

6. The Means of Grace: Word and Baptism

It had been a rough day for the two missionaries in Philippi. After Paul and Silas saved a slave girl from an evil spirit, they were angrily accosted by her owners. This led to them being arrested and flogged – a punishment severe enough to kill a man. Exhausted and bleeding, they were finally dumped off at the city jail. Even there the jailor had no pity on his helpless captives. He caused additional discomfort by ordering them to be locked up all night with their feet in the stocks. Yet, despite their troubles, Paul and Silas remained in good spirits, praying and singing hymns and telling their fellow prisoners about their Savior, Jesus.

Around midnight a tremendous earthquake shook the prison so violently that the door swung open, and the prisoners' chains were all torn loose. The jailor rushed outside and when he saw the doors open, he fell to his knees in dismay. Under Roman law, any time a prisoner escaped, the jailor paid for it with his life. Resolving that he would rather die quickly now than be publicly executed later, the jailor drew his sword and prepared to commit suicide.

Before he could go through with his plan, a voice stopped him in his tracks. It was Paul, calling from the darkness of the jail. "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" Astounded, the jailor called for lights and saw that what Paul said was true. Despite his excessively cruel treatment, the two missionaries had convinced all the other prisoners to stay in their cells - saving their captor's life.

The jailor was overcome with emotion. What could possibly cause these two men to show him such kindness after he had showed them such cruelty? "They must have some connection with God," he thought, and asked them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas were happy to share the good news that salvation requires no action on our part. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." The jailor was so happy to hear the gospel that at that very hour of the night he invited Paul and Silas into his home and dressed their wounds. Afterward, he and his whole family were baptized.

This was common practice in the early church. When the head of a household came to faith, he very naturally wanted the rest of his family – very young and old alike – to be adopted into God's family through the waters of baptism.

(adapted from Acts 16:25-40)

This lesson focuses on the tool God uses to create faith in human hearts. **"The gospel,"** Paul writes, "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Romans 1:16) We will look especially at how God applies that gospel to our hearts through the sacrament of baptism.

WHAT ARE THE MEANS OF GRACE?

Review the two main messages of God's Word, and discuss why they are both important.

Read Acts 2:22-41.

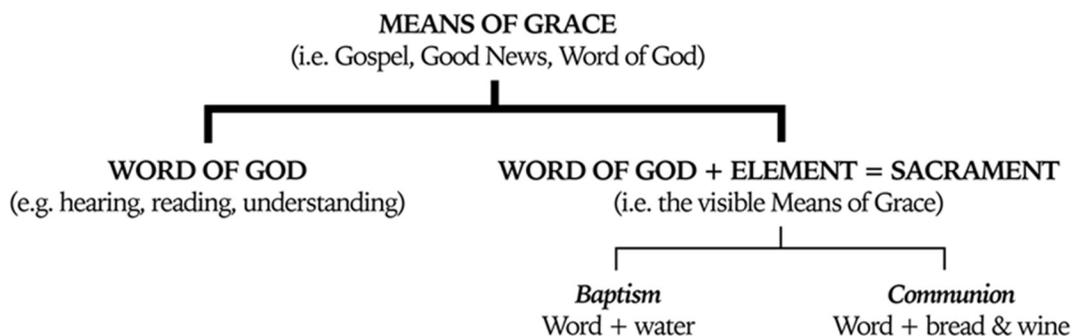
In this Pentecost sermon, the Holy Spirit led Peter to preach both **law** and **gospel**. Many people responded to God's Word. Their response to the law was repentance, and their response to the gospel was faith.

1 Corinthians 12:3 *No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 10:17 *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*

Based on the passages we've read so far, it is clear that **the Holy Spirit** is responsible for bringing people to faith. He does it by bringing them into contact with **the gospel of Jesus Christ**.

The following diagram illustrates the different ways that he does this, also known as the **Means of Grace**.

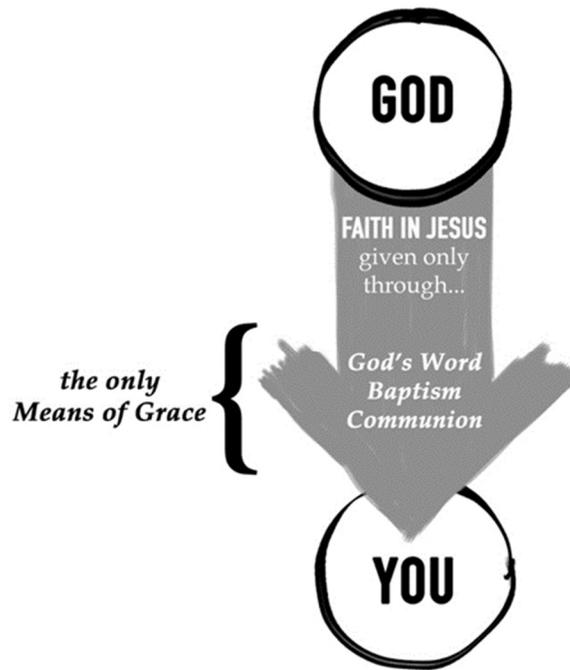


In addition to the written or spoken Word, the Holy Spirit also brings people the gospel in two other very special ways. The Lutheran church calls these **sacraments**. We define a sacrament as:

- A sacred act that Jesus commanded
- An act using certain physical elements connected to God's Word
- An act through which God promises to give forgiveness, new life, and salvation

The only two acts that fit this description are _____ and _____.

NOTE: Whenever we talk about these two sacred acts called "sacraments," we need to remember *who is acting*. Both sacraments are purely the work of God, and not the work of humans. If we forget this, we stand to lose all the joy and comfort that God wants us to have in both baptism and the Lord's Supper. The sacraments only work one way: from God to us.



Let's begin with the sacrament of baptism.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT BAPTISM?

Where in the Bible does Jesus command baptism?

Read Matthew 28:18-20.

Jesus says that our mission is to make disciples of all nations. In the original Greek, baptizing and teaching are clearly identified as the *means by which* people are “made disciples.”

Where in the Bible does it say that in baptism, God saves sinners?

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

Acts 2:38 *Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**. And you will receive **the gift of the Holy Spirit**.”*

Through baptism God saves us, by forgiving our sins and giving us faith (a.k.a. “the gift of the Holy Spirit.”)

Read the following passages and identify even more spiritual blessings God gives us through baptism:

Galatians 3:26-27

Romans 6:1-7

Titus 3:5-6

WHY DO LUTHERANS BAPTIZE INFANTS?

Read Acts 16:13-15 and Acts 16:29-34

In both these stories of Christian converts in Philippi, the people were baptized along with their whole families. No distinction of age is mentioned.

We also know the following truths from God's Word. . .

Psalm 51:5 Children are sinful from conception

Ezekiel 18:20 Sinful people deserve to die

Romans 5:12 Sin is the cause of death

1 Peter 3:20b-21 Baptism saves people from sin

Matthew 28:19 Jesus says to baptize "all nations"

Ephesians 2:8-9 Faith in a sinner's heart is a miracle every time it happens – no matter how young or old they are.

Luke 18:15-17 Jesus says "Let the little children come to me." (The Greek word in this passage is specifically used for infants and unborn children) See also Matthew 18:6 & Mark 10:13



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM

Why do some churches not baptize infants?

They view baptism as something *we* do, rather than something *God* does. Because of this, they only permit those who know about baptism and ask for it to be baptized. They are trying to make the "arrow" of the sacraments point up, when it should be pointing down. They also believe that young people should not be baptized until they reach an "age of accountability", which is not found in the Bible. They do not believe infants or small children are sinful. They do not believe that infants and small children are held accountable to God for the sins they commit. They do not believe that infants/small children can have faith in Jesus.

Did the early church baptize infants?

Absolutely. Early Christians knew that baptism is something God does for us. Numerous inscriptions on the graves in the catacombs, dating back to the very first centuries of Christianity, testify to the fact that the early Christians baptized their children. Here is one: "Aristus lived eight months. He was recently baptized."

Many of the early church fathers wrote about infant baptism. For example, Irenaeus (d.202AD) a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of St. John, speaks of people of all ages, from infants up to the oldest, as reborn through Christ. Origen (185-254AD) wrote, "Infants are baptized for the forgiveness of sins," and "The church received from the apostles the tradition to give even little children to baptism."

Does it matter how much water is used in baptism?

Scripture nowhere specifies an amount of water to be used. Early engravings dating as far back as 165 AD show pictures of baptisms by pouring water over the head. It is not the water that has the power, but the Word of God applied with water in the name of the Triune God.

Is there any difference between baptizing children and adults?

Jesus said, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, **and teaching** them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

When we baptize an infant, we trust through this sacrament God is putting faith in their heart. We (pastor, parents, and sponsors) also take responsibility to teach them God's Word throughout their life so their faith can grow.

When we baptize an adult, we recognize that God has already given them faith through the preaching of the Gospel. We trust that God will strengthen that faith through baptism, and through a steady diet of God's Word throughout their life.

Illustration: Growing a tomato plant by seed...



Taking it deeper...

Agree or disagree?

Babies are too young to understand baptism.

Babies are too young to believe in Jesus.

Babies should be baptized as soon as possible.

Only pastors may perform a baptism.

If you were baptized as a child in another Christian church but later become a Lutheran, you must be re-baptized.

If you were baptized as a child, lost your faith, and years later became a Christian again, you must be re-baptized.

Discuss:

Why do some parents designate sponsors or godparents for a child being baptized?

What happens to babies who die without baptism?

Why does the pastor make the sign of the cross when he speaks the name of the Trinity?

What is that giant candle in the chancel next to the baptismal font?

What does baptism mean for me today?

LUTHER SAYS.... (SMALL CATECHISM: PART 4—The sacrament of Holy Baptism)

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM FOR OUR DAILY LIFE

What does baptizing with water mean?

Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written?

Saint Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, "We were...buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

BAPTISM — IS IT A WORK OF GOD OR A WORK OF MAN?

Does God do something special through baptism? Over the centuries millions of Christians have said, “Yes! God works in the waters of baptism, not only giving a sign and seal of His grace, but actually delivering to the baptized His regenerating Spirit.” Others, however, who have permitted their understanding of baptism to be guided by mere human reason and sight, declare that baptism is merely man’s response to the grace of God obtained elsewhere.

Below are some common objections to the Biblical teaching of God’s saving power in baptism. Each is followed by a Scripture-based rebuttal.

OBJECTION	REBUTTAL
Isn't joining the church an act of a person who decides to believe in Jesus, and not based on a mere ritual like baptism?	The Church is not like a club, made up of individuals who on their own decide to join (1 Cor. 2:12-14), but is a family established by its head Jesus Christ (Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5), a new community resulting from His Spirit's call (Jn. 3:5; 15:16; 1 Cor. 12:3). God's action always precedes the existence of faith in any individual, regardless of age.
Baptism in the Spirit is the only regenerating baptism. Water baptism accomplishes nothing special.	The distinction is artificial. Christian baptism is baptism in the Spirit. What God has joined together we are not to put asunder. The Spirit comes to us enveloped in baptism's waters (Jn. 3:5; Titus 3:5). Peter states clearly that through baptism the gift of the Spirit is given (Acts 2:33).
If infants should be baptized, why doesn't the Bible say so?	What is assumed need not always be expressed. The Bible always includes infants and families in its understanding of "nations" (Ex. 11:5; Josh. 8:35; Isa. 13:16; Ezek. 9:6). Jesus did not condemn Judaism for circumcising 8-day-old children, or baptizing the infants of those who converted to Judaism.
Since adults are first taught, then baptized, doesn't the same rule apply to infants and children?	Jesus's command to disciple all nations coordinates teaching and baptism, but does not specify sequence. The order makes sense with adults but cannot be used as the reason against baptizing infants. To assume this is to hold the error that a person contributes to his salvation through offering some type of rational thought. Infants are baptized with the purpose that they enter into Christ's church for a life-long learning of His Word (2 Pet. 3:18).
Isn't the baptizing of infants a denial of the necessity of faith?	The Holy Spirit desires to create faith in all. He can come even to a child in the womb (Jer. 1:5; Lk. 1:15). He also comes in baptism's water to bestow faith in infants and children (Ps. 22:9-10; Matt. 21:15-16).
A child is not worthy to be baptized because he/she has not made a conscious and firm declaration of faith.	Saving faith is never self-centered or self-originated. No one, regardless of age, infants or adults, is worthy of God's gracious activity, nor is able to accept God or create his/her own faith (1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:7; 9:16). But what is impossible for all people, including infants, children, and adults, is possible with God (Matt. 19:26).

OBJECTION	REBUTTAL
Baptism should be limited to those who have reached the "age of accountability."	There is no Biblical statement for waiting until such an age. Accountability before God begins at conception (Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Jn. 3:6). Baptism is like the Old Testament rite of circumcision, and Jewish children were circumcised when just eight days old.
Isn't it enough that infants and children are simply "presented" or "dedicated to God," asking for His blessing upon them?	Jesus did not command us to do just these, but to baptize "all nations." Infant "dedication" or "presentation" does not carry with it the divine promise of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness, as does baptism (Acts 2:38).
Aren't infants and children of believing parents already sanctified (1 Cor. 7:14) and therefore not in need of baptism?	While Jewish boys were born "in holiness," they still had to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. Christ says that infants are an example of how to receive God's kingdom (Mk. 10:15). Only by bringing them to baptism can we be sure that infants have been given Christ's kingdom (Rom. 6:3), and are under the influence of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies through water and Word (Jn. 3:5).
If baptism is so powerful, then why do so many who were baptized as infants no longer live an active Christian life?	Human unfaithfulness (for example, the children of Israel during the forty years in the wilderness) does not negate God's faithfulness (Rom. 3:1-4). Scripture teaches that believers can and do at times wander away from the faith (Matt. 13:5-7, 19-22).
Since the thief on the cross was saved without baptism, baptism is not necessary to salvation.	We cannot assume that the thief wasn't baptized, since John the Baptizer baptized a great number of Jews in and around Jerusalem (Jn. 3:23; Matt. 3:5). Only unbelief damns; not the lack of baptism. If not being baptized is symptomatic of a person's rejecting the promises of God's Word, then that person is in spiritual danger (Lk. 7:30).
Isn't baptizing infants giving the wrong impression of believing in "magical" water?	Only if we believe that baptism is mere water, rather than the water and the Word specifically connected to Christ's command and promises (Eph. 5:26; Matt. 28:19-20).

CONCLUSION: Baptism is not a mere ritual of remembrance. It is an active carrier of divine rescue; thus, baptism is an objective fact that is the foundation of Christian joy and comfort. Baptism brings the Holy Spirit, who connects the newly baptized to the new life (Jn. 3:5; Titus 3:5-7) resident in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 22:16). This new birth is given to all sinners, regardless of age (Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:25-28; Col. 2:13, 14). Baptism now saves you (1 Pet. 3:21).

BAPTISM — IS IT A WORK OF GOD OR A WORK OF MAN?

For hundreds of years the Christian church continued to practice its belief that through baptism the Holy Spirit bestows a new spiritual status upon the one baptized, regardless of age. But around the 16th century some radical reformers began to place their emphasis upon what human beings can do and see, thereby denying the clear statements of Scripture regarding baptism's regenerating power. "Baptism . . . saves" (1 Peter 3:21).

DENOMINATION	BELIEFS ABOUT BAPTISM	TYPE OF BAPTISM	BELIEF IN BAPTISM OF INFANTS	BAPTISM REGENERATES, GIVES SPIRITUAL LIFE
Seventh Day Adventists	An ordinance, a symbolic ritual, not necessary to salvation. A time for person to express personal faith in Christ.	By immersion only.	No. Only those old enough to give expression of knowledge of their conversion. Children "dedicated" or "presented" to God.	
Baptists	A divine ordinance, a symbolic ritual, a sign of having already been saved, but not necessary for salvation.	By immersion only.	No. Baptism is an act of confession that is done by a converted person able to profess faith.	
Eastern Orthodox	The "Mystery" (Sacrament) is necessary because it confers forgiveness for both native sinfulness and actual transgressions.	By immersion 3 times (sprinkling accepted only in emergency).	Yes. Also receive Holy Communion and the Chrismation (anointing).	Yes.
Episcopal (Anglicans, Anglo-Catholics)	Necessary to salvation because it conveys spiritual rebirth.	By immersion or pouring.	Yes.	Yes. Anglo-Catholic, but "low" Episcopalians do not.
Lutherans	A vehicle for God's Spirit to bestow the necessary new life-giving status upon sinners (Titus 3:5).	By sprinkling, pouring, or immersing.	Yes.	Yes.
Methodists (Arminians, Wesleyans)	Baptism not necessary to salvation, since it is an outward sign of one's membership in the Christian community.	By sprinkling, pouring, or immersion.	Yes.	Yes.
Presbyterians	An ordinance, a symbolic ritual, and a seal of the adult believer's present faith.	By sprinkling, pouring, or immersing.	Yes, to indicate membership in the Covenant Community of their Christian parents.	

Pentecostal "Various "holiness" groups, Christian Missionary Alliance, Assemblies of God)	Water baptism is an ordinance, a symbolic ritual used to witness to having accepted Christ as personal Savior.	By immersion. Also stress the necessity of a "second" baptism of a special outpouring from the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in unintelligible language.	No. But dedicate children to God, asking His blessing on them.	
Quakers (Religious Society of Friends, and the Mennonites)	Only an external symbol that is no longer to be practiced.	Do not believe in baptism of water, but only in an inward, ongoing purification of the human spirit in a life of discipline led by the Holy Spirit.		
Roman Catholic	Necessary for the infusion of the sanctifying power called grace that starts one on the path to salvation.	Primarily by sprinkling.	Yes.	Yes.
Salvation Army	Do not baptize anyone today. Believe it was to be done only at the time of Christ.			
United Church of Christ (Evangelical and Reformed Churches, and the Congregationalist Churches)	Not necessary for salvation because it is only an outward ritual.	By sprinkling.	No. Baptism administered at the time of Confirmation. Infants are "presented" or "dedicated" to God by parents or sponsors.	
Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints (Mormons) (Anti-Trinitarian)	An ordinance essential to salvation for the removal of sins and entrance into the church.	By immersion performed by a person holding proper priesthood authority.	No. Only those 8 years old and older.	
Jehovah Witnesses (Anti-Trinitarian)	Baptism not necessary for salvation since it is only a symbol of one's attitude of being dead to sin.	By immersion, but not done in their meeting places (Kingdom Halls).	No.	

Birth is always a gift from God, and not something we do for ourselves. Christians who follow the practice of the early church, as do the Lutherans, declare that baptism is more than a human act remembering some action of God in the past, and more than a human act of obedience to a divine command. Baptism is rebirth (John 3:3-5), initiated and carried out by God. Baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21) because the Holy Spirit is enveloped in its waters to bring the baptized into a new life of salvation through connection with Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5; Romans 6:4).