



*The Sacrament
of
Holy Baptism*

An introduction to the Lutheran
understanding of this amazing act of God!

Pastor Brian Malison

You are preparing for a baptism. It might be your own or it might be your child's. Either way, I invite you to read through this brochure with an expectation that this event is the most significant thing for which you could ever plan. For it truly is!

Baptism is one of two things that Jesus instructed the early Church to do without providing a lot of clear theological instructions (the other is the meal of Holy Communion). What we know about baptism is that Jesus commands that we do it ("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..." Matthew 28:19) and that it is an important part of one's salvation ("The one who believes and is baptized will be saved..." Mark 16:16). That obviously leaves a lot of questions regarding what happens in baptism and how it is to be done.

Beginning With Birth

Chances are, if you are reading this, you are alive. And being alive suggests at some point you were born. You probably don't remember your birth (although you were there!), but it is such an important day that every year on that day you celebrate it.

You didn't choose your parents. They chose you. You didn't choose the manner in which you were born; your mother's doctor probably had a say in this. You didn't choose the date of your birth; a higher power made that decision.

An act of incredible importance to you was done to you or for you without your consent and without you understanding. And yet, it has made you the person you are today.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is about birth, too. It is a birth into God's family made possible by God. In Romans 6:3-4 we are told that in the waters of baptism we die, but then are raised to new life. In John 3:3-8 Jesus refers to this as being "born from above" or "born of the Spirit." It is nothing that you can do for yourself, it is something that God does, and God's Spirit is not constricted or controlled by our vote, claim, or understanding.

It's All About Grace

There are two ways that people have historically tried to connect with God. One way is to earn God's favor. Many people try very hard, by their actions and words, to be good people so that, by virtue of their words and actions, they might be deemed worthy of receiving God's love. Often you hear frustration from these people whether due to disappointment over other people who fail in their attempt to become holy, or disappointment over themselves for "backsliding."

Another way of trying to connect with God is to recognize our complete inability to do anything to achieve holiness (or perfection, or purity, or righteousness) and instead embrace an understanding that God is the only one who can make us holy. People who understand this connection believe that it is God's unmerited love, called grace, which describes not only God's attachment to us, but also the manner in which we receive salvation.

Some Christian churches would suggest that baptism is something we do, an act of our commitment to God, a public confession of our faith. While the public acknowledgement of baptism is important, the single most important distinction for Lutheran Christians (and scores of other Christian churches around the world) is that baptism is all about *God*. Baptism is *God's idea* for bringing us into his family, it is *God's plan* for our salvation, and it is *God's way* of giving us a spiritual experience.

The essential understanding that Lutherans have in baptism is that God is the one who is at work. It is God who gives us faith, it is God who grants salvation, and it is God who baptizes a person. The minute we begin thinking that we are doing God a favor by getting baptized, we have missed the essence of what baptism is all about.

In the waters of baptism it is God saying to the person (whether young or old), "You are my child...in whom I am well pleased (Luke 3:21)." Though it may be the form of a pastor who pours water over the head (or dunks in the pool), it is always the hands of God at work and the voice of God who declares the grace given to the baptized.

Children and Baptism

Jesus never gives instruction regarding who can and cannot be baptized. He simply says, "Do it!" In one passage in Acts (16:25-34) it says that a whole household was baptized. Presumably this meant young and old.

If it is true that God is the one who acts in a baptism, then it really doesn't matter what the receiver thinks. To be baptized doesn't suggest that you have to know certain things or that you have to attain a certain grade on a test. This is not to say that faith isn't necessary; it is. But right knowledge or clear comprehension is not necessary.

In fact, it is quite clear that Jesus had a special affinity for children. Once, when his disciples tried to shoo children away from him, Jesus said, "Let the little ones come to me, and forbid them not, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:13-16).

Faith and Baptism

Is faith necessary in baptism? Yes, faith is necessary. But where does faith come from? Can we create faith ourselves, or are we even dependent upon God to give us faith? St. Paul says in Ephesians that "by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8)." We must be very careful not to equate faith with an intellectual assent, nor something in which we take pride. The minute faith becomes a human achievement we will have made it a work, something to be earned. Faith is a *gift* from God; we cannot even believe in God without God's help!

Often times people confuse faith with trust. Biblically speaking, faith is a position one has of helplessness before God; it is marked by awe, humility, and reverence (but it is not any one of these characteristics). Trust, on the other hand, is active. Trust is marked by obedience, hope, and worship. While faith is something given to us, faith grows as we learn to trust God more and more every day.

So, whose faith is present in a baptism, especially the baptism of an infant? The baptized person for one. We dare not say that faith is not present in an infant. Even John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb when he was brought into the presence of Mary, pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:41).

But also we dare not sell short the faith of the people bringing the person to the baptismal waters. In fact, we dare not sell short the faith of all those gathered for a baptism. The community of faith is very important in a baptism. Faith *never* happens in a vacuum; faith happens when people influence one another with the good news of Jesus Christ. Parents, siblings, grandparents, and whole congregations have a tremendous responsibility of raising the baptized person with a constant awareness of themselves as children of God and God's claim on their future. While it is true that we are all held accountable for the way our faith is carried out, faith itself is a community event.



What Happens in Baptism?

In addition to being born into God's family in baptism (or, to use Paul's phrase in Romans 8:15 "adoption"), three incredible blessings are included.

First, God forgives us of our past. All our sins are forgiven. And since God is not bound by time and space limitations, the promise is that all our sins we shall ever commit are forgiven. While we will realize that forgiveness as our life unfolds, in baptism forgiveness happens completely.

Second, God promises to be with us in our present. There is no place where we will go in life that God will not be there with us. God will never abandon us, nor forget us. God will always be closer to us than we are even to ourselves!

And third, God promises that we will be with him in eternity. We will always be God's child; we will have a place in God's family forever. Whatever heaven will look like, of one thing we can be certain. We will be there in God's presence.

So baptism is an event that ties together the past, the present, and the future!

What About "Other Things?"

As stated earlier, God gives us the command to baptize but doesn't provide us with a lot of details on how to baptize. Over the centuries the Christian Church has practiced baptism in a number of different ways. Most of these ways are valid.

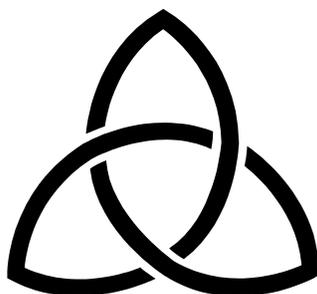
For instance, in some traditions adults are baptized only after completing a training period. This time of instruction might be a few weeks long or many months long. In other traditions adults are baptized immediately and then asked to attend a series of classes to further their understanding of the Church and principles of faith. Either way is appropriate according to the community of faith's tradition and practice.

In some churches a person is immersed completely under water, while in others water is poured over the head of the baptized. Again, any method which utilizes water in the baptism is acceptable.

Some churches add to the baptism such rituals as anointing with oil, lighting special candles, and saying specialized prayers. All of these traditions assist in making a baptism a very special event.

The importance is not found so much in the details of baptism, but the big picture of baptism – in baptism you become God's child. However baptism takes place, it need only happen once in a person's life, just as you can only be born once into this material world (see Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus in John chapter 3). While there may come occasions to publicly acknowledge that you have made a renewed commitment to God, the performance of a second (or third) baptism is not necessary. Please talk with your pastor about how such a public reaffirmation of faith might take place.

The only case in which a second baptism is not only acceptable but necessary is if the first baptism was not performed in the name of the Triune God; Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. As directed by Jesus in Matthew 28:19, baptism is an event of the whole nature of God. It is not relegated to baptism in Jesus or the Holy Spirit only, as some traditions mistakenly declare.



What Happens After Baptism?

Too often, for good and bad reasons, people place a lot of emphasis on baptism, but fail to understand the importance of following up the baptism with a disciplined plan for growth. It is wrong for us to think that spiritual maturity just sort of magically happens. Nobody ever slid toward spiritual maturity! The follow up to a baptism is as important (if not more so) than the plans made before a baptism.

When an infant or child is baptized the parents and sponsors make a series of promises. They promise to...

- Bring the child to worship every Sunday;
- Teach them how to pray (following the direction of the Lord's Prayer);
- Teach them the essential principals of faith of the Christian Church;
- Teach them the difference between right and wrong as provided by the 10 Commandments;
- Give them an age-appropriate Bible as they grow up;
- Bring them to Sunday School and other faith education events;

These "disciplines" are time-honored ways for children and adults to grow with a deeper faith and wider understanding of God's claim upon their lives.

Baptized for Life

The essential point is to acknowledge that while in baptism Jesus becomes our Savior, every day is an opportunity for him to become our Lord. Each day you are challenged to "die to yourself" and "pick up your cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24)." Every day there will be hundreds, if not thousands, of choices we need to make which will define, in part, who we are. As we seek to live as children of God we will need to "return to our baptism" to remember that we are God's children, and as such, trust His leading in the midst of challenging times.

One final point – if we are God's children in baptism, can we ever stop being God's child? Put another way, can a person ever denounce their faith? Perhaps we need to ask the question from a human standpoint; can you ever stop being your parents' child? Supposedly you could go through court proceedings to emancipate yourself from their "legal" guardianship, but the truth of the matter is that you will forever carry their DNA (if you are biologically their child), share their generational history, and carry many of their traits (how many kids say they will never do certain things their parents do only to grow up and find themselves saying and doing the exact things they vowed never to do?).

It is from the humble perspective that God's love is greater than our commitment, and God's mercy is greater than our disobedience, that we believe God will always claim us as his child, even though we fail to live up to that claim. Having said that, we acknowledge that God has the final say in all matters of the eternal. We believe that ultimately we will stand before God and account for the life we have lived. But we believe (and desperately hope) that God's mercy and love will ultimately be the salvation for all God's children.

Baptism is of eternal significance, and as such, the most important ministry of the Church and the most wonderful event we celebrate!

