



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.8 – The Doctrine of Baptism

Baptism as a Means of Grace and as a Sacrament

In our discussion of the means of grace we have already explained the use of the word “sacrament” and the meaning of the term “means of grace.” We have explained why we call baptism a sacrament, and why we say that baptism is a means of grace. But as we have now considered more fully what the Bible says about baptism, it is perhaps useful to repeat some of the teachings we considered earlier.

The two functions of a means of grace are to convey forgiveness of sins and to create faith in that forgiveness. Baptism is truly a means of grace, for baptism offers, gives, and seals to us the remission of sins that Christ won for all. God also uses baptism to create and strengthen our faith in Christ. The apostle Paul calls baptism **“the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”** (Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit is at work in baptism to regenerate us and renew us. Regeneration means the beginning of a new spiritual life; it means to be reborn or to be born again. In His conversation with Nicodemus Jesus said: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’”** (John 3:5-7).

On Pentecost the apostle Peter offered his penitent listeners the forgiveness of their sins through baptism, saying to them: **“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”** (Acts 2:38). When Ananias of Damascus brought the Gospel of Jesus to Saul of Tarsus (later known as the missionary Paul), he said to him: **“Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins”** (Acts 22:16). The benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection for all are conveyed to sinners through baptism, for the apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: **“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?”** (Romans 6:3).

Therefore, just as the spoken or written Gospel of Christ conveys the forgiveness of sins and creates faith in Christ, so also baptism conveys the same forgiveness of sins and likewise creates faith and new spiritual life. Since baptism is the Holy Spirit’s washing of regeneration, it has the same power as the spoken or written Gospel of Christ through which the apostle Peter says we are **“born again”** (1 Peter 1:23). The form of the Gospel is different, but it is still the same saving Gospel, whether it comes in spoken form only or in the form of the spoken Word combined with the application of water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of our Lutheran confessions, the *Apology (Defense) of the Augsburg Confession*, puts it this way: *“Just as the Word enters through the ear in order to strike the heart, so also the rite (of baptism) enters through the eye in order to move the heart. The word and the rite have the same effect. Augustine put it well when he said that the sacrament is a ‘visible word,’ because the rite is received by the eyes and is, as it were, a picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 219-220). Augustine was a Christian bishop or pastor who lived in northern Africa (354-430 A.D.).

Most Protestant churches use of baptism in one way or another, but almost all of them do not teach that baptism is truly a means of grace that conveys the forgiveness of sins, even though Peter clearly taught on Pentecost that baptism is **“for the remission of sins”** (Acts 2:38). Some of them teach that the Holy Spirit does not need any means of grace but does His work apart from the means of grace,

even though baptism very often takes place at the same time that the Holy Spirit is working directly on the heart. In their view, baptism is a picture of what God is doing apart from baptism; that is, baptism is a symbolical action only, and it does not actually convey the forgiveness of sins to the person who is baptized.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the person administering the baptism must have the right intention; otherwise the baptism does not have the proper result. But the power of baptism is in God's Word connected to the baptism, not in the intention of the person doing the baptizing.

The Gospel in word only does not lose its power or effect when spoken by an unbeliever or hypocrite. In the same way, baptism also does not lose its power or effect, as long as the Word connected with it is truly God's Word, regardless of who the administrator is. However, doubt is cast upon a person's baptism if the group that is administering the baptism defines the words used in the proper administration of baptism differently from the plain meaning of the words. For example, Jesus told His disciples to baptize **"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"** (Matthew 28:19). Thus, God has taught us to understand that the true God is one God in three equal persons – the Triune God. If the group doing the baptizing officially defines the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as three gods rather than one God in three Persons, or if the group officially denies that the Son is God or that the Holy Spirit is God, it is questionable whether such a baptism is a valid baptism. Even though the sound of the words may be the same, the content of the words is different, since the words are officially defined by the group in a different way. We therefore have serious doubts as to whether a baptism performed by Jehovah's Witnesses or any other anti-Trinitarian sect is a Christian baptism, since Jehovah's Witnesses and other such sects reject the concept of a Triune God. The Mormons picture Father, Son, and Holy Spirit not as one God but as three separate gods. Should we accept their baptism as valid? A baptism that is doubtful does not give the baptized person the needed assurance that he is truly baptized.

On the other hand, the validity of the baptism is not put in doubt if the administrator of the baptism is an unbeliever, as long as the words that are used for the baptism are the words that Jesus instructed us to use, and these words are officially defined by the group administering the baptism in the proper way. Therefore, we do not ordinarily baptize persons coming to us from other church bodies if they have already been baptized in a Christian church that confesses the Triune God and uses water for its baptisms. It may also happen on occasion that a person has truly been baptized but there is no record of such a baptism or no witnesses that can attest to such a baptism. Since no one can know for sure whether a baptism has taken place, the person should be baptized even though it is possible that they may have been baptized at an earlier time. A baptism that is doubtful does not give the baptized person the needed assurance that he is truly baptized, so in the case of doubt, it is better to baptize someone so that they can have the assurance that they were properly baptized.

Even though it is generally true that pastors have been called by Christian congregations to do the actual baptizing in God's name and in the congregation's name, any Christian may administer baptism and should administer baptism if a called pastor is not available. For example, when an unbaptized infant, child, or an adult is seriously sick and there is a possibility of imminent death, and no pastor is close at hand or readily available, the Christians who are present should ask one of their number to administer the baptism to the unbaptized person and then later notify the pastor so that there can be a proper record of the baptism.

Those who administer the baptism do not have any special powers that make the baptism effective. The power is in God's Word, and those who do the baptizing are merely stewards or caretakers, as the apostle Paul wrote: **"Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"** (1 Corinthians 4:1). **"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?"** (1 Corinthians 3:5).

A baptism that is administered according to the words given by Jesus Himself is a valid baptism even if the person who is being baptized is an unbeliever at the time of the baptism. God's Word remains true even if it is not believed. The apostle Paul wrote: **"What if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar"** (Romans 3:3-4).

Nevertheless, the only way to receive the benefit of baptism is through faith, that is, by believing and trusting in the promise of God that is made at baptism. Jesus said: **"He who believes and is baptized will be saved"** (Mark 16:16). The letter to the Hebrews says: **"Indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it"** (Hebrews 4:2). What this means in practice is that a person who has been baptized may not have the benefit of baptism for a time because of their unbelief, but later on they may be brought to faith in Jesus through the Gospel. Such a person does not have to be rebaptized, for God's Word spoken at their baptism remains valid even if they did not believe it for a time.

The question is often asked whether unbaptized persons can be saved. Jesus told His disciples: **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned"** (Mark 16:15-16). Notice that Jesus did not say: "He who is not baptized will be condemned." Therefore, we cannot say that all unbaptized persons will be condemned. The repentant thief next to Jesus on the cross was not baptized, and yet Jesus said to him: **"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise"** (Luke 23:43). His lack of baptism did not condemn him.

On the other hand, if someone professes to believe in Christ but stubbornly refuses to be baptized, he is despising God's Word and God's means of grace. This is what God's Word says concerning those who rejected the baptism of John the Baptist: **"The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him"** (Luke 7:30). A true believer in Christ will not continue to reject God's gracious gift in baptism.

Even without baptism God can create faith in Christ through the Gospel Word, even in the case of small children. There have been cases where parents have refused to have their children baptized, and yet the child may have been led to believe in Jesus by his hearing of the Gospel. Thus, baptism is not absolutely necessary for salvation, since God is able to produce and sustain faith in Christ through the Gospel Word. Nevertheless, baptism is not optional, as though we have the right to choose not to be baptized. Thus, baptism is necessary as something commanded by God and established by God as a means of grace, which no Christian will want to despise or ignore. But God in His mercy is able to accomplish His purpose through the spoken Gospel when in unusual circumstances baptism is lacking.

Questions

1. What are the two functions of a means of grace?
2. Why is it right for us to call baptism a means of grace?
3. What makes baptism different from the Gospel Word?
4. What is it that gives baptism the power to forgive sins?
5. Why is it that a baptism is valid even if done by an unbeliever?
6. What makes the baptisms of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons doubtful?
7. Why is it important for the church to keep records of baptisms?
8. Why may any Christian perform a baptism? When would he or she do so?
9. What is the only way to receive the benefit of baptism?
10. How can someone who is not baptized still be saved?