

Stumbling blocks to the Evangelical Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism – a typical Lutheran/Protestant dialogue

Lutheran: Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* states that baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe.

Protestant: I disagree. We are saved by faith alone.

[Ephesians 2:8,9] says, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.'

Lutheran: Lutherans also believe that sinners are saved by grace alone through faith alone. However, we believe that baptism is God's work in us. [Titus 3:3-7] says:

'For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.'

Protestant: This passage from Titus doesn't speak about water baptism. This is a reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which all believers receive when they accept Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Lutheran: According to Scripture, there is only one baptism that all Christians receive.

[Ephesians 4:4-6] says, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.'

Protestant: This passage also speaks about Holy Spirit baptism. This is the only baptism that forgives sin.

Lutheran: Jesus commissioned his disciples in [Matthew 28:19],

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’

This is the one baptism that is for all people. This is the only baptism that was commanded by our Lord.

Protestant: But sinners are saved before baptism. Baptism is only *symbolic* of the saving work of Christ. The New Testament only speaks of believers being baptised; not infants.

Lutheran: Firstly, I want to respond to your claim that baptism is only symbolic. This isn't biblical. [Acts 2:38] says,

‘Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”’

[1 Peter 3:21] says very explicitly that baptism now saves you. Secondly, because God gives us the forgiveness of sins through baptism, it is for all people, including infants.

Protestant: Even if baptism does save, infants can't have faith. Also, there is an age of accountability for all people. God, doesn't see babies as unrighteous.

Lutheran: This is definitely not true. Remember, we are given faith in baptism. [Galatians 3:26,27] says,

‘for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.’

It is clear from Scripture, that all people are stained because of original sin. [Psalm 51:5] supports this core doctrine:

‘Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.’

Infants have a need to be baptised. The Great Commission [Matthew 28:16-20] says that disciples are to be made of *all* people (v 19). [Acts 2:39] says that the gift of the Holy Spirit through baptism is the promise for you and for your children.

Protestant: You make it sound like there is something magical in baptism that cleanses us from sin.

Lutheran: We read [1 Peter 3:21]. Look also at [Ephesians 5:26]. It says that, Jesus, having cleansed her (the church), by the washing of the water with the word, saves us in baptism. Baptism is only effective because of the word of God in connection with the water. That is why it is necessary to baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son † and of the Holy Spirit.

Protestant: But Lutherans also baptise by sprinkling and by pouring. The English word for baptism comes from a Greek word which means “immersion”. Immersion is the only valid mode of baptism.

Lutheran: The Greek word “βαπτίζω” (bap-tid'-zo), is actually not limited to “immersion”. Remember the passage from [Titus 3] which you said refers to Holy Spirit baptism? I have already shown that this passage refers to the Sacrament of baptism. In this passage, it speaks of baptism as a washing of regeneration which is poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour. There are plenty of other passages supporting other modes of baptism.

Dear Saints, Holy Baptism from an Evangelical Lutheran perspective is a sacrament – a place where Christ is present, a core teaching of Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, and an Article of Faith in the Augsburg Confession; the correct teaching of which, is definitely worth upholding and defending, for in it lies assurance, hope and salvation for the Christian believer. I hope this is helpful.

Some biblical references to baptism including Old Testament references to circumcision and saving acts involving water

Genesis 6 – 9 (Noah and the ark) [See 1 Peter 3:18-22].

Genesis 17:10-14 Covenant through circumcision.

Genesis 17:23 Abraham circumcises all the males of his household including Ishmael.

Genesis 34:24

Exodus 2:1-10 (Baby Moses v3 “papyrus basket” [tê·ḅat] also rendered “ark”).

Exodus 4:24-26 *“A bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision.’*

Exodus 12:43-51

Exodus 14 Crossing the Red Sea [v 30] *‘Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians;’*

Leviticus 12:3 Circumcision.

Leviticus 13 – 15 bath of purification.

Deuteronomy 10:16 *‘Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart,’*

Deuteronomy 30:6 *‘And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.’*

Joshua 3 Israel crosses the Jordan opposite Jericho [vv15-17 see Exodus 14:21,22].

Joshua 5:2-9

2 Kings 5:1-14 The washing of the Aramaic commander Naaman can be related to baptism: at the instruction of the prophet Elisha, the leper washed himself by dipping his body seven times into the Jordan, and the disease abated. This can be understood as a symbol for the washing away of original sin through baptism.

Jeremiah 4:4

Jeremiah 9:25,26

Ezekiel 16:9 bathed with water - through which Jerusalem was received into a covenant of salvation.

Matthew 3:11-17 The baptism of Jesus.

Matthew 21:25

Matthew 28:16-20 *The Great Commission.* *'Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

Mark 1:4,5 John's baptism of repentance.

Mark 1:8 John's baptism with water; Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:9,10 John baptises Jesus in the Jordan.

Mark 11:30

Mark 16:16 *'The one who believes and is baptised will be saved.'*

Luke 3:3; Luke 3:16; Luke 3:21,22; Luke 7:29,30

Luke 12:50 Jesus describes his sacrificial death as baptism.

John 1:29-33 John the baptiser.

John 3:3-7 Nicodemus.

John 3:22-26 Jesus baptising and John explaining purification to a Jew.

John 4:1,2

John 4:13,14 The Samaritan woman at the well.

John 10:40

Acts 1:5; Acts 1:22

Acts 2:38-42 *'the promise is for you, for your children,'*

Acts 8:12,13

Acts 8:35-38 Philip and the eunuch.

Acts 9:18; Acts 10:37; Acts 10:44-48; Acts 11:16; Acts 13:24

Acts 16:15 Lydia and her household baptised.

Acts 16:31-33 The Philippian jailer, *'he and all his household were baptised.'*

Acts 18:8 Crispus, all his household, and many Corinthians were baptised.

Acts 18:25

Acts 19:2-5 Reception of the Holy Spirit through baptism.

Acts 22:16 *'be baptised, and have your sins washed away,'* Ananias inviting Saul [Paul].

Romans 6:1-18 Baptised into Christ's death.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

1 Corinthians 10:1-4 Red Sea, Moses, Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:13 *'For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body'*

1 Corinthians 15:29

Galatians 3:24-27 *'baptised into Christ'*

Ephesians 4:4-6 One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Ephesians 4:22-24 Put off your old self.

Ephesians 5:25-27 *'cleansing her [the church] with the washing of water by the word.'*

Colossians 2:11-15 *'buried with him [Christ] in baptism'*

Titus 3:3-7 *'the water [washing] of rebirth [regeneration] and renewal by the Holy Spirit.'*

1 Peter 1:3 *'born again'* [See John 3:3-7].

1 Peter 3:18-22 The days of Noah prefiguring baptism - *'saved through water' [v20]; 'baptism... now saves you' [v21].*

Revelation 22:14 *'Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates' [See also John 10:9] "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved."*

Baptism FAQs

QUESTION: Can you please clarify the Lutheran view of baptism and its purpose? Does the child become a Christian when baptised?

ANSWER: Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches that a person is saved by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

The Bible tells us that such 'faith comes from what is heard' (Romans 10:17). Jesus himself commands baptism (Matthew 28:19-20) and tells us that baptism is water used together with the Word of God.

Because of this, we believe that baptism is one of the miraculous means of grace (another is God's Word as it is written or spoken), through which God creates and strengthens the gift of faith in a person's heart (see Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:1-4; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Terms the Bible uses to talk about the beginning of faith include "conversion" and "regeneration". Although we don't claim to understand fully how this happens, we believe that when an infant is baptised God creates faith in the heart of that infant.

We believe this because the Bible says that infants can believe (Matthew 18:6) and that new birth (regeneration) happens in baptism (John 3:5-7; Titus 3:5-6). The infant's faith cannot yet, of course, be verbally expressed or articulated by the child, yet it is real and present all the same (see Acts 2:38-39; Luke 1:15; 2 Timothy 3:15).

The faith of the infant, like the faith of adults, also needs to be fed and nurtured by God's Word (Matthew 28:18-20).

Lutherans do not believe that only those baptised as infants receive faith. Faith can also be created in a person's heart by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's (written or spoken) Word.

Baptism should then soon follow conversion (cf. Acts 8:26-40) for the purpose of confirming and strengthening faith in accordance with God's command and promise. Depending on the situation, therefore, Lutherans baptise people of all ages from infancy to adulthood.

Lutherans don't believe that baptism is exclusively necessary for salvation (see Luke 23:40-43 The thief on the cross). All true believers in the Old Testament era were saved without baptism. Mark 16:16 implies that it is not the absence of baptism that condemns a person but the absence of faith, and there are clearly other ways of coming to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit (reading or hearing the Word of God).

Still, baptism dare not be despised or wilfully neglected, since it is explicitly commanded by God and has his precious promises attached to it. It is not a mere "ritual" or "symbol," but a powerful means of grace by which God grants faith and the forgiveness of sins.

QUESTION: I believe I understand the Lutheran position on baptism although it seems to lead down a troublesome path. As I understand you can be regenerated through baptism and also regenerated by believing in Jesus, without baptism, and then later baptised.

The Lutheran position forces one to come to this conclusion of two ways to be saved, although both are by faith alone, just two different means. In Acts 10:44ff they believed and as a result were saved, filled with the Holy Spirit and therefore baptised. Ephesians 1:3 also speaks of salvation by the work of the Holy Spirit.

If baptism also saves, it must not save adults since an adult would not say I do not believe but I want to be baptised to get the faith to believe.

If indeed the texts of baptismal regeneration do actually refer to salvation, it must only be for babies since adults would of necessity believe before being baptised.

And if they do only speak of babies who do not have the capacity to believe, why don't these verses say so?

My question then is, what do you see wrong with my reasoning? You do not have to give me the texts since I have known them and have studied them and have ready many articles and the catechism both from Lutherans and others.

ANSWER: Perhaps you are very familiar with the Large Catechism's treatment of baptism, but we mention it here because Luther's treatise on infant baptism in this section is extremely useful.

Luther goes to the heart of the foundational theological questions at issue over against errant understandings of baptism present among those involved in the Anabaptist movement of his time.

Perhaps we can make a couple of points that seem pertinent to the issue(s) you have raised. First, as you have implied in your letter, it seems important to note that while baptism is God's gracious means of conveying to human beings his saving grace revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Saviour, it is not the only means.

On the basis of the scriptures we teach that the spoken Word of the Gospel (Romans 1:16-17; 10:17) and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; 1 Corinthians 11) are also means of grace.

It is no less a miracle of God's grace at work that an adult should believe by hearing the words of the Gospel, than that an infant should receive through baptism the Spirit who creates the very faith by which one receives incorporation into Christ (Romans 6:4, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism...").

Adults who hear the spoken Word and believe eagerly seek to be baptised, not because it is a human rite symbolic of one's commitment or something to that effect, but because of what God promises in and through baptism.

It must be remembered that the only theological distinction between the spoken Word of the Gospel and baptism is that the sacrament includes a

visible element; hence, our Lutheran fathers commonly spoke of baptism as “visible Gospel.”

The scriptures distinguish baptism and the spoken Word — but do not separate them; they are both means of grace. As you are also no doubt fully aware, we teach that it is not the lack of baptism that necessarily condemns, but it is the despising of this precious gift that endangers faith, for God himself has instituted it and attached his promises to it.

The scriptures teach, of course, that there is only one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). There is no indication that God has limited this blessed means of grace to individuals on the basis of age or levels of maturity.

Baptism is God’s act, a divine testimony to what “grace alone” really means, whereby he imparts the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation to individuals, children and adults alike.

And as our Lutheran fathers have always taught, baptism confirms the grace of God upon adults who have already come to faith, and strengthens them in their faith, even as the Lord’s Supper does.

QUESTION: How does faith play a role in infant baptism? Is faith later taken care of when the child is confirmed?

ANSWER: Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches that a person is saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Baptism, we believe, is one of the miraculous means of grace (together with God's written and spoken Word) through which God creates the gift of faith in a person's heart.

Although we do not claim to understand how this happens or how it is possible, we believe (because of what the Bible says about baptism) that when an infant is baptised God creates faith in the heart of that infant.

This faith cannot yet, of course, be expressed or articulated, yet it is real and present all the same (see 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 2:38-39; Titus 3:5-6; Matthew 18:6; Luke 1:15; 2 Timothy 3:15; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Parents and sponsors of a baptised child bear the responsibility of teaching this child God's Word so that the child's faith may live and grow (Matthew 28:18-20).

Confirmation is a time-honoured church tradition (not required by God's Word, but we believe useful nonetheless) in which the child baptised as an infant is given the opportunity to confess for himself or herself the faith that he or she was unable to confess as an infant.

Faith is not “created” at confirmation; rather, it is confessed for all to hear so that the church can join and rejoice in this public confession, which has its roots in the faith which God himself created in baptism.

QUESTION: You say that infant baptism is ONE way of salvation. Since this practice was unknown in the New Testament or even the early Catholic Church, it is speculative. The Bible says that repentance is a prerequisite for faith. I repented at 5, so it can be early, but not in someone's arms.

ANSWER: Infants are included in “all nations” who are to be baptised (Matthew 28:19). Certainly, they were included in Peter's Pentecost exhortation in Acts 2:38, 39: “Repent and be baptised everyone one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. ... The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Whole households, everyone in the family, were baptised in the beginning of New Testament times, which in all probability included infants (Acts 16:15 and 33). [The “household” formula used here by Luke has Old Testament precedent, with special reference also to small children, as for example in 1 Samuel 22:16, 19].

In Romans 6, the Holy Spirit tells us in the Word that in baptism we have been united with Jesus' death and resurrection—regenerated, dying to sin and rising to new life. That happens to infants when baptised (Galatians 3:27).

“For as many of you who have been baptised have put on Christ.” Baptism through the Word creates the faith necessary to receive salvation for infants. Infants can have faith.

In Mark 10:14 Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

The Greek word in this text is “paidia” which means babes in arms. Infants can belong to the kingdom of God.

“From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise ...” (Psalm 8:2). “Yet you brought me out of the womb, you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast” (Psalm 22:9).

From the beginning of New Testament Christianity at Pentecost to our time, unbroken and uninterrupted, the Church has baptised babies.

Polycarp (69-155 AD), a disciple of the Apostle John, was baptised as an infant.

Justin Martyr (100-166 AD) of the next generation, about the year 150 AD, states in his Dialog with Trypho The Jew “that baptism is the circumcision of the New Testament.”

Irenaeus (130-200 AD) writes in Against Heresies II 22:4 “that Jesus came to save all through means of himself — all, I say, who through him are born again to God – infants and children, boys and youth, and old men.”

Similar expressions are found in succeeding generations by Origen (185-254 AD) and Cyprian (215-258 AD), and at the Council of Carthage in 254 where the 66 bishops stated: “We ought not hinder any person from baptism and the grace of God ... especially infants ... those newly born.”

Origen wrote in his Commentary on Romans 5:9: “For this also it was that the Church had from the Apostles a tradition to give baptism even to infants.” Origen also wrote in his Homily on Luke 14: “Infants are to be baptised for the remission of sins.”

Cyprian's reply to a bishop who wrote to him regarding the baptism of infants stated: "Should we wait until the 8th day as did the Jews in the circumcision? No, the child should be baptised as soon as it is born."

Augustine (354-430 AD) declared, "The custom of our mother Church in baptising infants must not be counted needless, nor believed to be other than a tradition of the Apostles."

Augustine further states: "... the whole Church which hastens to baptise infants, because it unhesitatingly believes that otherwise they cannot possibly be vivified in Christ."

In 517 AD, 10 rules of discipline were framed for the Church in Spain. The fifth rule states that "... in case infants were ill ... if they were offered, to baptise them, even though it were the day that they were born ... such was to be done."

This pattern of baptising infants remained in Christianity through the Dark and Middle Ages until modern times. In the 1500 years from the time of Christ to the Protestant Reformation, the only notable church father who expressed opposition to infant baptism was Tertullian (160-215 AD). Tertullian held that in the case of "little children," baptism ought to be delayed until they "know how to ask for salvation."

Then in the 1520s the Christian Church experienced opposition specifically to infant baptism under the influence of Thomas Muenzer and other fanatics who opposed both civil and religious authority, original sin and human concupiscence (inclination to evil).

Thomas' opposition was then embraced by a considerable number of Swiss, German and Dutch Anabaptists. This brought about strong warning and renunciation by the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed alike.

It was considered a shameless affront to what had been practised in each generation since Christ's command in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) to baptise all nations irrespective of age.

QUESTION: Lutherans mainly use the “sprinkle” method of baptism, if you will. The people of the Bible, including Jesus, were baptised using the immersion method. Why don’t Lutherans follow the way Jesus was baptised by John?

ANSWER: On the basis of the evidence provided in the New Testament, it is not possible to prove that the term “baptise” always refers to immersion, nor that the baptisms mentioned were all done by immersion — implying (in the view of some) that only baptisms done by immersion can be considered valid.

In fact, taken as a whole, the evidence suggests otherwise. In some cases the term “baptise” is synonymous with “wash” (Titus 3:5-6; see also Hebrews 9:19; Ephesians 5:26, Acts 22:16; and Mark 7:1-4 — a passage in which some earlier translators considered the term “baptise” to include the washing of “dining couches”), and it is highly likely that baptisms were performed in the early church by methods other than immersion.

Three thousand were baptised on Pentecost in Jerusalem, where no river exists and no mention is made of other large quantities of water that would or may have been used.

In fact, the shortage of water supplies in general in many parts of the ancient world would have precluded baptism by immersion. It is unlikely that in Jerusalem, Samaria, Damascus, Philippi, Corinth, Rome, or Asia Minor enough water was always available for a full bath.

It should be noted that very early in Christian history methods other than immersion were used and allowed. The Didache requires the administrator of baptism to “pour water three times on the head” (7:3). No mention is made of immersion.

Early Christian art depicts baptisms of persons standing in shallow pools with water poured on the head.

Lutherans have therefore held that the manner of baptism (that is, immersion, pouring, sprinkling, etc.) does not determine whether a baptism is valid, any more than the manner of distributing the Lord's Supper (common cup, individual glasses) affects the validity of this

sacrament. Only the Word of God and the “element” (water), according to divine institution, makes a baptism valid.

QUESTION: Why do Lutherans baptise infants?

ANSWER: Lutherans baptise infants because of what the Bible teaches regarding:

1.) God's command to baptise (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). There is not a single passage in scripture which instructs us not to baptise for reasons of age, race, or gender.

On the contrary, the divine commands to baptise in scripture are all universal in nature. On the basis of these commands, the Christian church has baptised infants from the earliest days of its history.

Since those baptised are also to be instructed in the Christian faith, (Matthew 28:20), the church baptises infants with the expectation that parents or spiritual guardians will nurture the faith of the one baptised through continued teaching of God's Word.

2.) Our need for baptism (Psalm 51:5; John 3:5-7; Acts 2:38; Romans 3:23; Romans 6:3-4). According to the Bible, all people—including infants—are sinful and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

King David confesses, “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Like adults, infants die—proof that they too are under the curse of sin and death.

According to the Bible, baptism (somewhat like Old Testament circumcision, administered to 8-day-old-babies – see Colossians 2:11-12) is God's gracious way of washing away our sins – even the sins of infants – without any help or cooperation on our part. It is a wonderful gift of a loving and gracious God.

3.) God's promises and power (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; John 3:5-7; Titus 3:5-6; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:1-4; Colossians 2:11-12; Ephesians 5:25-26; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Those churches which deny baptism to infants usually do so because they have a wrong understanding of baptism. They see baptism as something we do (e.g., a public profession of faith, etc.) rather than seeing it as something that God does for us and in us.

None of the passages listed above, nor any passage in scripture, describes baptism as “our work” or as “our public confession of faith.”

Instead, these passages describe baptism as a gracious and powerful work of God through which he miraculously (though through very “ordinary” means) washes away our sins by applying to us the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection (Acts 2:38-39; Acts 22:16), gives us a new birth in which we “cooperate” just as little as we did in our first birth (John 3:5-7), clothes us in Christ's righteousness (Galatians 3:26-27), gives us the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-6), saves us (1 Peter 3:21), buries us and raises us up with Christ as new creatures (Romans 6:4; Col. 2:11-12), makes us holy in God's sight (Ephesians 5: 25-26) and incorporates us into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

All of this, according to the Bible, happens in baptism, and all of it is God's doing, not ours. The promises and power of baptism are extended to all in scripture — including infants — and are available to all.

Parents and sponsors then have the privilege and responsibility of nurturing the baptised child in God's love and in his Word so that he or she may know and continue to enjoy the wonderful blessings of baptism throughout his or her life.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters

This is something I've been working on for a while and felt I should share with you; such is the importance, blessing, and consoling comfort of Holy Baptism to Christian believers.

Blessings and peace
Pastor Greg
Tuesday 5th May 2020