

Baptism *Dr. Paul Spaulding*

Few Lutherans in our culture who are open to discussing their faith have not heard the question, “Why do you baptize infants?” Why do we baptize infants? A comfortable answer to that question eludes many people, church members and clergy alike. We hope here to provide some sense of why.

First, a brief history of baptism. Let us begin with the Reformation and back our way up to the early church. The Reformation was a great watershed in Christian History, and it will be important for us to look both forward and backward from that point. For centuries nothing was known in the church but infant baptism. By the Middle Ages, canon law and church order dictated the necessity of infant baptism and the procedure for its practice. But as with most rigidly defined doctrines and practices of the medieval church, infant baptism had a more humble and gracious origin in the early church. St. Augustine, that great evangelical bishop of the early church who died in 430 AD, says, “The whole church practices infant baptism. It was not instituted by church councils, but was always practiced.” He combines infant baptism as a mark of God’s grace with the challenge for peoples of all ages to rest in that grace. He recognized the importance of lifelong commitment to Christ, and of adults surrendering all to God, for it was he who coined the phrase, “The heart of man is restless until it rests in God.”

Further back in history, Origen, who died a little over 200 years after Christ’s death, relates that baptism of infants was a common practice. He attributes that practice to the apostles themselves.

In the early missionary days of the church it is generally accepted that most baptisms were of adults. Even by those presently affirming infant baptism this is held to be the case. This was an historical fact necessitated by the missionary nature of the church in that era. This is what we see reflected in the stories in the book of Acts. Contemporary missionaries in lands new to Christianity baptize mostly adults also. Again this is the necessity of history. Christianity (without the nurturing body of believers, local churches, local leadership, and strong Christian families) must reach its new converts through conversion of a community’s adult population. Christianity calls to the whole person, mind, body, spirit, and emotions. Without childhood training and the example of adults, the rule of the mind must be challenged first in the unbeliever. Such was the case in the early church. Therefore, most baptisms recorded in the Bible are of adults.

But those defending believer’s baptism, that is, adult baptism, cannot make their stand on the basis of Biblical practice. The account of the baptisms is certainly incomplete in the Bible and also inconclusive. Where whole families or households were baptized it is possible those events included children and infants. Likewise, those defending infant baptism cannot make a conclusive historical case from the Bible either. In a nutshell the Bible stories of Christian baptism do not solve the problem. They do not even provide a basis for logical argument leading in one direction or another.

What is obvious from history is that the early church quickly began baptizing its new infant arrivals so that by the time of Origen and even earlier it was common practice. Whether they should have done this is the question. That is a question that must be answered theologically rather than historically. The debate over that question - should the Christian Church, early or late, second century or today, baptize infants? - heated up in the Reformation years. Let us now look at those years following the watershed of the Reformation.

It was in Zurich, Switzerland, a Reformation town, that Anabaptism arose. Anabaptism is the notion that adult believers not infants, should be baptized. The term "Anabaptism" came from the fact that this usually meant re-baptism. Most of the Zurich's people were already baptized as infants. Zwingli, one of the Reformers from Zurich, emphasized the effort to return to the main ideas and practices of the early or primitive church. Leaders and lay people in Zurich shared this endeavor and there thus arose an increased interest in the literal interpretation of Scripture as the best means of implementing early church patterns. With the quest for literalism it was soon noticed that baptism of infants was not specially commanded in the Bible. Therefore, as early as 1522 many townspeople went beyond Zwingli's emphasis and began proposing adult baptism and thereby the re-baptism of many. Being avid missionaries, their movement spread and soon the separation in the Reformation camp was obvious and serious. Scorned by the Protestants and killed by the Catholics, individual Anabaptists suffered while their ideas spread. In the Protestant camp, division was soon marked between Luther and his stress on God's action in baptism and the Anabaptist stress on an adult's commitment and affirmation of the work of Christ. This remains at the core of contemporary differences between Protestant understandings of baptism. Fortunately, few are burned at the stake these days.

Let us now approach the question of infant baptism theologically. In all theological questions of the church it is imperative to remember the central reason for the Christian Faith, that is, Jesus Christ. Our focus must always start here, end here, and consciously be on our minds throughout our discussion. This emphasis on Christ is not just for sake of background to our free-wheeling ideas. Jesus Christ, who He is and what He does, affects every step in building coherent theological ideas. We will see this come true in our discussion of baptism.

So we begin with our focus on Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of God's love for humanity. In Christ we see God become one of us. God Himself has become incarnate, that is, "in flesh", so that He may reach out to us to make us His own. This is the nature of God: to reach out to humankind with His love, action, and Himself. This also is the sum of all that is in the New Testament. Whether it be the miracles of Jesus, or the Apostle Paul telling us not to be conformed to this world but transformed, every facet of God's Word points us to the God who reaches out to us.

Therefore the doctrines of the Church that rise out of Scripture are really not the province of the Church, but of the God of the Church, the God of the Bible and theology. Our question about baptism therefore should not start with "How does it work for me?"

What do I do to get its benefits?" The question is "What stake does God have in baptism? What is God's interest in it?"

Immediately we can say God commanded it. It is God's idea. It says in Matthew 28:19, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This same verse shows that God's involvement in baptism is double-edged. It was His idea, and He commanded it, and what He commanded was that we are to be baptized into His name, into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is involved by involving us with Himself.

That is a principle that works throughout God's working. God always involves Himself with us in order to involve us with Himself. He is a risk-taking lover of the universe, of this world, of humanity, and even of the dirt, skin, bones, flesh and blood, water, bread and wine of the world. He sent Himself, Jesus Christ, to be born of a woman, be a carpenter, live in Palestine, and to die at the hands of the Roman Empire. He sent His Word spoken and written in human language by human voices and human hands. He gave baptism and Holy Communion through the Word and the everyday elements of water, bread and wine. We could go on and on with this risk-taking, loved-filled, incarnational nature of God that permeates all Scripture. It is the Way God is, the way God reaches out to bring us to Himself.

There is no reason a baby born in a manger should bring us into relationship with the God of the universe except by the power of God. There is no reason English language words, whatever version you choose, written by Isaiah or Paul, and published by Zondervan or Nelson should effect eternal salvation except by the power of God. There is no reason a little tap water plus some words from this Book should do anything significant, except by the power of God. The point is, the power lies with God. It is God's nature to reach out and use everyday things to effect His purposes. The great multitude in Revelation 7 praises God by crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the lamb." So does baptism, Jesus, and the Word.

Let us quickly review this beginning principle. If the question of baptism is not to be answered historically but rather theologically, we must start where all theology starts: with God. So doing, we discover baptism is God's idea and His tool. It is one more instance in God's pattern of using the mundane and ordinary things of life to fulfill His purpose of bringing all humanity to Himself. Baptism, therefore, like Jesus, the Word, and salvation, is not primarily ours but God's. What He chooses to do with it is what we must accept and will enjoy.

Once we discover the basic element in baptism is not water, ourselves, our understanding of it, our faith or whatever, but rather is God's, then we can ask, "What does God do in baptism?"

Let us list some of the things the Bible says God does in, with, and by baptism. Acts 22:16 and Ephesians 5:26 speak about baptism as washing away our sins by cleansing us with water and the Word. Acts 2:38 says baptism is for the forgiveness of our

sins. Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:11-12 say essentially the same thing. Let us quote Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried with Him therefore, by baptism into death, so that when Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life." I Corinthians 12:13 talks about our being baptized into the body of "Christ" and Galatians 3:27 talks about clothing ourselves with Christ by baptism. I Peter 3:21, comparing baptism to Noah being saved by the Ark, says, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, though the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

By God's idea of baptism an appeal is made to God. By God's idea of baptism Christ is put on us like a garment, and we join the body of Christ. By God's baptism we die, are buried and rise with Christ. We are forgiven and have our sins washed away. All of this is God's business. Not one comment is made as to when it is to happen, or how we are to think or act at the time of our baptism. These verses capture the essential nature of baptism by capturing what God does in God's baptism.

Now we can ask the secondary question. How do I participate in baptism and its benefits? If children are to be baptized, how do they participate in baptism and its benefits? How is faith involved, and is it salvation that comes to those who are baptized? There are two important words in this last question that will give us the key to the question of participating in baptism and its benefits. Those words are "faith" and "salvation."

Let us look first at what salvation is. We must first say salvation is not a thing to possess. It is not a ticket we can carry in our pocket that lets us into heaven. Nor is it a charm worn around one's neck. According to the Bible, salvation is a process. We are initiated into it. We grow in it. And we see it fulfilled in eternity. Salvation, and the Christian life which salvation fosters, has an "already" and "not yet" character. What Christ did on the cross and in the resurrection, He did for our salvation once and for all. That is past tense. Salvation in that sense has been completed. As we individually participate in this salvation it becomes for us a present reality. In that sense salvation is already ours. But being humans bound to the flow of time, day after day, year after year, salvation for us is also a process. We can talk about our beginning as a Christian, our growth, and our future. Finally, salvation in one sense is not yet ours. One day we will see it completed and fulfilled in eternity with Christ. "We", as I John 3:2 says, "shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is."

This whole process from Christ's work, on through our participation in this life, and on to heaven itself is a process initiated, carried on, and consummated by the power of God. All salvation belongs to our God. Wherever we find ourselves along the way the statement is still true, "Apart from Him I can do nothing." The essence of salvation is in Christ's accomplished work. Any facet of our participation in salvation is dependent on that fact. Salvation rests there, gets its power there, and is nothing without Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Therefore, we can say with confidence that baptism is not the sum total of salvation. Baptism is a means God has chosen to send His saving grace. Baptism therefore is a means of initiation to the process of salvation. Let us leave it at that for the moment. More needs to be said about the relationship of baptism and salvation but another topic comes first. That topic is the question about the relationship of faith to salvation and faith to baptism, especially where infants are concerned. Rejection of, or problems with, infant baptism are usually based on the belief that infants cannot have faith. So we need to deal very clearly with the word "faith" and with the notion of "saving faith".

Faith, like salvation and grace, is not a substance you can have more or less of. Faith is also not a mental action or step. Faith involves the person as a surrounding, enveloping and permeating gift. When it breaks through the human shell, we experience what we often call "getting faith". Really "getting faith" is a non-act of surrender to what is already there, a letting go of our control. It is unhindered and unencumbered trust. Faith therefore is simply non-resistance. It is helplessness. O. Hallesby in his classic book on Prayer talks about our coming to God and how faith is involved. Let me quote several passages. "As far as I can see, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless...Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray... To pray is to open the door unto Jesus and admit Him into your distress...helplessness is the real secret and the impelling power of prayer. You should...thank God for the feeling of helplessness He has given you. It is one of the greatest gifts that God can impart to us. For it is only when we are helpless that we open our hearts to Jesus and let Him help us in our distress, according to His grace and mercy." He continues, "I never grow weary of emphasizing our helplessness, for it is the decisive factor not only in our prayer life, but in our whole relation to God...(God) does not need any help; all He needs is access."

"All He needs is access!" That is a startling revelation and a stumbling block for many an individual. Yet that is exactly what Scripture says. Jesus says in John 15:5, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Later on in verse 16 he says, "You did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit." Paul says in Roman 9:16, "so it depends not on man's will or exertion but on God's mercy." In II Corinthians 12:9 he quotes His Lord saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Faith and life in Christ are a gift given by God to helpless sinners. As adults, you and I have had years to practice blocking that gift. We repeatedly block His access to our distress. We are sinners, that is, rebels, from birth. But over the years we add to our sinful nature the mental idolatry of being our own little gods. We want to do things for ourselves, even salvation.

That is why, when an adult is converted, that conversion occurs only when that person quits fighting and can just plain be a sinner; that is, someone God can reach. That is why Jesus said, "I came not to call the righteous but sinners." That is why He said, "Unless you come like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Children are not innocent, they are simply helpless sinners. God loves sinners. Children are what

we need to be. They have the kind of faith (helpless accessibility) we need for salvation. This is what “saving faith” means, the kind of faith God both gives and honors.

We must say God is a jealous God. He does not just mystically infuse faith into individuals throughout the world. He uses means. Romans 10:17 says “Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.” The Word of God is indelibly tied to faith and the salvation faith produces. Since God and His Word authorized the commanded baptism as a means of His reaching out to this kind of faith (helpless, open access) with His love and grace, we baptize. We baptize adults that come empty and helpless in unencumbered trust. We baptize infants who are empty and helpless with unencumbered trust.

By the time we are adults it takes the hearing of the Word to shatter our defenses and produce this kind of faith. Thus an adult who becomes a Christian is conscious of this process, of faith’s presence, of salvation. For faith itself, always a gift of God, is the same as an infant’s: open, unencumbered, helpless trust in God Who alone saves. That faith is in God and that it does save is declared for the infant by God. God’s Word is the active agent for both the adult and infant. All God needs from us is access. Baptism, therefore, is the Word of God with the water by Christ’s command as Martin Luther says in his Small Catechism. Paul in Ephesians 5:26 says that children of God are cleansed by “the washing of water with the Word.” The power lies with God. Baptism is a means of His love in action toward helpless sinners. I quote again from O. Hallesby

“If you are a mother you will understand very readily this phase of prayer. Your infant child cannot formulate in words a single petition to you. The little one prays the best way he knows how. All he can do is to cry, but you understand very well his pleading cry. Moreover, the little one need not even cry. All you need to do is see him in all his helpless dependence upon you, and a prayer touches your mother-heart, a prayer which is stronger than the loudest cry.

He who is the father of all that is called mother and all that is called child in heaven and on earth deals with us in the same way.

If you are a mother, you will understand this too, better than the rest of us. You care for your little one night and day, even though he does not understand what you are doing, sacrificing, and suffering for him. He does not thank you, and often he is even contrary, causing you not little difficulty. But you do not let that hinder you. You hear and answer incessantly the prayer which his helplessness sends up to your mother-heart. Such is God.

These words from Hallesby remind us that the focus is always on God. Take your eyes off Him and the results parallel what happened to Peter when he went to meet Jesus on the water. Baptism without the continual conscious focus on the Lord of baptism becomes either a magic show or a source for pride and a reward for accomplishment. But, if our eyes are always on Jesus then baptism can be what God wants it to be. The Bible relates that to us.

So in summary let me say baptism viewed theologically is God's business. It was His idea. He commanded it and by it intended to accomplish certain things in its recipients, essentially: our cleansing and forgiveness and our being welcomed into the family of God. Therefore we can say baptism is means of grace, specifically an initiating means of grace for salvation. That salvation is given by God where helpless trust is together with His Word. This is true in all cases of salvation and also in baptism. Because this position of an unhindered sinner exists only in those who are infants, or in mature individuals who recognize their helplessness before Him, it is these we baptize. We recognize the power in both cases rests on the Word of God and not on the individual's preparation, intelligence, or determination. Baptism is therefore a means by which we are initiated into the Body of Christ, by which salvation is initiated to us.

One of the best metaphors for baptism is adoption. I will never forget the time a family came in to talk about the baptism of their child and of an eleven year-old foster child that was staying with them. When I mentioned that in baptism we are adopted into God's family the foster child's eyes grew wide. Nobody had adopted her in all her years of being a foster child. She knew the value of adoption. Here at last was a family, God's family, where she would belong.

Adoption is a wonderful picture of baptism because at the same time it is true that a young child does not make the decision about being adopted, that child becomes a real member of the family. It is also true that you don't just adopt a baby, bring it home and leave it on the kitchen floor and go about your business. Nourishment and guidance and love are necessary for the new child of the family to survive, and certainly for the child to grow.

Being such an initiatory means of grace, baptism must be followed by constant renewal of the relationship to Jesus Christ that it establishes. In his Small Catechism, Luther says that baptism's meaning for daily living is that "our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires should be drowned though daily repentance, and day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever."

Baptism is a means by which we are initiated into this life. As this life in Christ continues baptism can stand as a reminder of the active grace of God. Luther encouraged those challenged by temptation to remember their baptism. But at the same time I don't think Luther intended for baptism to become the all encompassing and almost sole definition of Christian life. We should be careful not to imply that we live in relationship to baptism. It is not "baptism" into which we were baptized, but into Christ. The focus should not be stuck on a baptism remembered, but on a relationship which is lived, and even more specifically, on the One with whom the relationship is lived. When we speak to someone who is married and we want to get at what that means for that person, we don't ask, "How was your wedding?" Rather we ask, "How is your marriage," and, "How is your spouse?"

It may be legitimate to use the word "baptism" as a descriptive term for the ebb and flow of a lifelong relationship to Jesus Christ. In fact the term used as such has special

meaning. Daily we are drowning and rising again. But at the same time, because of the term's common association with a sacrament and ritual of the church, with a particular momentary event, and with an initiatory move on God's part, the daily walk with one's Lord could, and perhaps should, have other terminology associated with it. Anything from "a walk with one's Lord" to "a relationship with Jesus Christ," carries the meaning of the living, vibrant relationship to God established in baptism.

When we can get the focus off the event of baptism and its ritual or liturgical use in the church, and off how much faith is needed, or how much water is needed, or how old a person has to be, or even how much one is suppose to hearken back to the event, and rather focus on God and the fact that baptism is God's act, we can see baptism rightly. Our involvement with Christianity has a beginning, middle, and a "not yet" (it need have no end), which corresponds to baptism; the daily dying and rising; and the hope of glory. To call all this "living your baptism" may be theologically correct but can be misleading in common usage, placing the emphasis on the gift rather than the Giver.

To get at the heart of the matter of Christian living, the question necessary for all - even those baptized - is, "are you a Christian?" Or, "How is your relationship to Jesus Christ today?" The challenge and opportunity is to live as children of God. This is the true focus of Christianity and therefore of baptism. We are not to live in the past nor spend all our energy deciphering the future. Therefore, in the present Christ is our all in all. The challenge to parents and sponsors of infants who are baptized is to so honor God's grace which is given in the sacrament of Baptism that they nourish the child with Christian love and the Word of God, so that one day the child can recognize Christ as all important for his or her own present, and then can say, "I too am a child of the King," and live consciously as a mature Christian.

A quick comment about eternal security. I do not believe eternal security is disseminated by baptism, a conversion experience, or by consistent human determination. The only security for any one of us lies in Jesus Christ. As His child I have freedom, live in a state of forgiveness, and am a redeemed sinner. But I can rebel and reject God's love and salvation, or I can starve it to death. At some point of God's deciding I will have isolated myself from the benefits of His love. Therefore I will no longer experience salvation and if this is perpetuated, neither will I experience salvation's eternal counterpart, heaven. But this does not mean that I did not for a time experience salvation. Remember, salvation is God's business. It is real and completed once for all. We are given the privilege of participating in it. Some do this continually, some fall out of the participation. God's action in baptism does not fail; we do.

I therefore also believe that one can be converted to Christianity even if they were at one time baptized or had an earlier conversion experience. What one hopes for and counsels for is consistency in the Faith. But when one has rejected or forgotten and thus starved his or her baptismal covenant, that person needs the experience of surrendering to God, letting go of the control of their life, and discovering the unceasing, immeasurable love, forgiveness, and release God has for him or her in Jesus Christ. In other words, that person needs conversion. They need to return to the family and once again become a

child of the Heavenly Father and an heir of the Kingdom. We do not re-baptize these people. God never negated His original promise. They wandered, God didn't.

Therefore we can say baptism is a means of God's grace whereby God effects salvation by initiating us to its process. At the same time we, in that process, are subject to the need of daily renewal, recognizing the possibility of our departing from our participation in salvation and its benefits. This is not a fearful thing for the Christian but is a reminder of our helplessness and our complete dependence on the God of love.

In conclusion, a sacramental understanding of baptism is underwritten by two foundation stones on which sit two pillars on which in turn baptism rests. The two foundation stones are *The Character of God* and *The Effectiveness of the Word of God*. God is a God incarnationally in pursuit of us. And when God's Word says God is working in Baptism, He is. When one is baptized in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they are. On these two foundation stones rest two pillars: *The reality of the Body of Christ*, and *The on-going relationship of the baptized individual with their Lord*. Only in the context of the baptized being nourished in the church and being encouraged to develop a walk with their Lord does infant baptism make sense. Without these four essentials sacramental baptism devolves into a magic act, a ticket to turn in at the pearly gates. That is not what we believe. We believe it is a great gift, rich in grace, and able to bring you into a relationship with God that He longs to see grow.