

# HOLY BAPTISM: A BRIEF STUDY

*Pr. William P. Terjesen*

The appropriate place to start when considering the doctrine of Holy Baptism is with Christ's Great Commission to the disciples. **Matthew 28:18-20** says:

- 18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.
- 19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
- 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

The mission of the Christian Church, given by Jesus, and conducted by His authority and in His presence, is to go to all nations baptizing and teaching the Word of God so that as many people as possible might be saved. Jesus says in this passage that the way to bring people to salvation is to baptize them and teach them. The church is to continue to do this until the end of the world with the assurance that Christ is present with them. The mission is universal, encompassing as many as can be imagined by the term "all nations". All people in the world have this in common: they are conceived and born in sin and would perish eternally in hell unless saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, they are all candidates for the mission efforts of the Church.

What, then, have we learned from this passage about Holy Baptism?

1. Baptism in the Name of the Triune God is right at the center of the Church's mission. It is not a peripheral activity
2. Baptism is done according to the Institution of Christ, by His authority, and in His presence. It is not simply a humanly devised church ceremony.
3. The recipients of this baptizing and teaching mission of the Church are "all nations", a term that discourages any unwarranted narrowing down. This point will be reiterated again later when we consider "infant baptism".

Now, this is not all that the Bible has to say about Holy Baptism, but so far we learned enough to know that a right teaching, right practicing church will have Baptism right in the center of its evangelical outreach rather than on the sidelines. Christ's words in **Mark 16:15-16** echo the words we've just considered:

- 15 And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.
- 16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

Since Holy Baptism is so central and so important to the mission of the Church and to the salvation of sinners, it is imperative that we look closely at the rest of the Biblical data on the subject. Some churches consider Holy Baptism an "ordinance" that is, an act that we are commanded to do by Christ. According to this way of thinking Baptism is an act of obedience done by a person; an external act which signifies or symbolizes an inner spiritual reality. Among people who think like this, what's really important is one's inner spiritual experience of "asking Jesus to come into my heart". The act of Baptism itself is of relatively minor importance.

But in the Lutheran Church Holy Baptism is a Sacrament. It is an act of God upon the person being baptized; an act in which the Lord gives to the baptized the benefits, blessings, and gifts which Christ purchased and won for us with His sacrificial death on the cross. Like the Word of God and Holy Communion, Baptism is a God-appointed delivery vehicle for the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. In the Word we are told of, and offered, the forgiveness of sins through Christ. And in the Word and Sacraments God also delivers what He promises. Therefore, faith is never in doubt as to where to find grace: God's Word and Sacraments. Let's look at some more Bible passages about Holy Baptism.

### **Acts 2.37-39**

- 37 Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?
- 38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.
- 39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

In Acts 2, the astonishing events of the Day of Pentecost are related to us. The Holy Ghost was poured out on the disciples and they spoke in languages they had never known before. This gift of the Spirit was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and a consequence of the completed saving work of Jesus Christ. Peter preached the Word to the thousands who gathered because of the sound of the rushing mighty wind and the whole group of disciples speaking in tongues. At the end of his preaching, we are told that the crowd was "pricked in their hearts", that is, they were alarmed and troubled in conscience. They realized their sinful condition and asked, "what shall we do?" Peter's answer is very instructive when we let him say what he's actually saying. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." One is baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Note this! Peter is saying that forgiveness of sins is given in baptism. He further says that the gift of the Holy Ghost is received through baptism. People who believe that baptism only symbolizes these things must fiddle with these words and reinterpret them. But when we let them say what they say, we are led to the conclusion: God grants in baptism the benefits Christ won for us in His death and resurrection. But there's more. Peter says further: "The promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." We are here confronted again with the universal scope of God's saving grace. And it includes children (more about this later). Let's move on.

### **John 3.3-5**

- 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
- 4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?
- 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

In John 3, Jesus is speaking with the pharisee Nicodemus who has come to Him at night with questions. In verse 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that the only way to see the kingdom of God is to be "born again". Nicodemus, a man of the Law, is used to "doing" something, and here Jesus tells him that he must "be" something: born again. Confused, Nicodemus asks, "How?" Jesus, in a most solemn way, explains how in verse 5: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." To be born again is to be born of water and the Spirit, or in other words, to be baptized. Now, there is no shortage of scholars who deny that Jesus is referring to baptism here, but all their alternative interpretations are forced and complex where Jesus is clear and simple. Wherever in the New Testament water is mentioned in connection with salvation it is always talking about Holy Baptism. And it is more than interesting to note that the entire second half of John 3 deals with baptizing done by Jesus' disciples and John the Baptist. So, from Jesus' own mouth we have it: to be born again is to be baptized. The connection of water and Spirit mentioned here is further elaborated in our next passage.

### **1 Corinthians 12.13**

- 13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

Just as Jesus had mentioned water and Spirit in one breath, so here St. Paul says that it is the Spirit at work in Holy Baptism. To be baptized in to the body of Christ means to be made a member of Christ's church which is His body. Paul says that this is done by the Spirit who baptizes us into Christ. He is not talking about some subsequent "Spirit baptism", but of being made a member of Christ. There is no separation between Spirit baptism and water baptism, they are one in the same. In **Ephesians 4.5** St. Paul tells us there is "one baptism". Baptism is baptism, the vehicle through which the Holy Ghost delivers Christ's saving benefits to us, and regenerates us. When we let the Word speak to us as it is without

overlaying it with our own preconceived ideas, it is amazing what we learn. Let's move to the next passage.

### **Acts 22.16**

- 16 And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

St. Paul is relating the story of his conversion. He had seen a vision of the Risen Christ while on the road to Damascus. Christ told him to go into the city and await further instructions. A Christian named Ananias was sent by Christ to heal Paul's blindness and tell him what he must do. The central idea for the purpose of our subject is in verse 16, where Ananias tells Paul: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins". Gramatically, there is only one honest interpretation possible: baptism is a washing way of sins. The forgiveness won for us by Christ is personally applied to us in baptism, a washing away of sins. Ananias doesn't have an altar call. He doesn't urge Paul to "invite Christ into your heart". He doesn't tell Paul to pray and seek until he finds Christ. He tells him to be baptized and wash away his sins. Let's look further.

### **Romans 6.3-4**

- 3 Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?
- 4 Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Notice in verse 3 that baptism is baptism into Christ and into His death. In baptism a link up takes place between the sinner and Christ. This is not symbolic language. In verse 4 the link up between the sinner and the death and resurrection of Christ is made more explicit. In baptism we are buried and raise with Christ; His death and resurrection become ours. The death and resurrection of Christ are the source of all salvation. The benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ are delivered to us in baptism. We are linked up to what Christ has done for us, and then whatever good works we do are rooted in His saving grace. Please take notice in all these passages that the language, if allowed to stand untweaked, tells us clearly that the salvation won for us through Christ is offered and delivered to us in the Word and Baptism. The symbolic interpretation of these passages does not come from anything in the Bible, but is imported in from the outside, from anti-sacramental theologians. When we let the Word say what it says, we come up with baptismal regeneration. Our next passage:

### **Ephesians 5.26**

- 26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.

This is a brief passage but a significant one. As Luther's Small Catechism tells us: "How can water do such great things? It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simple water and no Baptism. But with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost." This passage clearly states that we are sanctified (made holy; set apart) and cleansed (forgiven) through Christ with "the washing of the water in connection with the Word" (a more literal rendering of the original Greek). Christ applies the benefits of His saving death to us in the sacrament of Baptism. This is further amplified by our next passage.

### **Titus 3.5-7**

- 5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;
- 6 Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;
- 7 That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Paul is rejecting the idea of salvation by doing good works and proclaiming in a beautiful way that we are saved by the grace and mercy of God through Christ Jesus, "by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost". Remember what Jesus said about being born again? "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (**John 3.5**). Both passages are talking about the same thing. We have no warrant for supposing that the "washing of regeneration" is anything other than Baptism through which we are cleansed and renewed by the Holy Ghost. One more passage:

## 1 Peter 3.18-21

- 18 For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:
- 19 By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;
- 20 Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.
- 21 The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Here St. Peter tells us that the salvation of Noah and his family in the Ark during the flood was a "type" of God's saving activity in the sacrament of Baptism. Notice St. Peter's words: "Baptism doth also now save us". He doesn't say Baptism symbolizes our salvation, or that Baptism represents externally an already accomplished internal activity. That's not biblical thinking. Baptism is a divinely instituted means of grace through which God offers and gives the grace won for us by the atoning work of Jesus.

I hope that as we have looked somewhat carefully at the above Scripture passages, the reader will have come to see that the Bible teaches Baptismal Regeneration, and that the symbolic interpretation of the sacraments does not come from the Scriptures but from the fallen mind of man. Baptism is not a work we do to symbolize anything, it is a gift we receive from the hand of a loving and gracious God who through it links us up with the saving work of Christ. It only remains now to deal with the question of infant Baptism.

### Do infants need salvation?

Some teach that babies are born innocent; other teach that though babies are born with original sin, God doesn't hold it against them until they get old enough to commit "real" sins. Both of these opinions answer "no" to our question. The Bible and the Lutheran Church teach otherwise. The Augsburg Confession, Article 2, sums up the biblical teaching of original sin nicely:

1] Also they teach that since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with 2] concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost. 3] They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that original depravity is sin, and who, to obscure the glory of Christ's merit and benefits, argue that man can be justified before God by his own strength and reason. (Bente, F., Concordia Triglotta, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House) 1997.)

**Psalm 51.5** says: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." **Romans 3.10** says: "There is none righteous, no, not one." **Romans 3.23** says: "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." **Romans 6.23** says: "The wages of sin is death." **Romans 5.12** says: "As by one man [Adam] sin entered the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men..." The list goes on and on. All human beings are born sinners and would be eternally lost apart from salvation through Christ, and this includes infants. Sinful human reason rebels against this teaching but the Bible is clear: no one will be saved apart from Christ.

### Is Jesus concerned about the salvation of infants?

Some would say "no". But again, the Bible teaches otherwise. In **Luke 18.15-16** we read:

- 15 And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them.
- 16 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.

Mothers were bringing their infants to Jesus because they were concerned about their children's salvation. The touch of Jesus was not just a gesture like a politician kissing a baby. The touch of Jesus was His saving, blessing, healing touch. The disciples were annoyed. They were unconcerned with infants and thought that Jesus had better things to do, and so they rebuked the women who brought the infants. Jesus, on the other hand, chided the disciples and indicated His concern for the salvation of infants. Now, this passages doesn't deal specifically with baptism, but it does indirectly. When Jesus was on the earth during His public ministry, people could bring their children directly to Him and His touch would save them and

bring them into the Kingdom. Now, Christ has given the Word and Sacraments to the church, through which He brings us into His blessings and kingdom. When we baptize an infant we are bringing him to Jesus, who is concerned about their salvation.

### **Can infants believe?**

Yes! Infants can believe. Jesus tells us so in **Matthew 18.1-6**:

- 1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
- 2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,
- 3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
- 5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.
- 6 But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Jesus here uses a little child (a baby or toddler) as an example the kind of faith we should have. Then He specifically refers to them as "one of these little ones which believe in me". Jesus answers a resounding "yes" to the question, "can infants believe?" This is further substantiated by **Ps 22:9** - "But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts." An infant at its mother's breasts can hope (trust, believe)? There it is in black and white. And look at **Luke 1.17** where the angel Gabriel tells Zacharias that John the Baptist will be "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb." Then in **Luke 1.41,44** the baby in Elisabeth's womb (John the Baptist) leaped for joy in her womb at the greeting of Mary. Infants can believe.

We should, however, at this point consider that faith has a conscious and an unconscious dimension. When we are in church, or praying, or studying Scripture, etc., our faith is conscious, that is, we are consciously exercising it. But when we are asleep, or engrossed in a good movie, or busy at a daily task, we are not consciously thinking about God, our faith is not being consciously exercised. But that doesn't mean it's not there. Now, an infant, so far as we know, is not yet capable of conscious, reflective faith, but has an unconscious faith, similar to the faith that abides in us even when we sleep. Then, as the child grows and is able to comprehend, the unconscious faith becomes more and more conscious and reflective as it is nurtured by the Word of God in Church and home.

### **Are the promises of the Gospel for little children too?**

As we learned at the beginning of this study, Jesus commissioned His church to make disciples of all nations; to preach the gospel to every creature (Matt 28.19, Mk 16.15). The Gospel promises are for everyone. St. Peter says so much in his Pentecost sermon:

#### **Acts 2.38-39**

- 38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.
- 39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Notice verse 39. The promise is unto you, and to your children. The Gospel promises are for little children. Baptizing infants is consistent with the Great Commission.

### **Is there any indication in the Bible of the Baptism of infants?**

There is no direct reference to the baptism of infants in the Bible. This is due to fact that the main thrust of the mission of the church in the Book of Acts is on the first generation or so of adult converts. We know, however, from studying the later Apostolic Fathers that infant Baptism was a practice received from the Apostles and the earliest church. By the second century it was already widespread, which would not have been so if the practice had been rejected by the Apostles. There are, however, two indirect witnesses to infant Baptism in the Bible. The first:

## **Colossians 2.10-12**

- 10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:
- 11 In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:
- 12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

In the Old Testament, male children were circumcised on the eighth day after their birth. Circumcision was in the OT what Baptism is in the New Testament. In our text above, Paul brings out this connection between circumcision in the OT and Baptism in the NT. Since circumcision could be performed on an eight day old infant in the OT, there is no reason why it's NT counterpart could not be administered to infants as well.

The second indirect reference to infant Baptism in the NT occurs in the Book of Acts where, on a number of occasions, we are told that someone's entire household was baptized.

### **Acts 16.15**

- 15 And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.

### **Acts 16.33**

- 33 And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway.

### **Acts 18.8**

- 8 And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.

It must be borne in mind that households in those days were not like modern nuclear families. People had many children, and their bondservants had children as well. Therefore, it is not stretching by any means to suppose that when these entire households were baptized, an infant or two were included in the number.

In all that we've said above about infant Baptism, it should be clear that far from being a later corruption of the biblical practice, infant Baptism is entirely consistent with:

1. infants' need for salvation because they, too, are sinners
2. Christ's loving concern for their salvation
3. the Bible's witness that infants can believe
4. the promises of the Gospel are for them, too,
5. the connection of baptism with circumcision, and,
6. the baptism of entire households in the Acts.

Therefore, a Christian may joyfully embrace the practice of infant Baptism, and turn a deaf ear to those who would disparage it with unsound reasoning which comes, not from the Bible, but from the mind of fallen man.

One last question remains. Critics of infant Baptism often point out the large numbers of people baptized as infants who are lukewarm, or even downright unbelievers. If infant Baptism is so great, why are so many thus Baptized so far from being faithful Christians? This is a fair question, but it can also be applied to those baptized as teenagers or adults. Many of them as well are devoid of faith. Why? Because there will always be those who fall away from Christ. The Bible does not teach "Once saved, always saved"; "once Baptized, always saved". Baptism is the beginning of our life in Christ which is maintained by the nurture of the Word of God and the sacrament of Holy Communion. But if a person neglects the Word and Sacrament and backslides into worldliness, the salvation granted in Baptism can be lost.

What we see in the lives of many nominal, lukewarm, unbelieving church members is not that Baptism never gave them salvation, but that through neglect of the nurture of the Word and sacrament, they backslid, and lost what they once had. When they repent and are converted, it is a return to the grace of God

given in Holy Baptism. God didn't abandon them, they abandoned God. When they repent, the grace and gifts once given in Baptism are again enjoyed by the penitent believer. It is a grave mistake to think that Baptism never did anything in the first place. Baptism offers and gives forgiveness, life and salvation. But if we neglect these gifts through worldliness and unbelief, we can lose them. May God grant us a firm and joyous faith in Christ, who through the sacrament of Holy Baptism, gave us all the benefits and gifts He purchased and won for us in His once for all sacrificial death and His victorious resurrection.