



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 10 The Doctrine of Baptism



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.1 – The Doctrine of Baptism

The Meaning of the Word “Baptize”

The word “baptize” (βαπτίζω, *baptizō*) is a Greek word that is used in various ways in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark, the word is used with reference to a Jewish custom or tradition that Jesus’ disciples were not observing. We read: **“Now when they (the Pharisees) saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches”** (Mark 7:2-4). The Greek words “baptize” and “baptism” are used for the words that are underlined in the above verses. Thus, in these verses “baptizing” and “baptism” refer to a certain kind of ceremonial washing that had become a tradition among the Jews. They applied water in some way to make their hands ceremonially clean, and they also applied water in some way to make their utensils clean.

Since there are many Baptists who claim that the word “baptize” means to immerse or to put something or someone totally under water for a time, it is important to realize that in Mark 7 the word does not mean “immerse”. Surely the Jews did not submerge themselves in water every time they came from the marketplace, nor would they have immersed their couches to make them ceremonially clean.

A similar usage of the word “baptize” is found in Luke 11:38, where a Pharisee invited Jesus to dine at wit him. We read: **“When the Pharisee saw it, he marveled that He (Jesus) had not first washed before dinner.”** The underlined word is the word “baptize” in Greek. Here again the word refers to a traditional Jewish cleansing ceremony. The Pharisee would not have expected Jesus to submerge himself before dinner. The same Jewish tradition is mentioned in Hebrews 9:10 where there is reference to **“various washings”** or “baptisms”.

Jesus used the word “baptism” to refer to the persecution and death that He and His disciples would undergo. When James and John requested seats of honor at Jesus’ right hand and left hand, Jesus asked them: **“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”** (Mark 10:38). When they said they were able, Jesus responded: **“You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized”** (Mark 10:39). Jesus was speaking of His own coming suffering and death when He said: **“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!”** (Luke 12:50). Thus, just as water may be poured out in a torrent on a person, so persecution and pain and even death will be poured out on Jesus and those who follow Him. In a similar way today, some people speak of a “baptism of fire”.

John the Baptist foretold a time when Jesus would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit. That is, He would pour the Holy Spirit on them by means of a number of supernatural events. He said: **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”** (Matthew 3:11). Shortly before His ascension to heaven Jesus repeated John’s prophecy, saying to His disciples: **“John truly baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”** (Acts 1:5). Ten days later this word was fulfilled. **“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.**

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues (languages), as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

The words “baptize” and “baptism” are used in the New Testament most frequently, however, for the water baptisms administered by John the Baptist and his disciples and by Jesus’ disciples during Jesus’ ministry among them. These words are used as well as for the baptisms administered by Christians in response to Jesus’ command: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).**

There is no doubt that the baptisms of John the Baptist and Jesus were water baptisms. We read: **“Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him (John the Baptist) and were baptized by him in the Jordan” (Matthew 3:5-6).** In fact, John said that it was God who sent him **“to baptize with water” (John 1:33).** John the Baptist used the Jordan River as his source of water for his baptisms. It is also reported: **“John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (John 3:23).**

Jesus referred to water also when He described baptism as being **“born of water and the Spirit”¹ (John 3:5).** The early Christians used water for their baptisms. The evangelist Philip was sitting in a chariot with the Ethiopian treasurer, explaining the Gospel of Christ to him. The book of Acts reports: **“Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ ... And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38).**

The apostle Paul referred to baptism as a washing. He wrote to the Ephesians: **“Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:25-26).** In his letter to Titus he referred to baptism as **“the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5-6).**

We have seen that baptism or baptizing may refer to various methods of applying water to wash something ceremonially. It can also refer to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost or the blood of persecution and martyrdom. Based on how the Bible uses the word, we must disagree with those who insist that the only proper way to baptize is by immersion, that is, by submerging the whole body of the person under water. The water may be applied in various ways, such as total immersion, partial immersion, pouring, sprinkling, washing, or even daubing. The usual method followed in American Lutheran congregations is the pouring of water on the head of the person being baptized three times while speaking Jesus’ words of institution **“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).** But we do not contend that this method is the only proper method. It is only one of many possible proper methods.

Sprinkling is mentioned in Exodus 24:8 and Ezekiel 36:25 in Old Testament ceremonies, as well as in Hebrews 12:24. Total immersion is ruled out of consideration in the Jewish ceremonies referred to in Mark 7:1-8 because it would not be practical to submerge the items being washed. When the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they were not immersed with the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit was poured out on them (Acts 1:5; 2:17; 10:45). In Romans 6:4 the apostle Paul speaks of baptism as a burying and a rising; in this case immersion could present a good picture.

¹ In the Greek (as in the English) there is only one preposition (“of”). This shows that Jesus was speaking of one birth: that of both water and the Spirit.

The water used in baptism does not have to be of a certain quality. Naturally, one would try to use clean water rather than dirty water, but no test is needed to determine a certain level of purity. A very early manual used in the first centuries of the Christian era makes this suggestion: "Baptize...in living water. And if you do not have living water, baptize into other water; if you do not have cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water thrice upon the head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (*Didache*, VII, 1-3, quoted in Schaff: *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, pp. 247-252). The climate of a country may help to determine which method of applying the water is used.

Questions

1. Why can we be sure that the word *baptizō* does not mean "immerse"?
2. What kind of baptism was Jesus talking about when James and John wanted special places in His kingdom?
3. What kind of baptism was Jesus talking about when He spoke about the disciples being baptized with the Holy Spirit?
4. In what way did the Holy Spirit come on the disciples on the day of Pentecost?
5. How do we know that the baptisms Jesus commanded us to do refer to water baptisms?
6. When did Jesus give His disciples the authority to baptize?
7. How many persons were baptized on the day of Pentecost?
8. What are some of the various ways by which the water of baptism may be applied?
9. What suggestions are made by the early Christian manual called *Didache*?
10. What method of baptism is generally used in your locale?
11. How would you answer those who insist on immersion or some other method as being the only correct way of baptizing?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.2 – The Doctrine of Baptism

“In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”

Jesus’ instructions to His disciples were clear: they were to apply the water of baptism **“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (Matthew 28:19). Thus, baptism conveys a blessing from the three Persons of God. God the Father adopts us as His children through baptism. In our baptism God gives us Christ, the Son of God, as a covering for our sins. In our baptism the Holy Spirit comes to us and makes His home in us, so that our body becomes His temple.

In the Old Testament, the priests were instructed to pronounce a threefold blessing on the people. God said: **“So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them”** (Numbers 6:23-27) In the New Testament this name is revealed more fully as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and this name is **“put”** on those who are baptized in this name.

The apostle John explains that those who are **“born...of God”** become **“children of God”**: **“As many as received Him (Jesus), to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”** (John 1:12-13). Baptism is, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, a second birth **“of water and the Spirit”** (John 3:5), and thus it is through baptism that persons are **“born of God”** and **“become children of God.”**

The apostle Paul assured the Christians in Galatia: **“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... And if you are Christ’s. Then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise”** (Galatians 3:26-29). When we are baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we put on Christ, the Son, and we become sons and daughters of the Father. Baptism in this name has power only because of what Christ accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection. Paul wrote: **“When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ”** (Galatians 4:4-7).

All of these things fit together: The Father sent the Son to be our Savior. When we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we receive the benefits of Christ’s work and we put on Christ. At the same time, the Father adopts us as His children by creating faith in Christ in our hearts. At the same time the Holy Spirit enters into our hearts and our bodies become His temple.

Paul asked the Christians in Rome: **“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?”** (Romans 6:3). To be baptized in the name of the Son means that we receive all the benefits of His death. We were baptized into His death. This means that we have the forgiveness of sins won by Christ through His death. All of the blessings that Jesus won for us by His suffering and death are given to us. This is what it means to be baptized in the name of Christ.

The Christians in Corinth were emphasizing their human leaders, whether Paul, Apollos, or Peter. Paul did not want this at all, so he wrote to them: **“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”** (1 Corinthians 1:13). The blessings of Christ’s crucifixion are what come to us when we are baptized in the name of Christ. The human being who administers the baptism

is of little importance. Paul wrote: **“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say I had baptized in my own name”** (1 Corinthians 1:14-15).

All of this is a gift of God’s grace wholly undeserved by us, for Paul wrote that all of this was planned by God from eternity: **“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace”** (Ephesians 1:4-6). And John wrote: **“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God”** (1 John 3:1).

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter promised that God would give them the gift of the Holy Spirit through their baptism: **“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”** (Acts 2:38). Notice that he is not extending to all of them the special gifts of the Holy Spirit (which are not distributed equally to all), but he is giving to all of them the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself through their baptism. The gift is the Holy Spirit, whom God gives to those who are baptized. All Christians receive God’s spirit. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“You are not in the flesh, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His... As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God”** (Romans 8:9, 14).

Thus, the Triune God works in baptism to grant overwhelming blessings to sinners like us. **“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** are not empty words, but words filled with blessings from God.

Sometimes, for the sake of brevity, the Scriptures speak of baptism as baptism in Jesus’ name, rather than baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. For examples, see Acts 2:38, Acts 8:15, Acts 10:48, Romans 6:3, and Galatians 3:27. But in spite of the different wording, there is only one baptism. Nevertheless, there is at least one denomination that insists that baptism must be in the name of “Jesus only”. Those in this group (the Oneness Pentecostals) have abandoned the teaching of the Trinity and baptize in the name of Jesus only.

The Holy Spirit uses different terms in the Bible to explain to us the blessings of baptism. As we have seen, one such blessing associated with baptism is the remission (forgiveness) of sins. The apostle Peter made this clear on Pentecost when he told the crowd: **“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 baptized Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul), he said to him: **“Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord”** (Acts 22:16). Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus: **“Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing”** (Ephesians 5:25-27).

It is clear that the forgiveness of sins was conveyed through the baptism of John the Baptist, for it is written: **“John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”** (Mark 1:4). The same phrase is used in Luke 3:3.

Since baptism conveys the forgiveness of sins, it also conveys the blessings of salvation and eternal life. Jesus said: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:15-16). The apostle Paul likewise taught: **“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:5-7).

The apostle Peter compared the water of the great flood in Noah’s time with the water of baptism and stated that both the flood and baptism were instruments of salvation. The sentence structure in

English is somewhat complicated. He wrote: **“He (Jesus) went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”** (1 Peter 3:19-21). Perhaps the term **“antitype”** needs to be explained. When there is a picture in the Old Testament foretelling something that will happen in the New Testament, that is called a type. When the picture is fulfilled in the New Testament, this is called the antitype. The type is a picture that points toward the antitype. Just as the flood waters in the days of Noah lifted up the ark and saved Noah and his family, so the waters of baptism today save us, not by removing dirt from our body but by taking away our sin and thus giving us a good conscience before God. Because we receive the forgiveness of all of our sins in Baptism, we no longer have a guilty conscience before God.

It is also clear that through baptism the Holy Spirit regenerates us – gives us a second birth – which is absolutely essential for salvation. Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“You must be born again”** (John 3:7). How can one be born again? 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”** (John 3:5-6). For this reason, the apostle Paul called baptism **“the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”** (Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit works through baptism to create in the person baptized the beginning of faith in Christ and the beginning of a new spiritual life. It is not the water that does the regenerating – it is the word of God that is in and with the water, as Peter said: **“Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever”** (1 Peter 1:23).

Another blessing of baptism is that through baptism we become members of Christ’s Church. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free”** (1 Corinthians 12:13). Christ’s Church is the body of Christ, and each individual Christian is a member of that body.

We have already referred to Paul’s words about putting on Christ. He wrote: **“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”** (Galatians 3:27). The picture of putting on Christ as one would put on new clothes brings to mind the picture of salvation spoken of by the prophet Isaiah: **“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels”** (Isaiah 61:10). Notice that we do not put on Christ by an act of our own, but it is God who clothes us with Christ. God provides the covering for us, even as He supplied Adam and Eve with tunics of skin in the Garden of Eden to cover up their shame and nakedness. The prophet Zechariah used a similar picture with reference to the high priest, Joshua. We read: **“Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel (who was the Son of God Himself as He appeared in the Old Testament). Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, ‘Take away the filthy garments from him.’ And to him He said, ‘See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.’ And I said, ‘Let them put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by”** (Zechariah 3:3-5).

Most Protestant churches claim that baptism does not convey any of these blessings. They say baptism does not give the forgiveness of sins, salvation, or the new birth. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, limits the forgiveness of sins given in baptism to the forgiveness of original sin and sins committed *before* baptism. The Council of Trent declared: “If anyone says that all sins which are committed after baptism are either remitted or rendered venial solely through the remembrance of faith of the baptism once received, let him be anathema” (Seventh Session, Canon 10). But when God’s Word says that baptism is for the remission of sins, there are no such limitations. God’s forgiveness is always total forgiveness.

Questions

1. What blessing in baptism comes to us especially from God the Father?
2. What blessing in baptism comes to us from God the Son?
3. What blessing in baptism comes to us from God the Holy Spirit?
4. What difference is there between us as children of God and Jesus as the Son of God?
5. What does it mean to be baptized into Christ's death?
6. Why must we say that the blessings of baptism are a gift of grace?
7. What is the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us in baptism?
8. What is the strange teaching of the Oneness Pentecostals?
9. What makes it possible for baptism to give us the forgiveness of sins?
10. In what way is the great flood a picture of baptism?
11. Why is baptism called a washing of regeneration?
12. What is meant by putting on Christ in baptism?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.3 – The Doctrine of Baptism

Baptism as a Work of God, Not as a Work of Man

One of the reasons many Protestants do not believe that baptism conveys the forgiveness of sins is that they think of baptism as a work of man. They say that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by works, and, therefore, we cannot be saved by baptism. If baptism were a work of man, they would be correct. It is certainly true that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by works. But baptism is not a work of man; it is a work of God. Submitting to baptism is not a matter of obedience to God's law. Baptism itself is the Gospel – the forgiveness of sins extended to sinners because of Christ's atoning death on the cross. Baptism is a work of God in which God, in His grace, gives the forgiveness of sins through the Word of Gospel connected to the earthly element of water.

The apostle Paul specifically tells us in his letter to Titus that baptism is a work of God, not a work of man: **“For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:3-7). Notice how the underlined phrases in the above passage emphasize that baptism is a work of God's grace. The Holy Spirit is at work in baptism to do that work that God wants Him to do.

Nevertheless, baptism should not be considered an automatic ticket to heaven, as though all baptized persons will attain eternal life because of their baptism. Baptism, just like the Gospel Word, is an act or promise of God that we need to receive through faith (trust) in God's promise. God gives forgiveness of sins in baptism and the only way to receive this gift of God is by faith (or trust) in it. For this reason, the author of the letter to the Hebrews warns: **“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God”** (Hebrews 3:12). God promises and gives forgiveness, but in our sinful condition we have the power to reject God's gift of forgiveness in unbelief. In the same letter to the Hebrews we read: **“For 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). For this very reason Jesus did not say: “He who is baptized shall be saved”, but He said: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:16).

The Roman Catholic Church incorrectly teaches that baptism is effective even without faith. They use the Latin expression *“ex opere operato”*, which means “from the work performed”. By this, they mean that baptism always accomplishes what God wants it to accomplish simply because the external act was performed. Nevertheless, in their view baptism gives only forgiveness of past sins and gives no assurance of forgiveness for sins committed after baptism.

The Holy Spirit conveys not only total forgiveness of sins through baptism, but also the power to fight against sin and win, for baptism is the Holy Spirit's washing of regeneration and renewal (Titus 3:5). The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so**

we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). In baptism, Paul says, **“our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin... Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts”** (Romans 6:6-12). This is why the world-renowned hymn “Rock of Ages” includes this prayer: “Let the water and the blood From Thy riven side which flowed Be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and power” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, #376:1). God through baptism gives us the double cure of sin: forgiveness of the guilt of sin and also the power to fight and win against sin.

Questions

1. Why do most Protestants think that baptism cannot give the forgiveness of sin?
2. Why is it important to understand that baptism is a work of God, not of man?
3. How does Paul stress that baptism as a work of God in Titus 3?
4. Why is it wrong to teach that baptism is an automatic ticket to heaven?
5. What is the role of faith in baptism?
6. What else does God give us in baptism, besides the forgiveness of sin?
7. How can we lose the blessings God gives us through baptism?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.4 – The Doctrine of Baptism

The Baptism of Infants and Young Children

Because Scripture clearly tells us that infants are actually sinful from conception and because baptism gives the forgiveness of sins, it is clear that God's gift of baptism is a blessing and a gift of God's grace also for infants and small children. The apostle Paul cautioned against unlimited participation in the Lord's Supper when he said: **"Let a man examine himself, and so let him of the bread and drink of the cup"** (1 Corinthians 11:28). But neither Paul nor our Lord Jesus nor any of the apostles ever spoke of any kind of limitations with respect to baptism. When Jesus instituted baptism, He said to His followers: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"** (Matthew 28:19-20).

We do not baptize persons contrary to their own desire, however, for the kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom and **"the weapons of our warfare are not carnal"** (2 Corinthians 10:4). Nor do we baptize infants and small children against the will of their parents or those who are responsible for them. But Peter made it clear on the day of Pentecost that baptism for the remission of sins was intended by the Lord as a blessing for all: **"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call"** (Acts 2:38-39).

It is true that there is no specific example in the New Testament of an infant or small child receiving baptism, but there are several examples of family or household baptisms. It is certainly probable that these families had members of various ages. On Paul's second mission journey, the woman Lydia living in Philippi heard the Gospel of Christ as preached by Paul and Silas. We read: **"The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul."** And then we are told: **"She and her household were baptized"** (Acts 16:14-15). Later in this same chapter we learn of the conversion of the jailer of Philippi. Paul and Silas **"spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house... And immediately he and all his family were baptized"** (Acts 16:32). It is possible that the Gentile Cornelius also had his family baptized after listening to the message brought by the apostle Peter (Acts 10:48; 11:14). In his letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul mentions that he **"baptized the household of Stephanas"** (1 Corinthians 1:16).

There are also many indications in the writings of the early Christians that it was customary for them to baptize infants and small children. One of our Lutheran teachers has written: "Origen calls the baptism of children a practice stemming from the apostles... It would be completely impossible to understand how the church fathers could have spoken in favor of children's baptism if it had been established as fact that only adults were baptized by the apostles or their helpers" (Adolf Hoenecke: *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, p. 100).

These early writings present much testimony that the baptism of infants and small children was standard practice in the first years of the church. But later the false teaching that baptism provides forgiveness only for sins committed before baptism took hold among many. As a consequence of this teaching some persons delayed their baptisms as long as possible, so that they would have greater assurance of forgiveness all the way to the end of their lives. Some even waited until they were about

to die. But this custom of delaying baptism did not prevail in the church, and soon the standard practice was to baptize a child soon after birth. This practice prevailed in the church until the time of the Reformation, when persons known as Anabaptists (rebaptizers) arose. They insisted that infant baptism was invalid, and that all persons baptized in infancy should be rebaptized as adults.

Today there are many Christian groups who oppose infant baptism, particularly those who are known as Baptists. In some parts of the world the majority of Christians baptize only adults who are able to confess their faith. What are some of the arguments used by those who oppose infant baptism? One argument is that there is no direct mention of an infant baptism in the New Testament. But this is an argument from silence. One cannot prove that the families baptized in the Bible comprised only adults.

The main argument used by Baptists and others is that since infants and small children are unable to express their faith in Christ, it is not possible for them to believe in Jesus. How then can they be saved? It is the view of Baptists and others that God does not charge sin against children until they reach the age of discretion. In their view, infants and children do not really need baptism for the remission of sins at their age. In fact, most Protestants – both those in favor of infant baptism and those opposing infant baptism – do not believe that baptism conveys forgiveness of sins in any case, and, therefore, the baptism of infants and children serves no purpose. In their view, it is not reasonable to believe that pouring water on the head of an infant while saying some words from the Bible can accomplish anything.

Because of the prevalence of these views that oppose infant baptism, it is necessary for us to teach very clearly why we, as confessional Lutherans, practice infant baptism and believe that those who oppose infant baptism are, in fact, opposing the will of God.

1. Our first reason for practicing infant baptism is simply that Jesus has commanded us to baptize all nations, and that Scripture does not express any limitations on this are expressed.
2. Secondly, the examples of family baptisms in the Bible make it probable that the apostles themselves practiced infant and child baptism.
3. Thirdly, the records of the early Christians indicate that infant baptism was practiced from the very earliest days of the church.
4. Fourthly, the Scriptures clearly teach that baptism is for the remission of sins, that baptism a washing of regeneration, that infants and small children are sinners from birth, and that they need the forgiveness of sins and regeneration. They need baptism. Our Lord Jesus told Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... 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... You must be born again”** (John 3:3-7). Before this spiritual regeneration, we are all **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1). Baptism provides a cleansing **“with the washing of water by the word”** (Ephesians 5:26). The notion that infants come into the world with a clean slate and are not responsible to God for the sins of childhood is clearly contrary to the teachings of Jesus, who said: **“Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies”** (Matthew 15:19). **“The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”** (Genesis 8:21).
5. Fifthly, even though Baptists and others argue that little children cannot believe in Jesus because they do not have any reasoning power, Jesus taught that little children can have faith in Him. Jesus said: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea”** (Matthew 18:6). John the Baptist was still in his mother’s womb when he was **“filled with the Holy Spirit”** (Luke 1:15). His mother Elisabeth testified: **“The babe leaped in my womb for joy”** (Luke 1:44). When little children praised Jesus as He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He said to those who objected: **“Have you never read, ‘Out of the**

mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise'?" (Matthew 21:16).

6. Sixthly, there can be no doubt that Jesus is very much concerned for the spiritual needs of infants. It is written: **"Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.' And he took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them"** (Mark 10:13-16). We are inclined to think that little children must become adults before they can receive Jesus' blessings, but Jesus turned that around and said that adults must become like little children. Jesus also said: **"Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones"** (Matthew 18:10). **"It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish"** (Matthew 18:14). Are not those who deprive infants and small children of the blessings of baptism guilty of a serious disservice to them?
7. Seventhly, baptism is compared with Old Testament circumcision, which was administered to male infants when they were eight days old. Paul wrote to the Colossians: **"In Him (Christ) you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism"** (Colossians 2:11-12). Circumcision was limited to males in the Old Testament, but it was not limited to adults. Surely baptism, which is Christ's circumcision or Christian circumcision, would not be more limited than Old Testament circumcision, which included infants and small children. In fact, it is clear that baptism is for all: men and women, adults and children, Jews and Gentiles. It is written: **"Both men and women were baptized"** (Acts 8:12).

Perhaps the chief reason why so many reject infant baptism is that they do not believe what the Bible teaches about baptism: that it is a washing of regeneration. In other words, they do not believe that an infant or a child is born again or regenerated through baptism. Since baptismal regeneration is something that must be believed rather than seen and since it is contrary to human reason, it is rejected. But on the basis of human reason we would have to object to almost all of the teachings of the Bible. In spiritual matters we have no sure guide apart from the Holy Scriptures, which our God has given to us as a source of Christian teaching. **"All scripture is given by inspiration of God (breathed out by God), and is profitable for doctrine"** (2 Timothy 3:16).

Questions

1. How does Matthew 28:19 teach us that we should baptize infants and children?
2. How does Acts 2:38-39 teach us that we should baptize infants and children?
3. Give some examples of family baptisms in the New Testament.
4. What evidence is there that the early Christians practiced infant baptism?
5. Why did some Christians delay their baptisms?
6. Who opposed infant baptism at the time of the Reformation?
7. What arguments are used by those who oppose infant baptism?
8. List the arguments in favor of infant baptism.
9. Which of these arguments is the strongest argument, in your opinion?
10. Why is it dangerous to argue on the basis of human reason?
11. Which groups practice infant baptism in your locale?
12. Which groups oppose infant baptism in your locale?
13. Why should we not force people to be baptized or to baptize their children?



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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?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.6 – The Doctrine of Baptism

The Continuing Use of Baptism in a Christian's Life

In the days of Abraham God initiated the rite of circumcision for all males in Abraham's household and among his descendants. All male babies were to be circumcised on their eighth day of life, and all those older than eight days at this time were to be circumcised at whatever age they were. This ceremony did not have to be repeated in a man's life; it happened only once in his life.

In a similar way baptism happens only once in a person's life. When Jesus gave the instructions for making disciples among the nations, He indicated that baptism was to be followed by teaching (Matthew 28:19-20). There is no indication anywhere that baptism, once administered according to Bible teaching, needs to be repeated.

The reason baptism does not need to be repeated is plain: when God makes a promise, we can count on Him to keep that promise. His Word can be trusted. Therefore, even if a baptized person later falls away from faith and lives the life of an unbeliever, God's Word has not changed. The person can return to the Lord and be assured that God's Word still stands. **"For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, not shall My covenant of peace be removed, says the LORD, who has mercy on you"** (Isaiah 54:10). God's covenant in baptism stands. The apostle Paul asks: **"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). God calls His covenant **"an everlasting covenant"** (Isaiah 55:3) and tells the one who has turned away: **"Let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon"** (Isaiah 55:7).

Thus, throughout their life a Christian can remember their baptism as God's Word to them personally that God has loved them, has sent Christ to be their Savior, has washed away their sins through Christ's blood, and has made them a child and heir of God and a member of His family and a member of His Church. Besides assuring us of God's forgiveness in Christ, baptism is God's pledge to us of His gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He gives us the Holy Spirit to wage war against the sin that continually entangles us. Paul's wrote in letter to the Romans: **"Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life, For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing that, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin"** (Romans 6:3-6).

Our baptism signifies the crucifixion and death of the old nature of sin, and the rising up of the new nature. Jesus died because the burden of our sin was laid on Him, but when He rose from the dead, that burden of sin was on Him no more. He was free. When we are baptized, we die with Christ, our old flesh is crucified and is buried, and we come forward after baptism with the forgiveness of all our sins and with the power to live a new life as slaves, no longer as slaves of sin and Satan, but as free and willing servants and slaves of our God. Paul says: **"Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness... But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:18, 22-23).

Martin Luther explained in his *Small Catechism*: “It (baptism) signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (*Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 360*).

Whenever we sin – and especially whenever we become aware of our sin and recognize our guilt – we need to acknowledge this sin to our Lord and return to His promise to us in our baptism that our sins are forgiven. In the strength of that assurance, we rise up again with new life and devotion and service to our Savior. In this way our baptism continues as a constant source of spiritual strength throughout our lives.

Questions

1. How many times was a male circumcised in the Old Testament?
2. How many times was a person baptized in the New Testament?
3. Why does baptism not have to be repeated when we sin?
4. What happened to all human sin when Jesus died?
5. Why was Jesus able to rise with new life after His burial?
6. What happens when we are buried with Christ in baptism?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.7 – The Doctrine of Baptism

The Baptism of John the Baptist

Jesus commanded to His disciples to baptize all nations after His suffering, death, and resurrection. But there had been a baptism before this time instituted by God Himself, for John the Baptist said: **“I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He (the Spirit) remained on Him (Jesus). I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God”** (John 1:32-34). It was God who sent John the Baptist to baptize with water; thus, John’s baptism was also instituted by God. Jesus also recognized that John’s baptism was **“from heaven”** and not **“from men”** (Matthew 21:25).

The baptism of John the Baptist was essentially the same as Christian baptism, for John’s baptism was also **“for the remission of sins”** (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). John baptized those who accepted his preaching of repentance and confessed their sins (Matthew 3:6). John’s role was preliminary – he was sent to prepare the way – as he said: **“That He (Christ) should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water”** (John 1:31).

When Jesus said to Nicodemus that one must be born again of water and the Spirit, He was referring to John’s baptism. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. It was very likely that he joined the other Pharisees in rejecting John’s baptism as unnecessary for them, for it is written: **“The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (John the Baptist)”** (Luke 7:30). Rejecting John’s baptism was the same as rejecting the will of God.

John the Baptist was not the only one who was authorized to baptize. Jesus’ disciples also baptized at the same time as John. In fact, John’s disciples complained to John: **“Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified – behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!”** (John 3:26). Jesus Himself did not baptize anyone, for it is written: **“When the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee”** (John 4:1-3). Most likely Jesus’ disciples were baptized by John, and as Jesus’ disciples they continued to carry out John’s baptism for some time. There is no record that Jesus Himself ever baptized anyone. It was not until after His resurrection that Jesus gave the orders for all of His followers to baptize others in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We do not know whether John the Baptist baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts tells us about an eloquent speaker named Apollos who came to Ephesus a short time after Paul himself had visited that city on his second journey. The Bible says of Apollos that he **“had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John”** (Acts 18:25). Priscilla and Aquila **“took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately”** (Acts 18:26). There is no indication that Apollos was baptized a second time.

When the apostle Paul returned to Ephesus on his third mission journey, he met twelve disciples who had been baptized with John’s baptism. Paul explained to them that John the Baptist was a man of God who told the people **“that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus”** (Acts 19:4). Thus, John’s work of baptizing was only temporary.

The New Testament was written in Greek, which did not include quotation marks, so it is difficult for us to know how to understand the account in Acts 19. The New King James Version ends Paul's words in with verse 4. Some Lutheran teachers believe that verse 5 was also spoken by Paul, which changes what happened. Below is the account as punctuated in the New King James version. Following that is an alternate version which includes verse 5 in what Paul says.

The New King James Version (Acts 19:1-7):

¹And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples ²he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit."

³And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?"

So they said, "Into John's baptism."

⁴Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus."

⁵When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all.

The alternate version (Acts 19:1-7):

¹And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples ²he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit."

³And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?"

So they said, "Into John's baptism."

⁴Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. ⁵When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

⁶And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all.

In the New King James Version, the twelve men were baptized twice: once with "John's baptism", then with the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus. In the alternate version, the men were baptized only once, with John's baptism, which Paul explained to them more fully.

Regardless of whether these men were baptized once or twice, we cannot conclude from this account that John's baptism was different from the Christian baptism, as the clear passages we have studied above show that they both give the forgiveness of sins. Nor can we conclude that God does not give His Holy Spirit in baptism or that the Holy Spirit must be given by a separate laying on of hands. The Bible passages we have studied in this chapter clearly show that one receives God's gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism (see, for example, Peter's words on Pentecost in Acts 2:38). As mentioned in lesson 9.6, the Bible refers to the laying on of hands, but nowhere does Jesus command us to do so. Jesus has, however, commanded us to baptize.

Questions

1. Where did John the Baptist get the authority to baptize?
2. What makes John's baptism basically the same as Christian baptism today?
3. How did the Pharisees react to John's baptism?
4. Why did John's disciples complain to John about Jesus?
5. How Apollos deficient in his understanding of the Gospel?
6. What was missing in the knowledge of the twelve men Paul met in Ephesus?



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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?