



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.5 – The Doctrine of Baptism

Baptism Customs

It is important that we distinguish between what God has commanded concerning baptism, and the customs that have developed among Christians in connection with baptism. In a sense our spiritual rebirth through water and the Holy Spirit is even more important than our physical birth, and therefore it is natural that Christians should celebrate baptism as a joyous event, whether the person being baptized is 80 years old, 40 years old, 20 years old, 10 years old, or a new-born baby. But the customs surrounding baptism should not become more important than the baptism itself.

All that is required for a valid baptism is the person to be baptized¹, the person who is doing the baptizing, the application of the water in one way or another, and, most important of all, the words of Jesus: **“in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”** (Matthew 28:19). Everything else may vary according to the needs and desires of the persons involved.

The examples we have in the New Testament of adult baptisms indicate that baptism follows basic instruction in the Gospel and a confession of faith in Christ, that is, the acceptance of the Gospel. On the day of Pentecost **“those who gladly received his word** (the preaching of Peter) **were baptized”** (Acts 2:41). The treasurer from Ethiopia was baptized by the evangelist Philip on a deserted road after Philip had explained that Jesus is the Lamb of God that has taken away the sin of the world. As soon as they came to some water on the road, the man asked Philip whether he could be baptized. The jailor at Philippi learned about the way of salvation in Jesus from Paul and Silas and was baptized, together with his family, on the very night he first learned about Jesus. Lydia was baptized after the Lord opened her heart to believe the Gospel as spoken to her by Paul and Silas at an outdoor prayer meeting by the riverside. In all of these cases not much time elapsed between the preaching of the Gospel, the confession of faith and the baptism; therefore, it is not necessary for the person being baptized to have a thorough knowledge of all the teachings of God’s Word. But the person should understand that they are a sinner, and that salvation comes alone through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God.

In the case of the family baptisms recorded in the Bible, it seems that the decision to baptize the family members was made by the head of the household, whether Lydia, the jailor of Philippi, or Stephanas of Corinth. In every case that is mentioned there is no long delay between the knowledge of the Gospel and the baptism. For this reason, it is common practice among confessional Lutherans in America to baptize adults as soon as they request baptism after hearing the Gospel and indicating acceptance of it. They may wish to be instructed in all of the Bible’s teachings before being baptized, but such a thorough course of instruction is not necessary, as the Bible examples indicate. As far as infants and children are concerned, they are baptized as soon as the parents or guardians ask for and arrange for such baptisms. It is not good to delay a long time; in fact, some parents request baptism to take place on the very day of birth in the same place in which the birth took place, whether in the home, in a hospital, or in some clinic somewhere. Other parents prefer to have their new-born child baptized in a church service attended by the entire congregation or a larger number of witnesses.

Since our Lord Jesus has entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven to each of His believers and to every group of His believers, any Christian may do the baptizing, applying the water together with

¹ either brought by himself or herself or by parents or guardians in the case of an infant or child.

Jesus' words. This is especially important to know in the event of an emergency – for example, a sudden sickness or the prolonged absence of a pastor, missionary, or congregation leader. When there are a number of Christians available to administer the baptism, the group should choose one of their number to do the baptizing in their name. When there is an established congregation of Christians, the congregation usually asks their spiritual leader – their pastor or elder – to administer the baptisms in the name of the congregation.

When a baptism is performed, it is important that a written record of this baptism be kept in a safe place and a copy given to the person being baptized (or his family), so that there is no doubt later on that the person was indeed baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The official record of such a baptism may also be signed by witnesses who were present for the baptism. These witnesses will be able to testify that such a baptism took place in accordance with God's Word, **“that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established”** (Matthew 18:16).

It has been customary in many places for the parents of children to be baptized to choose sponsors or godparents for their children. Such sponsors are to pray for the child and to assist in their Christian education. For this reason, it is important that persons chosen as sponsors agree with the parents with regard to what the true Christian teaching is. There is no requirement, however, that parents chose sponsors, since our Lord has not commanded such a custom.

Other customs in connection with baptisms may include the saying of a prayer or the Lord's Prayer, the recitation of the Apostles' Creed, a message from the pastor, the wearing of special clothing, the sign of the cross, a family meal, or a congregational celebration. Each group of Christians has the freedom to develop its own customs, but it is important that the customs do not become more important than the baptism itself. It may also be useful to ask the parents or sponsors whether they are willing to take on the important assignment of bringing up their children **“in the training and admonition of the Lord”** (Ephesians 6:4).

As far as the application of water is concerned, any convenient method may be used, whether it is pouring water on the head once or three times, whether it is sprinkling, whether it is some kind of ceremonial washing, or whether it is total or partial immersion. In most cases it is no doubt preferable to use the same method that has been used for other baptisms in the area. But in cases of emergency any type of application of the water is fine, as long as Jesus' words of institution are included. For example, the person doing the baptizing may say the following during the application of the water: “_____, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The name of the person to be baptized is usually spoken at the time of the baptism, but even that is not absolutely necessary. Perhaps the person being baptized has not yet been given a name.

Questions

1. What is required for a valid baptism?
2. At what point were adults baptized in the New Testament accounts?
3. When did the family baptisms take place?
4. To whom have the keys of heaven been given?
5. Who, then, has the authority to administer baptism?
6. When there is a group of Christians, which one has the authority to administer baptism?
7. Why is it important that a record be kept of the baptisms?
8. What is the purpose of having witnesses at a baptism?
9. Why is it not necessary to have sponsors for the persons baptized?
10. Which customs regarding baptism are common in your locale?
11. Which customs would you want to introduce or use?
12. Who should make the decisions concerning the order of service in baptism?
13. If you were asked to baptize someone, how would you do it?