

Christian Doctrine

#1 - What is a sacrament?

The word sacrament is not found in the Bible. It is just a handy word we use to describe certain sacred acts. When our Lutheran congregations use the term sacrament, we have in mind a three-part definition:

- *a sacred act started by Jesus*
- *in which the words of forgiveness are linked to something you can see and touch*
- *by means of which God offers and grants us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life*

Baptism and the Lord's Supper both offer and grant the forgiveness of sins, they were both instituted by Christ, they are both connected with God's Word, and they both make use of an external sign.

In our circles, it has become traditional to refer to the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The Gospel – the good news message that Christ has delivered us from the guilty punishment and manipulative power of sin – is the Means of Grace. The sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are included under our study of the Means of Grace because both Holy Baptism and Holy Communion employ the specific words and promises of the Gospel.

#2 - The Essence of Baptism

When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles (Mark 7:4).

"I baptize you with water for repentance" (the words of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11a).

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Before John the Baptist or Jesus ever used it, the Greek word βαπτίζω was a term which was commonly employed. In its most basic and popular usage, it simply meant to apply water for washing. Jews in Jesus' day "baptized" their dirty dishes. They baptized their hands before meals. These washings often had religiously ceremonial implications.

The term itself ("to baptize") and the application of water for washing were adapted for a special spiritual use by John the Baptist and Jesus. The essence of Baptism, according to the spiritual use and significance which it still has today, is extremely simple. Baptism is the application of water to a person in the name of the Triune God.

#3 - THE INSTITUTION OF BAPTISM

First: What is Baptism?

Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water used by God's command and connected with God's Word.

Which is that Word of God?

Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Matthew, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!"

#4 - The Blessings of Baptism

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:7).

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

The picture of washing away filth and dirt is a common biblical analogy for the removal of sin and guilt. John the Baptist (and later Jesus when he instituted Baptism) simply added a tremendously gracious twist to a rather common picture and practice. He preached and administered a “baptism of repentance.” Through the Word John proclaimed and the Baptism he administered, God worked to change people's minds so that they saw sin as a vile thing, but also as something which God had washed completely away.

Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name (Acts 22:16).

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39).

In Baptism, the water is an outer sign of a real and true internal washing, the washing away of sins. The Holy Spirit enters the hearts of those who are baptized, since his means of grace – the gospel – is present also in Baptism. Wherever the Holy Spirit is, there also are his gracious gifts of forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the certainty of salvation.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18-19).

The “baptismal formula” places the baptized person into communion with the Triune God. God’s name is everything about him, what he tells us about himself in his Word. When baptized in the name of the Triune God, the baptized person is brought into connection with and receives everything that the Triune God is and has done for all people.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Gal 3:26-27).

In Baptism God blankets us with the pure and holy perfection of his Son. Through Baptism Christ’s righteousness is credited to us.

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

#5 - Baptism’s blessings include the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, adoption into God’s family, the righteousness of Christ and salvation.

#6 - Through Baptism God rescues people from condemnation and grants them faith in Christ’s forgiveness of their sins. He can and does accomplish the very same thing through the Word alone. Both the Word by itself and Baptism, however, are the same means of grace, since both employ the gospel. The only difference is that in Baptism God individualizes the promise of forgiveness of sins through Christ. In his kindness and grace he grants his forgiveness to us with the personal touch, that we might all the more confidently know and believe, by virtue of a physical, visible, audible, tangible, historical action, “What God has graciously done for the whole world he has also most certainly done for me!”

#7 - The blessings of baptism are identical to what Jesus won for all people on the cross.

#8 - THE BLESSINGS OF BAPTISM

Second: What does Baptism do for us?

Baptism works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

What is God’s promise?

Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

#9 - The Baptismal Shell

We usually use regular tap water for baptisms. The water itself is not holy, nor does it need to be blessed. The method of application can be sprinkling, pouring or immersing. The fact that we have received from the early Christian church the shell as a symbol for Baptism lends support to the method of sprinkling or pouring. While immersion provides good biblical imagery for the meaning of baptism, they go too far who insist that it is the only acceptable and valid method of baptizing. The term **βαπτίζω** was the word used for washing before a meal (cf. Luke 11:38). It was never customary for Jews to immerse before eating dinner.

#10 - The Power of Baptism

Baptism is God's powerful means of grace through which he rescues sinners, forgives them, and grants them eternal life. Baptism saves!

In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 3:20b-21).

#11 - The Power of Baptism

The power of Baptism comes not from the water itself but from that most powerful thing in all creation – the Word of God which is used with the water.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27).

#12 - The Power of Baptism

The Word puts the almighty God's blessings of forgiveness, eternal life and salvation into the waters of Baptism. We receive those blessings through faith, which the Holy Spirit works in Baptism. Our first birth was into Satan's family and a sinful condition. By the Spirit's work in baptism we are born again into Christ's family and are holy before God.

When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

#13 - THE POWER OF BAPTISM

Third: How can water do such great things?

It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God's Word which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word used with the water. For without God's Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit.

Where is this written?

St. Paul says in Titus, chapter 3, "[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying."

#14 - Pertinent Points

Have you been baptized?

If you have not been baptized, the pastor would be happy to speak with you about being baptized. If you don't know if you have been baptized, there are some steps to take to find out.

Do you know the date of your baptism?

Consult your own records or, possibly, speak with your parents to ascertain the date of your baptism. It's a date worth knowing. It is sometimes referred to as one's spiritual birthday.

Who does the baptizing?

Usually, for the sake of order and so that official records might be kept, congregations ask their pastors to do the baptizing. Nonetheless, any Christian may perform a valid Baptism.

Is re-baptizing ever necessary?

Any Baptism performed in keeping with Jesus' institution (applying water in the name of the Triune God) is valid. Since they deny the doctrine of the Trinity and thus do not administer Baptism according to Christ's institution, Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints (Mormons) do not offer a valid baptism.

Can a baptized person fall away from the Christian faith?

A baptized person may be lost if, through unbelief, he rejects the grace God has shown him in Baptism. Should he, by God's gracious workings, return to faith, his Baptism is once again the guarantee that he is a forgiven child of God. No re-baptizing is necessary.

#15 - Salvation without Baptism?

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:5-6).

But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John (Luke 7:30).

While the Lord has bound us to utilize Baptism as a means of grace to bring forgiveness and faith to the heart, he has not bound or limited himself to saving people only or exclusively through Baptism. A person may come to faith through the Word and be saved solely through that means of God, if there is no opportunity to be baptized. This would be the exception rather than the rule. In and of itself, the absence of Baptism does not damn. Unbelief damns. The words above (John 3:5-6) were addressed to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a member of a group which rejected Baptism (Luke 7:30). A person cannot willfully despise Baptism and still be saved.

#16 - Infant Baptism

1) Babies are certainly included in “all nations.”

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

2) Babies are born sinful, separated from God’s love, and need God’s forgiveness.

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5).

The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done (Genesis 8:21).

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:5-6).

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so (Romans 8:7).

3) Baptism works as a means by which God offers and conveys forgiveness.

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39).

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Gal 3:26-27).

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:5-6).

4) Babies can believe.

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16).

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matthew 18:6).

...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15).

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:15-17).

Some maintain that Infant Baptism is incorrect since scripture nowhere explicitly says, “Baptize babies.” Such an “argument from silence” must be dismissed because of what scripture does say. Jesus said to baptize all nations. He never said, “Exclude children.” The Bible’s examples of “household baptisms” (Acts 16:15; Acts 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:15; Acts 2:38-39) speak in favor of the baptism of young children and infants. Infant baptism was never a bone of contention in the early church because already for 2000 years the earliest Christians had seen individuals entering the covenant with God as infants. The early church fathers (Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus) all write about Infant Baptism in such a way as to show that it was a generally accepted practice, not an innovation to be guarded against. Infant Baptism was never widely questioned until the 1500's.

#17 - Fickett's "Layman's Guide to Baptist Beliefs" states: "If a child dies before he reaches the age of accountability, he goes immediately to be with the Lord." There's only one problem with this teaching of an "age of accountability" – it's not in the Bible.

Still others say that since babies cannot understand the truths of Baptism, they consequently cannot truly have faith. Such thinking disregards the fact that faith and intelligence are not synonymous. In fact, our intelligence, our reason, rebels against faith and calls it foolishness. Faith is always a divine creation within us, a miracle worked by God, not an exertion of our own will or reason. Faith is God's gift (Ephesians 2:8-9; cf. Lesson 7, p. 3). It's just as much of a miracle for the Holy Spirit to put faith in the heart of a forty-seven-year-old as it is for him to put it in the heart of a two-day-old. Those who maintain that infants or young babies cannot believe truly need to grapple with the truth of Mark 16:16b: "...whoever does not believe will be condemned."

#18 - God comes to us with his blessings of forgiveness, new life and salvation through 1) the Word of God; 2) Baptism; and 3) the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is limited to Christians who are able to examine themselves (1 Corinthians 11:28-29).

The preaching and teaching of the Word of God are limited to those who can understand what is being said or read (Acts 8:30-35).

No limitation is placed on Baptism.

For children, Baptism is the means of entrance into God's family. Through Baptism God makes young children his own, cleansing them of their sins and giving them faith and the Holy Spirit.

#19 - What about babies who die without baptism?

The Bible says nothing about the fate of infants who die without Baptism. To say that babies who die without Baptism are either all damned or all taken to heaven would be saying more than what God says in scripture. God wisely withheld this information from us so that we might not neglect to baptize our infants as soon as possible. If they die at a very early age, they have through Baptism the faith that brings them into heaven. If they live a long life, their Baptism is God's pledge of forgiveness to them as long as they live. We cannot speculate or render absolute judgments in the cases of babies who die without Baptism but can only commit them to the mercy, justice and wisdom of God. Postponing the Baptism of an infant until a relative or friend arrives is an unsafe practice. A stillborn child is not to be baptized.

#20 - God's grace to us through Baptism

Baptism is not a way for a person to show God or other people that he is a Christian; nor is it a way for a person to demonstrate that he is joining a certain denomination. (Baptized Christians who join a Christian church body of a different denomination need not be re-baptized.)

In baptism, the arrow points from God to us, not from us to God. We are not doing something for him by being baptized; he is doing something for us by washing our sins away. In the forefront of the sacrament of Baptism is not the fact that a person thereby demonstrates his faith; in the forefront of this sacrament is the fact that a person is given faith or has his faith strengthened through Baptism. Baptism is a means of grace. Through Baptism God showers his grace on us by washing our sins away.