a period of depression over my own mistakes, failures, and the death of loved ones when I was in college. I could not see real hope for me until a trusted friend and professor reminded me that I had something tangible to cling to. I had the gifts promised me in my baptism. These gifts did not and do not depend on how I feel on the inside, or how strong my faith felt at the time, but on God and His promises. I had something solid to stand on in the midst of my doubt.

When people do not believe that baptism is God's work, but is theirs they cannot see things in this way. When pain and doubt come into their lives, regardless of the reason, they are unable to look outside themselves for the real hope God has given them in their baptism. They must turn inward and ask themselves if they really believe in the hope Jesus has for them. Do I trust that God still loves me? Is my faith strong enough? Instead of being able to turn to the solid ground God gives in His promises received through baptism, they must turn to their own ability to believe in those promises. They often end up on the shaky ground of their own wavering confidence and emotions.

So then, why do Lutherans baptize infants? First, we must look to the fact that we are all, regardless of our age, sinners. A couple of texts that make this clear are:

- Psalm 51:5 - "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."
- Romans 3:22c-23 - "For there is not distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

If all of us, regardless of our age, are sinners then we all need God's grace and the gifts promised in baptism. With this knowledge and knowing that it is God who comes to us in baptism, why would one deny that gift to the youngest among us?

There are those who would say that they would not baptize an infant, even in the case that they believed in baptism as a means of grace, because they do not believe infants have the cognitive ability to have faith. This simply does not make sense for several reasons. First, as stated earlier, the faith of the individual being baptized does not give or deny the baptism's validity, as it is God who comes to the person. The Holy Spirit can work that faith in their lives as they learn of the benefits they have received in it. Beyond that, who are we to say that an infant cannot have faith? We have a God who created this world simply by speaking. Why can He not then give faith to a child through water and His word? If we hold the view that an infant cannot have faith, do we doubt the child's ability to have it, or do we doubt God's ability to give it?

With an understanding of baptism as a means of grace, there is really no more reason to think of discussing not baptizing infants born to parents who would raise them in God's Word. However, there are those who, while conceding that there is no specific Scripture that says not to baptize infants and young children, want more Scriptural evidence for baptizing them. Therefore, we will look to a few passages that make a strong case for baptizing our children, even infants.

The first is the example of John the Baptist. Luke 1:15 says of John, "...for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and *he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.*" I realize that John was a special person, set aside for a special purpose, but the passage makes it clear that an infant, even in its mother's womb, can have the Holy Spirit by whom he or she can say "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3).

Another passage that speaks to the subject is Matthew 18:3-6. Here Jesus encourages us to "become like children" in verse 3. The word Matthew uses here, *παιδία*, is the same one he uses to describe the infant Jesus in chapter 2. Why would He encourage us to become like one who cannot have faith? Then in verse 6, Jesus says, "but whoever causes one of these *little ones who believe in me* to sin..." This is in reference to the child in verse 3 we are to become like. Jesus makes it clear here that children can have faith and does not give an age or condition in which this is not the case.

There is also the practical case of Colossians 2:11-12. Here the Apostle Paul tells us that the sign of the old covenant (circumcision) to bless all families of the earth through Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and that there is now a different circumcision (Baptism) in which we are buried with Christ and raised with Him to new life (much more than just a sign of the covenant). In Genesis 17:12 we find that God commanded that male Hebrew infants be circumcised on their eighth day of life. As Paul drew such a direct correlation between circumcision (performed on week old infants) and baptism, wouldn't he have given some direction to wait until a specific age if infants were not to be baptized?

There are several others that can be discussed, but the final passage we will look to is Luke 18:15-17, "Now they were bringing even *infants* to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, "*Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.* Truly, I say to you, whoever does not *receive the kingdom of God like a child* shall not enter it." Here we see that Jesus includes infants in the children He wants to be allowed to come to Him. He then says that we are to receive the kingdom like a child. Once again, Jesus makes no distinction between an older child and an infant receiving the kingdom of God. If Jesus makes no such distinction, why should we?

Baptism is a tremendous gift from our God. By it, we are His children and brothers and sister in Christ. We are heirs of God, assured that all of His promises, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ, are for us. Praise the Lord!