

Water with the Word: A Baptism Q&A

**Explaining the efficacy of Baptism
to Christian friends**

by Kelly Klages

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Dedication:

To Alex, for all his love, encouragement, and formatting prowess;
and to Anastasia and Micah, who both inspired me from the inside
while working on this book.

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- Does the Greek word *baptizo* literally translate as “immerse”?
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- Isn't Baptism by immersion a better symbolic picture of the burial and drowning of the Old Adam and the emergence of the new man, having been cleansed from sin, as in the Flood?
- Baptism by immersion is necessary because the Bible talks about being buried and raised with Christ in Romans 6 or Colossians 2, and immersion is meant to symbolically portray burial and resurrection.
- The Bible describes various people who are baptized, such as Jesus or the Ethiopian, as “coming up out of the water” after being baptized. Doesn't this prove that they were immersed?
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- Isn't it more comforting to believe that babies or children are innocent and do not stand in danger of judgment? It doesn't seem fair to think of someone so young being subject to punishment for sin.
- Does Isaiah 7:15-16 indicate that there is an age where children become accountable to God for their sins?
- I have sometimes heard the account of David and his first infant son by Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13-23) used as proof that infant children who haven't yet been brought into God's family are automatically bound for heaven. The thought is that David, in verse 23, seems to say that he is sure he will see his seven-day-old child in heaven.

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- The Bible connects Baptism and repentance, and sometimes talks about believing and repentance before it mentions Baptism. Isn't that a qualification— no one should be baptized until after they are mentally capable of repenting and turning from sin?
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- Why aren't there any specific examples of infants being baptized in the New Testament?
- Outside of the New Testament accounts, do we have written evidence that the early church baptized infants?
- Isn't it unfair and illegitimate for a parent or anyone else to “force” faith on their child? Shouldn't each child be given the option of making the decision for themselves, in order for that

faith to be real and personal? After all, no one can believe *for* another person.

- Does Baptism lose most of its significance if you're too young to have a conscious memory of the event?
- Infant Baptism seems to just give people a "free pass" to heaven. Shouldn't there be more to a person's conversion than that? Plenty of people think that because they've been baptized they can do anything they want and don't have to grow in their faith.
- If we hold that Baptism forgives sins and brings even infants into God's kingdom, why not just go around and baptize every infant we can find? God can sort out the details later.
- What is meant by the term "believer's Baptism"?
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- Is the practice of confirmation, a special period of instruction and profession of faith for older children, essentially a parallel of the profession of faith and instruction that happens before an older child or teen receives “believer’s Baptism” in a different church?
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- What is a “christening,” and is it different from a Baptism?
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- The Bible may say “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,” but right after that it says that “whoever does not believe will be condemned.” So it’s not lack of Baptism that condemns you, but lack of faith. Faith is the only important thing in this verse.
- In Acts 8:9-17, we read about the Samaritans who do not receive the Holy Spirit the same way as other believers did. They were baptized because they received the Word and were saved, but didn’t receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came down and laid their hands on them. And in Acts 10, we have what looks

like the opposite scenario— the Holy Spirit comes on the Gentiles before they can be baptized. Does this prove that the Holy Spirit and Baptism don't necessarily go together, or that Baptism doesn't do anything?

- In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that he was glad that he did not baptize many people, because Christ didn't send him to baptize but to preach the Gospel. Why would he say that?
- I've heard some explain Acts 2:38 by saying that the phrase "*for the forgiveness of sins*" should really be rendered "*because of the forgiveness of sins*" — that is, be baptized in light of the fact that your sins have been forgiven, not in order to obtain forgiveness. Is this a valid reading of the verse?
- If Baptism were really necessary for salvation, it would be mentioned in every Scripture passage that talks about being saved, but it isn't.

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- Luther was okay, but he and his followers didn't go far enough with the Reformation. They couldn't quite bring themselves to break away from a lot of the Roman trappings that they should have gotten rid of, like the Baptism of infants, so they tried to find creative ways of explaining the practice so it fit into their new theology.
- People who believe that Baptism saves are using it superstitiously, like it's a talisman or some kind of magical act.
- Parents who get their infants baptized do it just out of peer pressure from their surrounding community, not because they have sincere convictions that it benefits their child.
- I consider my Baptism to be an outward symbol of an inward change, a memorial of me committing my life to Jesus. Isn't this the more biblical expression of what Baptism is all about?
- Wouldn't a belief in the saving nature of Baptism lead to all kinds of power abuses by the church? Can a pastor or priest really claim to hold a person's salvation in their hands like that? Salvation should be more of a personal thing between me and God, not the result of some priestcraft.

- The thief on the cross wasn't baptized, but he was still saved.
- Baptism is just a ceremony, a human ritual. I don't see why any Christian should attach such importance to it when what counts is the spiritual reality of dying to our old selves and living new lives as Christians.
- You people seem to talk about Baptism more than you talk about Jesus!
- I asked a pastor/friend once why they believe what they believe about Baptism, and they weren't able to give me a sensible answer at all. That convinced me that there is no good reason for the positions they hold.
- Why does the Lutheran church and others consider "re-Baptism" to be such a terrible thing? What if someone who was baptized as an infant started attending another church where they had to be baptized again in order to become a member?
- I'm dating someone that I hope to marry someday, and that person absolutely refuses to consider Baptism for infants. But otherwise, we have a lot of other similarities when it comes to faith—we both believe Jesus died to save us from sin. So is it really that big a deal if I don't plan to have my children baptized until later on in their lives—as long as they're baptized eventually?
- People who believe in infant Baptism haven't really thought the issue through or looked into God's Word. They're just blindly going along with tradition.
- Why even bother arguing about Baptism? The Gospel is the primary thing; all these other details are just secondary. Why be divisive over it?

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Introduction

What is the purpose of this book?

This book is intended to help explain why Lutherans, along with the majority of Christians today and throughout history, accept the *efficacy* of Baptism (the belief that Baptism itself actually accomplishes something) and recognize the legitimacy of baptizing infants. It came about after a realization that there are many evangelical Christians today who have some questions or misunderstandings about Baptism issues, as believed by those who say “Baptism saves.”

This book isn’t intended to cover every possible issue, scenario, or question that might be raised about Baptism. The way these questions are asked in the real world vary from person to person, but I’ve tried to include the basic questions from which most of these issues stem. The answers given are very brief and written on a lay level. Other recommended resources are listed in Appendix C for those who wish to look at this topic in a more in-depth way. Question-and-answer books tend to carry the risk of appearing to over-simplify issues because they are designed for brevity. On the positive side, sometimes only a few sentences are needed to dispel certain misunderstandings or prejudices, or to help someone think of an issue in a slightly different way— so a more “at a glance” format can be useful to some.

The book also does not go into detail in analyzing exactly how each church body differs in its understanding of Baptism. It is written from a Lutheran perspective, and addresses general questions that are commonly raised by members of church bodies which deny the efficacy of Baptism altogether. (These may possibly include non-denominational churches, Pentecostals, Baptists, Mennonites, or a number of other church groups.) Although the majority of Christians do accept the efficacy of Baptism and the baptizing of infants, the opposition to this teaching is very wide-spread and tends to be strongly represented within Christian bookstores, and among popular teachers, authors, and

pastors. Since many of those churches which reject Baptism's efficacy are also frequently anti-creedal and stress autonomy, there are a wide range of different beliefs in their midst, even within the same church body. Not every non-denominational church member is going to have all of the objections that this book presents, for example, and not all of these Christians are harboring the same misunderstandings or stereotypes. The Q&As given here represent a wide cross-section of popular opinion and commonly-heard objections.

Before joining the Lutheran church and studying about Baptism's relationship to salvation by grace through faith, most of the questions in this book were my own. I had difficulty finding answers at the time — not because answers didn't exist, but because I was using an entirely different faith vocabulary and it was hard for others to understand the questions I was asking. This communication problem can make it challenging to overcome presuppositions and faulty rumors, so it's my hope that this book will provide a few helpful explanations and facilitate some "thinking outside the box."

Who can make use of this book?

This book can be used by anyone curious about how the Lutheran church — a church which is well-known for its commitment to grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone — explains its firm conviction that Baptism gives salvation, eternal life, and the forgiveness of sins. It can be utilized by Lutherans who have heard some of these questions raised by friends or acquaintances, or who have had some of these questions themselves. The book may also be used by those who have never been exposed to a clear and simple defense of the efficacy of Baptism, and would like to see how these questions are answered by other Christians who have a strong commitment to the teachings of the Bible and the centrality of the gospel of Christ. It will be assumed that the Christian readers of this book are willing to consider the Holy Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine and ultimate authority for questions about our faith.

Many of the questions being asked are well-thought-out, legitimate curiosities. On the other hand, some of the common objections levelled against those who believe in the efficacy of Baptism are little more than “straw-man” arguments, or are based on misinformation and faulty assumptions. The brief Q&As listed here are meant to help both sides realize that answers exist to these questions, and to clear up some of the misunderstandings or confusion. Even if disagreement remains, it is better for disagreement to be based on an accurate understanding of a church’s teaching, rather than on common stereotypes and incorrect preconceptions.

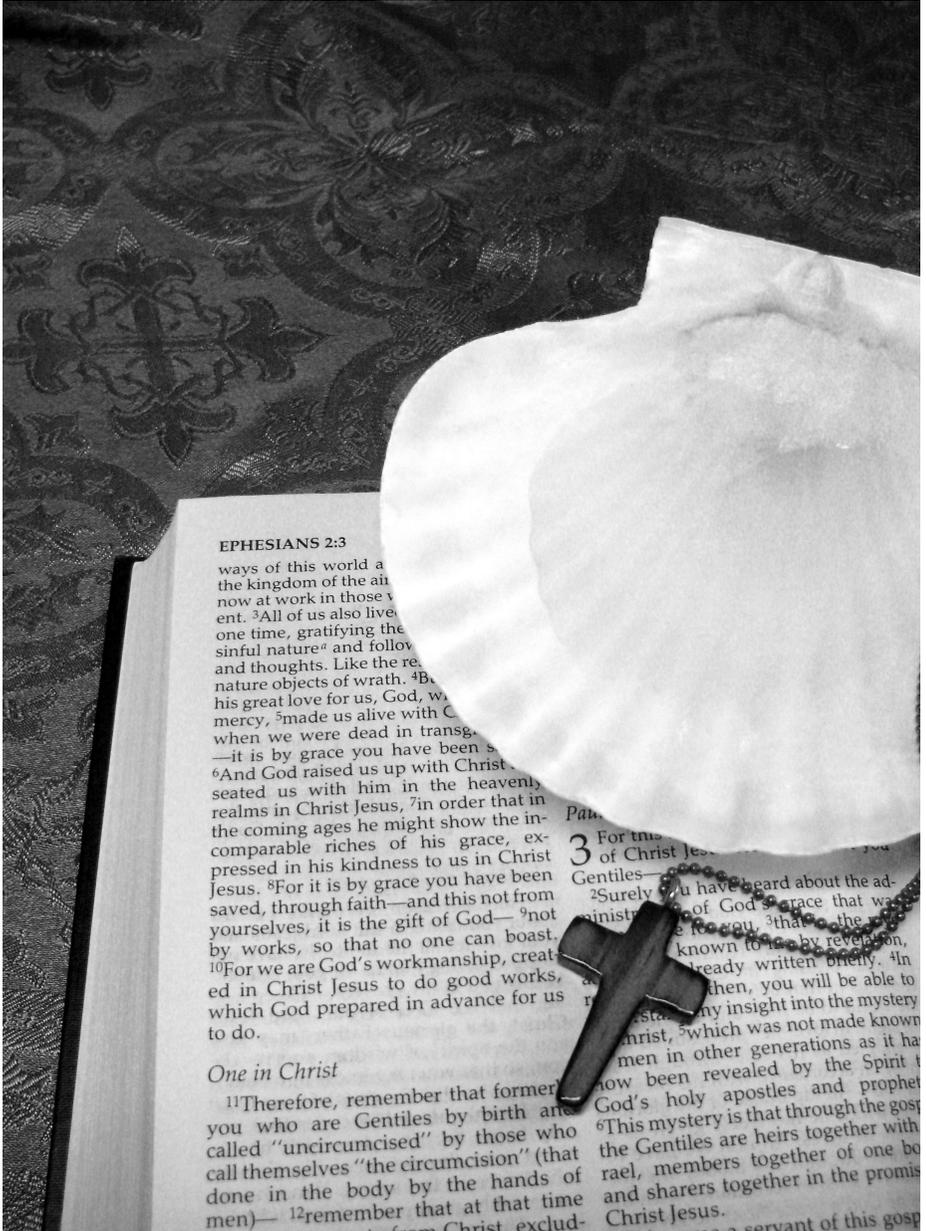
What are the basic themes of this book?

The Q&As in this book are divided into 9 different sections, since a lot of questions asked about Baptism tend to fall under larger “umbrellas.” For example, a number of inquiries deal with the relationship of Baptism to salvation by grace through faith. Another group of questions concern issues that specially pertain to infant Baptism; still other questions have to do with specific Bible verses. Also included are a few appendices which provide “at a glance” summaries of what this book is all about.

The first two sections are recommended reading for those who are addressing any other question in the book, because they cover some of the most important basics for understanding how Lutherans address and approach the subject of Baptism. The cornerstone of Lutheran teaching is justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. An understanding of the centrality of this belief is important to understanding why Baptism is regarded so highly by Lutherans. As someone who in the past had always assumed that “Baptism saves” must be an expression of works-righteousness and an anti-Scriptural tradition of men, I was in for a major surprise. I discovered that the Lutheran view of Baptism was not only thoroughly biblical, but more Christ-centered and Gospel-oriented than I could have ever imagined Baptism to be.

Section I.

What Does the Bible Tell Us About Baptism?



I. What Does the Bible Tell Us About Baptism?

“What is Baptism?”

Baptism is a Christian rite involving a washing with water, along with the words and promises of God. Baptism is administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and marks the entry of the baptized person into the Christian Church. “What is Baptism? Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water contained within God's command and united with God's Word” (*Small Catechism, Baptism, 1*). In Scripture, we are given both a command to baptize as well as promises that God attaches to Baptism. Matthew 28:19 tells us that this is how Christian disciples are made. The verses below point out some of God's promises for us in Baptism.

“What does Baptism do?”

The Bible gives us many details about the effects of Baptism. In Baptism:

- God's name is placed on us. “...Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).
- We become children of God through faith, having been clothed with Christ. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27).
- We are made holy in God's sight and made part of his Church. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).
- We receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit. “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off— for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39).

- We are born again. “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5).
- Our sins are washed away. “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away” (Acts 22:16).
- We are justified by God’s grace, given rebirth and renewal. “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5b-7).
- We die to sin and are raised to new life in Christ. “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him 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” (Romans 6:3-4).

Obviously some will wonder, “How can just a little bit of water be so special? How can this ceremony accomplish anything?” The key and the power of Baptism is the Word of promise which God attaches to the water, the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus *for us*. Baptism applies this promise of good news to us directly, and we receive the Gospel through faith and are saved. As our catechism points out: “How can water do such great things? Water doesn't make these things happen, of course. It is God's Word, which is with and in the water. Because, without God's Word, the water is plain water and not Baptism. But with God's Word it is a Baptism, a grace-filled water of life, a bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit...” (*Small Catechism, Baptism, 3*)

(Note: Catechisms are simply teaching resources that present the

truths of the Bible in an easy-to-learn format. They aren't used or intended to replace Scripture, but to convey important truths of the Bible in a learning-friendly way. They are based completely on Scripture themselves. I occasionally quote some of these various teaching tools because the summary they provide is as succinct and straightforward as any that I could give.)

“Why is it often called Holy Baptism?”

Holiness comes from God and belongs to God. He is the one who makes things holy — that is, truly pure and good. We refer to things that are dedicated to God's service as holy, because they are used by him to bestow his blessing. Baptism is holy and makes us holy people because it communicates God's purity, goodness, and blessings to us.

“Who needs Baptism?”

Baptism is for sinners in need of God's salvation and holiness; therefore all need what Baptism offers. The Bible's command and promise concerning Baptism are never described as being limited to age, gender, mental ability, country of origin, or any other factor. On the contrary, the church is simply commanded to baptize “all nations” (Matthew 28:19). At Pentecost, Peter tells the crowds that Baptism for the remission of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit is a promise that is “for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39). The bad news is that all are sinners; the good news is that through Christ, the gift of salvation is free to all (Romans 3:21-24). Baptism is a general, inclusive command, and we should not place limitations on it that are not instituted by God himself.

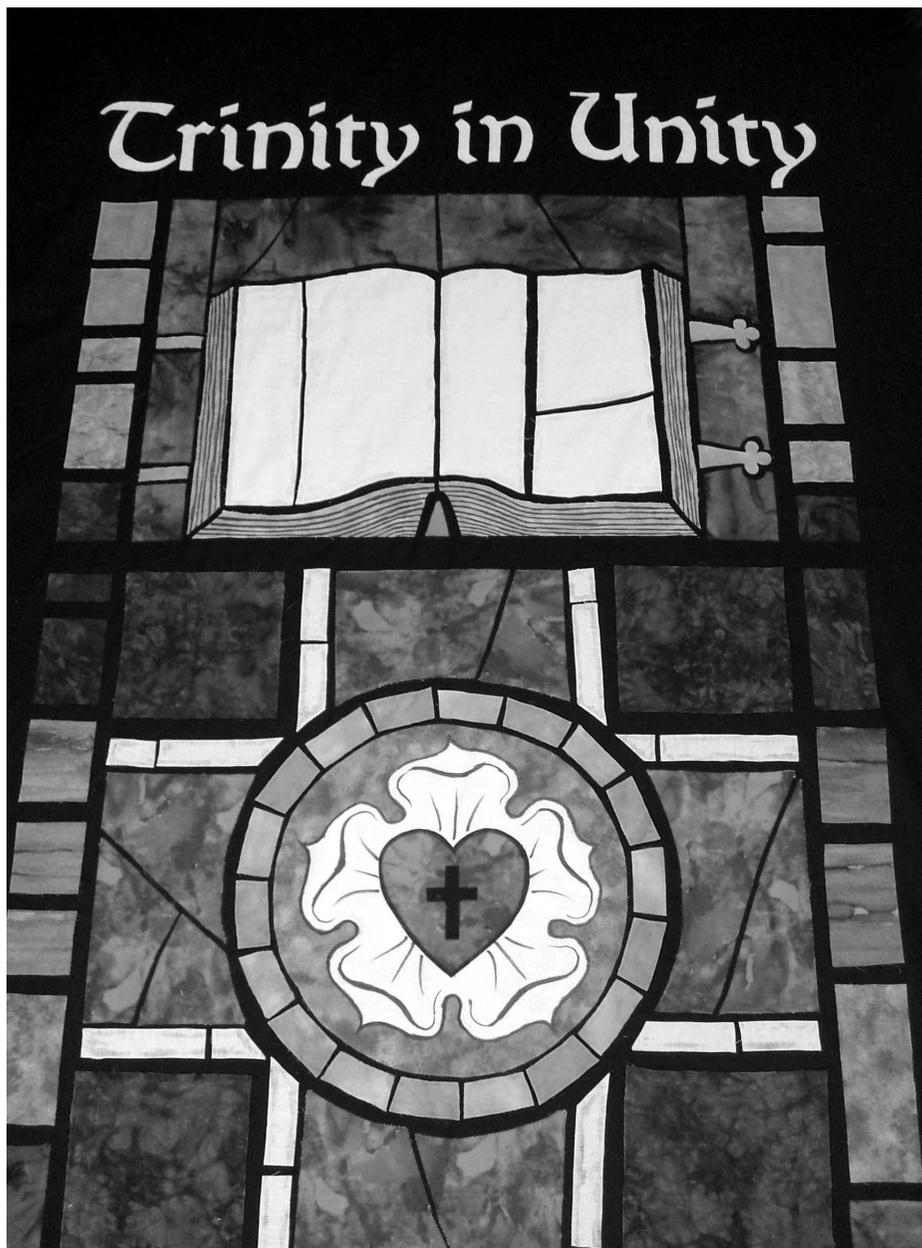
“What’s a sacrament? I don’t recall hearing that word in the Bible.”

The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, referring to a consecrated “mystery.” In 1 Corinthians, Paul describes the ministry of the apostles as being “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (4:1, ESV). It is the job of the shepherds of Christ’s church to bring the Gospel to God’s people through the means of grace which God has given the church— the Word, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. We use the word “sacrament” to describe something that is instituted and commanded by Christ, carries the promise of the Gospel and of salvation, and has some kind of visible element— in this case, water.

Paul paints a beautiful picture of the union between Christ and his church by likening it to a husband with his bride: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:25-27, 32, ESV). This is also why our catechism refers to Baptism as “water and the Word” — it’s not mere water that saves, but water included in God’s command and combined with his Word. Perhaps you are familiar with the hymn “The Church’s One Foundation.” The first line is: “The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord / She is his new creation by water and the Word / From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride / With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.” This is the sacred mystery of the union with Christ we have through Baptism.

Section II.
Salvation by Grace through Faith

Trinity in Unity



II. Salvation by Grace through Faith

“Why is Baptism called a ‘means of grace’?”

A *means* is a vehicle for something or someone to get from one place to another. A car is the means by which we go downtown to go to the store; studying is the means by which we get good grades; etc.

Baptism is a means of grace because it takes what Jesus did 2,000 years ago on Calvary and delivers it to us in the here and now. We cannot travel back in time to access Jesus on the cross, so God uses vehicles to get the saving Gospel of grace to us today. Those means are his Word and Sacraments. We cannot believe in Jesus unless the Word comes to us which tells us about him (Romans 10:14-17). God gives us that saving Word in very real, tangible forms— ink on paper, sound waves hitting your eardrums on a Sunday morning, water, bread, and wine. He also uses people like you and me to be the means through which the Gospel comes to our family, friends, and neighbors.

Some people may think of it as being very “unspiritual” that God would work through such lowly, earthly means. Spiritual things are often thought of as being completely opposed to the physical; a kind of nebulous aura, or a special and mysterious state of mind. But this isn’t the message of Christianity. Our faith tells of a God who became real, human flesh in a lowly stable and died on an actual cross, shedding real blood and experiencing real anguish, all to save us from our sins. He then rose bodily and ensured physical resurrection for us as well. God has permanently united himself with humanity, caring so deeply about the physical world he has made that he came to die to redeem it from the curse of sin. God has always used physical means to meet with his people.

Baptism never saves by virtue of the act itself, but it saves only because it connects us to the death and resurrection of Jesus. “Baptism, which corresponds to [the Flood], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21, ESV). And, “Do

you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:3-5, ESV).

“I know that Lutherans have always been very firm about salvation by grace alone through faith alone. So I’m confused: how can you believe in salvation by faith alone if you talk about Baptism, a physical work, in connection with being saved?”

This question is at the root of most dismissals of the efficacy of Baptism, because the question assumes that Baptism is a human work or falls into the category of “good works,” which all Protestants know do not contribute to our salvation. Now if Baptism *were* a mere human work, we would indeed never speak of it as a saving action. But as previously quoted verses have shown, God is the one who washes us and regenerates us, making us his own in Baptism. We are passive and receive the gift through faith, faith created in us by God through his Word. God does it all.

Just because something can be seen outwardly, and is carried out in human operation, does not make it any less of a vehicle of grace from God. Consider: most Christians would agree that a person can hear a pastor preach the Word of the Gospel from a Bible in the pulpit, and can receive that Word in faith and be saved as a result. But isn’t human action involved there? Someone had to translate and publish the words of that Bible; someone is paying the pastor for doing his job that Sunday; someone is using the ears God gave them and receiving the sound vibrations across the room. This doesn’t mean that the person who heard the Word and believed it was saved by human works! And it doesn’t mean that the pastor’s faith saved us, or the faith of our parents who drove us to church, or that the faith of others is counted as our own faith.

It simply indicates that God does indeed use physical means, which he ordains, to communicate his Gospel and save people. Baptism is one of those means. In our various vocations, including parents or pastors, God is working in our physical selves to deliver the Gospel (as well as other blessings of this life) to our neighbors in need.

As Luther expounds: “For it is of the greatest importance that we esteem Baptism excellent, glorious, and exalted, for which we contend and fight chiefly, because the world is now so full of sects clamoring that Baptism is an external thing, and that external things are of no benefit. But let it be ever so much an external thing, here stand God’s Word and command which institute, establish, and confirm Baptism. But what God institutes and commands cannot be a vain, but must be a most precious thing, though in appearance it were of less value than a straw. If hitherto people could consider it a great thing when the Pope with his letters and bulls dispensed indulgences and confirmed altars and churches, solely because of the letters and seals, we ought to esteem Baptism much more highly and more precious, because God has commanded it, and, besides, it is performed in His name. For these are the words, Go ye, baptize; however, not in your name, but in the name of God. For to be baptized in the name of God is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore, although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own work” (*Large Catechism, Baptism, 7-10*).

“Why would God give us more than one means of receiving the Gospel? Isn’t his Word enough?”

The preached Word would be enough, but we have a generous God who confirms his promises to us in Christ by way of various sure signs. It is always the same Gospel and the same grace that is communicated to us: the forgiveness of sins which Christ won for us on the cross. It’s not a matter of getting quantifiably “more” salvation; but God’s means of grace sustain and build us up in love, assurance of faith, and reliance on Christ. And so we are commanded and encouraged to make frequent use of the Gospel, whether it comes to us through the

spoken or preached Word, or remembering how he has made us his own through Baptism, or receiving his body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

This understanding of the Gospel may be a little confusing for those who think of faith in terms of a strict timeline: "I was saved when I heard the Word and believed, so why talk about Baptism saving also?" Some Christians understand faith to be something that God gives us just once, and if he has truly given it to us (or if we were truly sincere enough when we accepted the Gospel) then our faith can never be endangered. The Gospel is considered to be more or less for the unconverted only, while rules of good Christian living (Law) is for those inside the church. Lutherans, by contrast, recognize our constant need as sinners to hear the Gospel and receive the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith, and we thank God for the provision he gives us to keep us in Christ. God lovingly gives us abundant Gospel gifts, and we remain united to our Lord in faith through that Gospel.

"If a person is saved through hearing God's Word and believing it, do we need to be baptized? Is it possible to be a Christian and to be saved without Baptism?"

We certainly need to be baptized, because God has commanded it. Baptism goes hand-in-hand with receiving God's Word through faith. Many examples are given in the New Testament of adult believers who, upon first receiving the Gospel, are immediately baptized as a result. As Mark 16:16 says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."

There may be special and rare cases where a believer in Christ remains unbaptized for some reason or another. However, we dare not despise God's Word and his gifts by willfully neglecting Baptism, his means for bringing us into his Church, the body of Christ. True Christian faith clings to God's Word and promises, and by rejecting those promises, we indicate that we do not want what they offer. We don't use the rare exception to make the rule.

As Mark 16:16 also says, "whoever does not believe will be condemned." Lack of faith in God will result in condemnation, even if

someone was baptized previously but falls away from faith. Baptism isn't a "magic bullet," but goes hand-in-hand with faith in the Word. We can let that gift of faith in us die if we do not receive God's Word and his Gospel, but rather despise it through lack of use.

"Can an infant have faith? Does God save some people through faith in Christ, and other people in other ways?"

The Bible is abundantly clear that faith in Christ is the only way a person can be saved (John 8:24, 14:6; Romans 3:22-24; Acts 4:12; Ephesians 2:1-10; Hebrews 11:6; 1 John 5:12-13). We maintain from Scripture that faith and salvation are gifts from God that anyone may receive through the Word. And so it is not surprising to find a number of passages in Scripture that refer to the faith of infants and very small children. Examples include:

- "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger" (Psalm 8:2).
- "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God" (Psalm 22:9-10).
- "He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea'" (Matthew 18:2-6).
- "People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to

me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them" (Mark 10:13-16).

- "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy'" (Luke 1:41-44).

Faith is not a mere matter of intellectual consent. Those who have a hard time with the idea that infants have faith tend to define faith according to intellectual abilities. But does God save us according to our mental abilities, or does he save us freely even though we are helpless and undeserving? Faith has to do with being in a relationship of trust. And any parent will tell you that their infant child trusts them implicitly. The reason is simply because that parent gave them life. Likewise, those who are born of God, of water and the Spirit, live in a relationship of trust with their heavenly Father who gave them life (John 1:12-13; 3:5). See more in Sections IV and V on "Infant Baptism."

"What's the difference between thinking of faith as a work we have to accomplish, versus thinking of it as a gift of God to us?"

The difference is monumental. If faith is an attitude, mindset, or decision that we must bring to God in order to get salvation from him, then no one would ever be saved. God's Word teaches that faith is not of ourselves, but is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8); that all are completely dead in their trespasses before God brings us to life in Christ (Colossians 2:11-14); that the sinful mind is hostile to God and incapable of pleasing

God in any way (Romans 8:7-8); that without the Holy Spirit, no one can understand spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14); and that salvation does not depend on man's desire, effort, or decisions, but on God's mercy (John 1:12-13, Romans 9:16). It is just as much of a miracle for an adult to be brought to faith as it is for an infant.

In short, we do not bring faith to God in exchange for salvation, as though we were bartering with him or somehow attaining heaven by our own moral choices. (Few Christians will admit that this is their actual belief, claiming instead that they give the Holy Spirit credit for helping them make the right choice to be saved. But they will still hold that it's ultimately up to you to attain salvation by the power of your own will; that your *response* to Jesus is what ensures your salvation, not simply God's work itself.) Rather, through the Gospel, God brings us from death to life and enables us to trust in him and receive his gifts. Faith does not cause salvation, but receives it.

If faith is a gift from God, we do not have to worry and fret over whether our decisions or intentions regarding salvation before God were really sincere enough to "get us saved." In fact, examining our hearts closely for proof of salvation can only lead us to despair. Our hearts are sinful and weak, and cannot save us. Rather, it is Jesus who won our salvation on the cross, and we have a sure promise that his salvation has been applied to us in Baptism (Galatians 3:27). We look to his external Word and promises for our assurances in salvation, not our own inner lives or deeds.

Some people who see faith and Baptism as human works, signifying conversion by means of total commitment to Christ, may end up getting baptized again and again. They realize that they are sinners and were not really fully committed the first time, and must try again. This tragically takes the focus off of Christ's objective work, and treats Baptism as a mere sign to show God how committed they are to him. It can lead many to self-righteousness or despair. But if Baptism is a gracious working of God as Scripture notes, we can have confidence in the salvation we have received from God. Those who believe that Baptism does not save and regenerate erroneously accuse other Christians as believing in "works righteousness" in this matter.

Ironically, Lutherans in turn would view that understanding of faith as a form of “works righteousness” because they are turning faith itself into a good work that they bring to God for salvation, ultimately making justification and forgiveness of sins their own responsibility to attain.

“I get the idea that Baptism isn’t really a human ‘good work’ being done to merit salvation, but it still seems like a kind of *additional requirement* for salvation, besides just believing.”

Anyone who has witnessed a Baptism, particularly that of a helpless infant, must quickly realize that the recipient is just that— a recipient, not someone performing a work so that they will be saved. Baptism isn’t something the recipient *does*; it’s something they *receive*, being completely passive. As previously mentioned, Lutherans believe that it is God who does the baptizing, just as God is the one doing the justifying and sanctifying, getting complete credit for our salvation. “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). Still, we all know that Baptism is commanded, not an optional add-on for any Christian. Even if it isn’t a work, some Christians are concerned about adding on “extra requirements” to simple belief when talking about our salvation.

A large part of the confusion has to do with the fact that those who deny the regenerative power of Baptism are used to thinking of Baptism in purely “Law” terms. Baptism is exclusively called an “ordinance,” which means a commandment or law. It is thought of as a legal obligation of the believer, a requirement to fulfill Christian duty. It is not believed to impart grace, salvation, or forgiveness— it is simply something we do to show our obedience to God. It’s considered a work, which is precisely why they will not attribute salvation to it.

The Lutheran does not think of Baptism as “something I have to do on my checklist of salvation or Christian living.” They think of Baptism as “something God gives me as a gift,” and so they are eager to participate in it, remember their Baptism, and encourage others to

receive Baptism as well. Baptism is a saving act of God, not a legal requirement for us to fulfill in the attainment of our salvation. “Believe in Jesus” and “be baptized” are both Scriptural imperatives, but they are not contradictory and should not be separated in our understanding of salvation and forgiveness. Nor should they be regarded in legalistic terms, but rather as a single act of receiving the Gospel.

Lutherans see a problem with the way some other Christians approach the idea of “faith alone.” We know that nothing will save us apart from faith. But “faith” is not some sort of substance in and of itself that saves; faith saves by clinging to an outward object. And what it clings to is God’s Word of Gospel promise, such as is applied to us in the waters of our Baptism. The entire Gospel is delivered to us through such external, outward means— from the actual incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, to the external preached, spoken and written Word, to those tangible means of apprehending the cross which we call sacraments. Just as faith can’t be called an “extra requirement” added onto Christ’s atonement in order for us to be saved, neither can Baptism. They are all gifts from God.

“What does living the baptized life look like?”

In Romans 6, Paul speaks in detail about our lives as baptized, regenerated people of God, living under grace and freed from sin’s power. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him 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... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of

righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (v. 1-4, 11-14).

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul writes: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v. 9-11).

Having been baptized and clothed with Christ's righteousness, we are free from the curse of the law and the slavery of sin. We are free to joyfully serve God and our neighbor, not from threat of punishment, but in loving gratitude to Christ. Through Baptism, we recall that we have been made children of our heavenly Father, called by his own name. We return to the forgiveness and grace received there for the rest of our lives. Baptism isn't a one-time deal: "I was baptized." It's a life-time deal: "I am baptized!"

As Luther writes again in his Large Catechism: "And here you see that Baptism, both in its power and signification, comprehends also the third Sacrament, which has been called repentance, as it is really nothing else than Baptism. For what else is repentance but an earnest attack upon the old man [that his lusts be restrained] and entering upon a new life? Therefore, if you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism, which not only signifies such a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. For therein are given grace, the Spirit, and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and become strong" (*Baptism*, 74-76).

"It's tyrannical to think of God just going around out of the blue and forcing certain people to be saved, with nothing they can do about it. That's why I believe that faith in God is about me making my decision for him. After that, I'm saved, and I can be baptized."

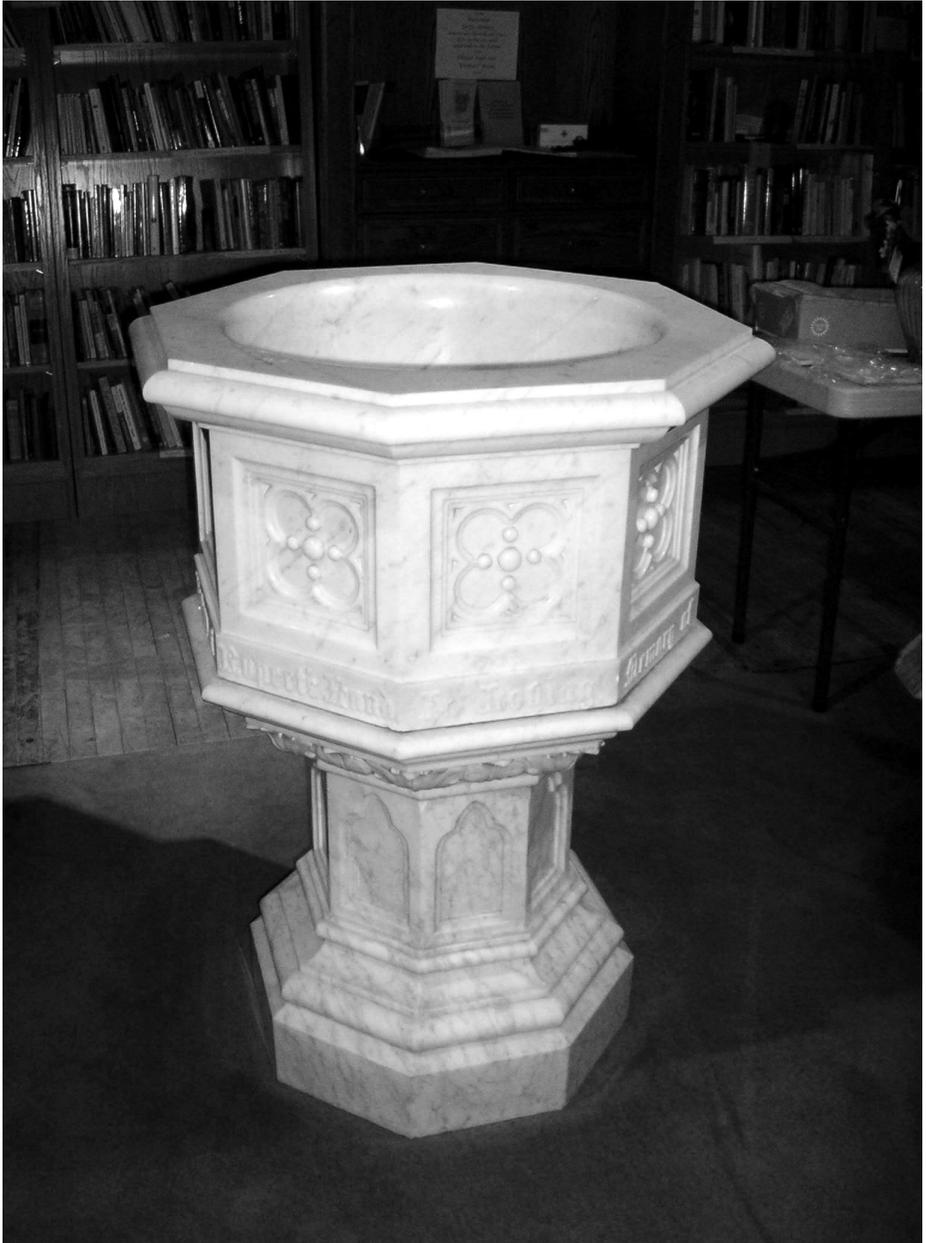
Upon close reflection, it's a little shocking how frequently this argument is made, considering how antithetical it is to the teaching of salvation by grace alone. The belief that God does not ask for our input before saving us absolutely infuriates many believers. I have heard Christians talk loudly about having some sort of *inalienable right* to deliberately walk into God's kingdom on their own two feet. They speak of God saving someone single-handedly as though it were cruel of him to do so without their permission and assent. This is like a drowning person being furious with a lifeguard for pulling him to safety and resuscitating him without getting a signed warrant. Thank God that he saves us without our precious input! I'm inclined to ask the person raising the objection: "Are we talking about the same thing here? You think it's mean and cruel of God to raise us from death to life, to give us forgiveness, eternal life and countless blessings as a free gift, to rescue us from death and hell, even while we were still undeserving sinners and enemies of God incapable of saying yes to him?" Yes, there is a fixed notion in our culture that we must earn everything we receive, or at least look over it and approve of it before calling it our own. We like to be the arbiters of what we get, even from God.

Having said that, there are other reasons why people may have this objection. Many who would say something like this believe in "once saved, always saved": an idea that Christians are incapable of falling away from the faith once they are saved. Therefore they see someone who was baptized as an infant live an adult life of decadence and godlessness, and conclude that either their Baptism meant nothing, or that Lutherans seem to think that people can be saved who are atheists as adults (as long as they were baptized as infants). But Lutherans do not teach this because they don't teach "once saved, always saved." It's not true that once God saves us in Baptism, we "can't do anything about" our state, that God has forced us into salvation without our ability to return the gift. Tragically, people can come to willfully reject God's gifts, refuse his forgiveness, and fall away, just as a person who was born into this world without their consent may grow up to throw away their life. The people of Israel are just one biblical example of those who were called by God and became his people, yet chose to reject him again and

again, finally even rejecting their Messiah.

“Once saved, always saved” is a can of worms that can’t be fully explored in a Q&A about Baptism, but the basic position that Lutherans hold is that God saves us single-handedly and so gets all the credit for our salvation, and that any condemnation a man receives is his own fault for rejecting God. If this seems paradoxical or difficult to understand, we simply state that this is what the Scriptures reveal to us, and so we must hold it to be true. Additionally, what gives us our assurance of salvation is being in Christ— receiving his Word and gifts in faith, including our Baptism, and remaining in that faith. Besides simply being Scriptural, we believe that this is by far the most comforting position and the one that gives us the most true and objective assurance of salvation.

Section III. Modes of Baptism



III. Modes of Baptism

“Does the Bible give a specific method of applying the water in Baptism?”

No. There are no Scriptural directives as to how the water must be applied in order for a Baptism to be legitimate. As long as it is performed in the name of the Triune God, as Jesus instituted, with water applied to a person, it is a true Baptism. Christian churches generally baptize by pouring, sprinkling, or immersing in water.

“Why does my Baptist friend insist that Baptism by immersion is the only legitimate way of being baptized?”

Baptists and some other church bodies believe that Baptism is a purely symbolic display of a person’s already-existing relationship with Christ. They do not believe it is effectual for salvation in any way, but is simply an act of human obedience (an ordinance). Because of this, they feel that the only benefit that Baptism will have is through what it manages to communicate symbolically. It is therefore seen as necessary to try to interpret all the passages in Scripture pertaining to Baptism in a symbolic-only way. So we come across a passage like Romans 6, which says that we are buried and raised with Christ through Baptism. If we take that passage at face value, it is true and effectual no matter how the water is applied. But if it *must* be seen as purely symbolic (due to the assumption that Baptism cannot save), the passage doesn’t make sense at all unless our mode of Baptism involves a clear visual picture of being buried, or drowning, and then being raised again. Therefore it is assumed that full immersion is necessary. The mechanics and minutiae of administration also take on a more primary importance when the act of Baptism is not seen as spiritually beneficial or effectual.

Other reasons given for an “immersion-only” position are discussed in the following FAQs.

“Is immersion the only mode of Baptism that was accepted in the early church?”

Some will claim, or simply assume, that Baptism by immersion is the only historical practice of the very early church, scuppered by the increasing power of the Roman church. This isn't historically tenable. Those who hold Baptism to be sacramentally effective don't generally have any problem with Baptism by immersion, and will freely admit that believers throughout the early church were willing to use immersion as a mode of Baptism, even as it is still a perfectly legitimate option today. However, we also have clear evidence that other modes of water application were used and were considered valid.

For starters, there are not many available bodies of water in the Middle East. John the Baptist baptized in towns by the Jordan River because it was one of the few sources he had to work with (see John 3:23). The book of Acts refers to an event at Pentecost where 3,000 people were baptized in Jerusalem, which is not near any major water sources. There was not likely to have been enough water in that place to accommodate that many immersions. To clean themselves, people did not immerse themselves in baths of water on a regular basis in that time and place; water was a precious commodity. Often people would simply wash their feet, and give their hands a ceremonial washing before eating— often through pouring (see John 13:8-10; Mark 7:1-4; 2 Kings 3:11). Pouring water on the hands for ceremonial cleansing continues to be a practice among modern Jewish people.

The Didache is a very early historical Christian document dated from around 100 A.D. In describing the various possible modes of Baptism (warm water, cold water, in flowing water, etc), it speaks of pouring water over the head three times (7:3). It is significant that both Latin *and* Greek church fathers refer to sprinkling or pouring as legitimate, true forms of *baptizo* (see the next Q&A).

In the field of archaeology, a variety of ancient baptismal fonts have been uncovered. Some are large and could accommodate full immersion; others are quite small— too small for immersion to be possible. Baptism by pouring also appears in early Christian artwork.

“Does the Greek word *baptizo* literally translate as ‘immerse’?”

Advocates of immersion-only Baptism will insist that the Greek word *baptizo* always and necessarily means “full immersion.” Therefore, they argue, Baptism is full immersion by definition, and those baptisms done by any other method are not real baptisms.

The truth is that the word *baptizo*, in the Koine Greek of Jesus’ day and at the time of the writing of the New Testament, refers to acts of washing that involve sprinkling, pouring, dipping, or submersion. Based on all the references to the word in the New Testament, as well as considering other ancient sources which use the word in ways that do not imply full immersion, the best and simplest alternate word would probably be “to wash.” In Mark 7:1-4, we hear of the Jews washing (*baptizo*) when they come in from the marketplace; they also wash a variety of other items— cups, pitchers, kettles, and *dining couches*. As noted earlier, it is unlikely that very large items would have been fully submerged, considering the value of water in ancient Israel. Christians need not be intimidated by arguments that this or that Bible lexicon defines “Baptism” in immersion terms, or the faulty assertion that Greek speakers have no concept of the word *baptizo* as meaning anything other than full immersion (Greek Christians do accept Catholic baptisms by pouring, for example, as valid). “Immersion” also does not have to imply “full submersion,” but can also mean a partial dipping or pouring.

Another very simple example which can be used from Scripture is the picture of believers being baptized with the Holy Spirit. If it’s true that Baptism is both purely symbolic and must refer to full immersion only, why is the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” always described as descending on believers from above, resting over their heads, or the Spirit being “poured out”? No Christian (except perhaps the very most charismatic-leaning) thinks of themselves as being *immersed* in the Holy Spirit and so “baptized.” The tendency is to imagine the “water” part of *baptizo* as an immersion, and the “Spirit” part of *baptizo* as a kind of pouring. This alone is an acknowledgement that the word *baptizo* is not exclusively used or thought of in terms of full immersion.

“I’ve heard that the Christian Baptism comes directly from the Jewish practice of a full-immersion *mikvah* bath required for converts to Judaism. If Christians adopted the practice directly, wouldn’t it mean that all Christians used to be baptized by full immersion, invalidating other forms of washing?”

Many forms of ritual purification with water are described in the Old Testament. A *mikvah* bath being required for Jewish converts is not; this conversion bath is a later tradition that is described in the rabbinical writings of the Jewish Mishnah. There seems to have been some connection between the *mikvah* and Christian Baptism, but the precise nature of that relationship is not agreed upon by scholars. Some hold that a partial immersion, involving pouring, to have been considered sufficient for ancient *mikvah* conversion baths. Regardless, the first thing we should ask in response to this question is: “Do we really want to use intertestamental Jewish rabbinical writings as our source of Christian doctrine, rather than the Bible itself?”

Taking a closer look at the typical requirements for the Jewish *mikvah* of conversion, if we do want to insist that Christian Baptism is only valid if it follows this form, reveals the following. Such a Jewish immersion washing is only considered genuine if the candidate is completely covered with water, including being totally undressed (even wearing a bandage or braids in the hair can invalidate it, because a part of the person may have remained untouched by the water). How many “full-immersion-only” Protestants have been legitimately baptized, if this is the criteria for what constitutes full immersion? And there are many more extensive rules about what makes for a legitimate *mikvah*, including the size of the receptacle and how much water it holds.

One interesting note about the traditional Jewish *mikvah* is that a three-fold immersion was customary. The three-fold application of water mentioned in the Didache (c. 100 A.D.), in connection with the name of the Holy Trinity in Christian Baptism, is still practiced by Lutherans and many other churches today as a continuation of the ancient Jewish practice. Most “full-immersion-only” Protestants have not

received this three-fold water application, but should we consider their baptisms to be therefore invalid? No, because there is no Scriptural command that insists that it must be so, just like there are no extensive rules and regulations for precise water application in the Bible. Our understanding of Baptism should not be a mere repristination of what we think early church traditions (or Jewish rituals) might have been. It must be grounded in Scripture and devoid of legalistic add-ons deemed as necessary.

“Isn’t Baptism by immersion a better symbolic picture of the burial and drowning of the Old Adam and the emergence of the new man, having been cleansed from sin, as in the Flood?”

Baptism by immersion is a very good visual image of drowning and the new Adam rising to a new life, and it will probably also remind us of a casket being lowered into a grave and the body being resurrected again. Luther himself had a strong appreciation for the “Old Adam” imagery of immersion Baptism. But two things should be noted: first, we must remember that Baptism has more than just symbolic value, but is truly effectual. Second, there are actually more references in Scripture to God’s washing and cleansing of his people through sprinkling and pouring than there are through immersion.

Perhaps the most well-known image used for immersion, besides the Romans reference to burial and resurrection, is that of the Flood: an event which was a prefiguration of Baptism which saves us (1 Peter 3:21). The flood waters inundated the sinful world, protecting Noah and his family from its evil, and cleansed the world, just as the waters of Baptism destroy sin in our lives and lead us to a newly-cleansed life. (But if you were trying to split hairs, even in this example it could be suggested that the people of Noah’s day were not dipped down into the flood and so immersed, but water was also “sprinkled” or “poured” down from above.)

Other references to washing and cleansing by God’s Spirit through the sprinkling or pouring of water include:

- “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22).
- “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:25-26).
- “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants” (Isaiah 44:3).
- “Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:29).
- “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7 — Hyssop was used to cleanse from leprosy by sprinkling the recipient with blood and water from the hyssop branch; see Leviticus 14:1-7).
- “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).

While Baptism by immersion is a good and sound method of Baptism, the main reason that Lutherans tend not to use it is to provide a testimony against those who would bind our consciences by insisting that we *must* immerse. (Similarly, some of our churches have taken to using white wine in Holy Communion as a testimony against those who, because of their symbolic-only stance on the Lord’s Supper, would insist that the wine needs to be red to meet their purely symbolic standards.)

“Baptism by immersion is necessary because the Bible talks about being buried and raised with Christ in Romans 6 or Colossians 2, and immersion is meant to symbolically portray burial and resurrection.”

Like the previous question, the first thing to note is that although death and resurrection are certainly hinted at visually in immersion Baptism, Baptism is not simply symbolic but actually effective. When the Bible says that we are buried and rise with Christ in Baptism and are incorporated into his death and resurrection through it, that’s precisely what is meant! And this very real dying and rising with Christ would be true no matter how the water is applied.

This comment also involves an interesting example of possibly reading some of our modern practices into Scripture where they aren’t necessarily found. When we think of being buried and rising again, we picture the typical “six feet under” hole in the graveyard, from which we will ascend again. This is fine, but how does this symbolically portray *Jesus’* death and resurrection? After all, Romans 6 refers to being buried and rising with Christ, just as he died, was buried, and was raised. And *Jesus*, as was typical and still is typical in many parts of the world, was not buried six feet under. He was buried above ground inside a cave. We presume that he walked out of the tomb; we have no evidence that he drilled a hole in the ceiling and came straight up out of the top.

What’s more, in Romans 6, our Baptism into Christ is mentioned not only in terms of us being buried and rising with Christ, but also in terms of us dying with him and being “crucified with Christ” (v. 6). Are we supposed to be looking for modes of Baptism that somehow symbolize *Jesus’* death by crucifixion? No mode of Baptism will be able to symbolically cover all the important aspects of Christ’s redemption of our sins. As is stated elsewhere, the different modes of Baptism each manage to visually convey different aspects of our salvation, including the “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit and the “making clean” through sprinkling. There may be some visual hints regarding Christ’s dying and rising in full-immersion Baptism, but we should be careful of reading into the text or projecting our own modern practices onto it.

“The Bible describes various people who were baptized, such as Jesus or the Ethiopian eunuch, as ‘coming up out of the water’ after being baptized. Doesn’t this prove that they were immersed?”

The idea of “coming up out of the water” gives many people a mental picture of getting up out of a swimming pool or re-emerging from the depths of a lake. So when we hear of Jesus being baptized and then “coming up out of the water,” or the baptized Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8, does this prove that they were immersed, or under water?

There is a very simple way of showing why the answer is “No.” In Acts 8:38-39, it says that Philip and the eunuch *both* went “down into the water,” and then Philip baptized him. It also describes them as *both* “coming up out of the water.” Surely Philip did not also immerse himself as he was simultaneously baptizing the eunuch, requiring them both to be totally covered with water! Going down into the water or up out of the water can just as easily mean standing ankle- or waist-deep in the water as the man was washed with water in some other mode rather than full immersion, after which both he and Philip would come back up out of the water onto dry land. There’s always a possibility that these baptisms were done by full immersion; we aren’t told exactly how the water was applied. But to say that the phrase “coming up out of the water” *proves* the use of immersion would be to say that Philip also dunked himself for some unknown reason during the Baptism.

Is “Baptism in the Holy Spirit” something we should keep separate and distinct from “water Baptism”?

No. Baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit go hand-in-hand. Only those who begin with the presupposition that the washing of water with the Word is ineffectual attempt to separate water from the Spirit with regard to Baptism. Pentecostals teach that water Baptism is one thing, but what makes people truly spiritual Christians is a “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” which usually refers to a display of special actions

like speaking in tongues. Other Christian groups which assume Baptism to be ineffectual will look at the Bible passages pertaining to the saving nature of Baptism, and are forced to assume that the writer is speaking of a merely “spiritual” baptism, not a true Christian Baptism consisting of water and the Word. In both cases, the idea of God working through lowly means, like water, is scorned as unspiritual, and so the simple reading of the texts on Baptism in God’s Word must be elaborately explained away.

The Baptism of Christ shows the descent of the Holy Spirit in connection with Jesus coming out of the water (Mark 1:10). When early Christians in the book of Acts received the Gospel and were baptized, we read that they received the Holy Spirit at the same time (Acts 2:38, etc). John 3:5 speaks of being born again by water and the Spirit— there are no separate categories indicated. Scripture teaches that there is only “one Baptism” (Ephesians 4:5), a truth we reiterate in the Nicene Creed.

The only distinction that might need to be made is the fact that John the Baptist points forward to the day of Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Christian church when he says, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). Shortly before Pentecost, Jesus himself explains to his disciples that this is what John meant (see Acts 1:4-5). This clearly doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit wasn’t convicting people of their sins through John’s Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, nor does it mean that when John’s baptizing ministry ended and Christian Baptism was instituted that Christians no longer needed to be baptized with water. In other words, though John is drawing a distinction between how he baptized and how Christ would baptize his followers following Pentecost, there’s no indication that water and the Spirit have nothing to do with each other in Baptism.

“If the pastor who baptized me turned out to be a hypocrite or a really bad person, should I consider getting baptized again? Would it invalidate my Baptism?”

No. Baptism is valid because of God’s Word of promise with the water, not because of the spiritual state of the person administering it. Since all people are indeed sinners, we always receive the blessings of God through weak and imperfect human beings. God’s gifts are not less valid because of the instruments he uses; in fact, they often end up shining all the brighter (2 Corinthians 4:7). We do not, of course, approve of sin for this reason (see Romans 3:7-8, 6:1-2)! But we do rejoice that we can be certain of our Baptism, which would not be possible if its validity were dependent on the internal state of the person administering it.

“What modes of Baptism would be inappropriate or illegitimate for Christians?”

Any ritual which is not done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and which does not include a washing of a person with water, is not Baptism. This would include a ceremony where the individual receives an initiation into any other name (such as the “Mother, the Lover, and the Friend”) or any other false god of un-Christian teaching, such as the god of the Mormons. Also, any ceremony which avoids water altogether, or people, or substitutes water in favor of other elements— like a sprinkling of rose petals, for example— cannot be rightly called Christian Baptism.

Churches that insist on full-immersion-only Baptism have more requirements on what makes a Baptism true and legitimate. Most do not recognize baptisms by sprinkling or pouring as true baptisms at all, and so they must believe that the majority of Christians today and throughout history have never actually been baptized.

Section IV.
Infant Baptism: “Age of Accountability”



IV. Infant Baptism: “Age of Accountability”

“Are infants sinners, since they don’t have the ability to make moral choices?”

The Bible is straightforward in stating that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Since the fall, all humanity is conceived and born in sin. Only when we accept this fact can we extend the Gospel to all people as well— because only sinners need the Gospel. This is why it is imperative to recognize and address sin. Christians recognize our sinful state, inherited from Adam, as “original sin.” We sin because we’re sinners; we’re not sinners because we sin.

- “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one’” (Romans 3:10-12).
- “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5).
- “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Romans 5:18).
- “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

It is not merely making poor moral choices that condemns us, and it is certainly not making some sort of moral choice to accept God that saves us. Neither salvation nor damnation are related to a person’s mental abilities or moral capacities; rather they have to do with our spiritual state before God. The Bible describes people as being objects of God’s wrath because of our sinful nature (Ephesians 2:1-3). Only those covered by Jesus’ righteousness through faith may access the Father.

“Assuming that infants are sinners, can we really consider them to be accountable for that sin? Wouldn’t God just overlook their sin until they can deal with it themselves?”

Here is the problem: God is holy and we are not. He cannot overlook sin and does not wink at it. His holiness destroys sin (Exodus 19:23-24, 1 Samuel 6:19-20, Isaiah 6:1-5). This is not because God is somehow cruel or unloving; it is because in our sinful state, we cannot handle the revealed glory of God’s presence. The Bible says that the entire world is held accountable before God (Romans 3:19). We do not measure spiritual accountability by our own standards, but by God’s perfect standard. If the sin of infants and children somehow didn’t “count” against them, then infants and children would never suffer death, or would not have fallen under judgments for sin such as the Flood. But children do die because they, like us, are sinners who live in a world of sin. Even creation is under the curse of the Fall of Man (Romans 8:19-21), so how can we assume children are exempt from the result of this curse simply because they do not have adult comprehension? We cannot afford to pretend that young children are innocent and have no need of Christ’s Gospel. It is not loving to assume that some groups of people don’t need Jesus, and Jesus had strong words for those who would hinder small children from coming to him.

“Does the Bible teach the idea of an ‘age of accountability’? How does a person who believes in this idea know when a child reaches that age?”

The idea behind an “age of accountability” is that each individual reaches an age of reason and moral capacity where they are able to choose to be saved, and thus become accountable before God for their sin (see above question). Some Christians who hold to this idea believe that infants and small children are not really sinners at all; others feel that they are sinners, but their sins are overlooked and not punished by God until they are old enough to truly know better. Either way, the thought

is that it would be very unfair for God to punish the sin of those who cannot choose whether or not to accept the Gospel. After all, our human legal systems have leniency built into them for underage offenders. Surely God would not harshly punish a small child who cannot (so it is thought) believe in Jesus?

The first thing to point out is that adults have no more ability to choose to accept the Gospel than infants do. It is not a question of who can choose and who can't— none can! (Romans 8:7-8; 1 Corinthians 2:14). Also, the Bible describes the *whole world* as being accountable to God for transgressing his Law (Romans 1-3, esp. 3:19)— even those Gentiles who did not have God's written Law are not considered to be "off the hook." Because we are all born into sin, and God's holiness destroys sin, we all clearly face sin's effects and consequences, including sickness, death, and even eternal condemnation. The good news is that precisely *because* all are alike under sin, all can also be freely justified through faith in Christ (Romans 3:21-24)! Both infants and adults can have faith and be saved through receiving the Gospel, and both infants and adults can perish without the Gospel, because no one can be saved apart from Christ (i.e. John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

The Bible simply does not teach the idea of an age of accountability; in fact it teaches to the contrary. (And no, in this system there is no sure way of telling when any given child reaches the age when they are suddenly accountable to God.) As a teaching, it exists solely to comfort the consciences of those who have rejected Baptism for infants and are looking for a way to make God seem more "fair" to our standards. We must remember that God is holy and his presence would destroy us in our sinful state. This is not God being unfair. What's more, God has mercifully and abundantly provided for us by sending Jesus to die for our sins so that *all* could be saved through faith in him. And so it is our privilege and duty to share the Gospel with all people, including infants and small children.

“Isn’t it more comforting to believe that babies or children are innocent and do not stand in danger of judgment? It doesn’t seem fair to think of someone so young being subject to punishment for sin.”

Despite the fact that the Bible doesn’t teach a concept of a child reaching a certain age where he or she is suddenly accountable to God for sin, and its clear teaching that the whole world is actually held accountable for sin, many will still hold to the idea simply because it seems more comforting. It is difficult to think of young children suffering for any reason.

But no one holds that infants and children don’t get sick and die. Why does this happen— because God is unfair? No, because of sin (Romans 6:23). Tragedy and suffering in the lives of infants is horrible and strikes us as grossly unfair, but because of sin it is a reality. Spiritual death is also a reality, one that we should take very seriously. Yet God, in his mercy, provides for the salvation of infants and adults alike through his Son. Baptism is a wonderfully comforting gift of God because it provides full assurance that God has saved us and placed his name on us. That promise is as certain as the water that I was washed with on February 4, 1991. And that promise is dependent on God’s Word, not me. It is also available to everyone. This is truly comforting.

Ironically, the “age of accountability” is the doctrine that provides very little comfort. No one knows what that age is; it is thought to vary with each child. Suppose your young child is capable of reasoning and making all manner of choices, but he or she has not, to your knowledge, made any public profession of faith in Jesus as Savior. On what basis could you know that their time is up, and that God now demands a reckoning from them of their sin? All a parent can do is worry and desperately hope that their child has not reached the mysterious age yet and does not yet need professed faith. In this system, salvation is only offered to those who “need it,” and who make a sincere confession of faith— all others who are thought to be not yet accountable are merely assumed to be covered by a kind of generic mercy of God. Sometimes it is thought that the state of innocence of these pre-believers

is somehow accomplished through Jesus' atonement, temporarily, until accountability sets in and the "cover" lifts, requiring the profession of faith to make salvation a personal and permanent covering. But the Bible speaks of no such thing— it only speaks of salvation through faith in Jesus. Without this, a parent has precious little to cling to, for faith clings only to God's Word of promise. It is not comforting to try to assume the reality of different paths of salvation when God has not revealed any to us.

If it's comfort we want, there is no point in cursing God for not providing a multitude of different options by which we could be saved. Comfort exists in fleeing to where God has promised to bless us with salvation, and taking hold of that word of promise in faith. Baptism was given to us so we could be truly comforted by the Gospel.

"Does Isaiah 7:15-16 indicate that there is an age where children become accountable to God for their sins?"

Some Christians point to Isaiah 7:15-16 as possible evidence that a child reaches an age where they are accountable to God by their ability to choose good and reject evil ("reject the wrong and choose the right" is the phrase used in these verses). The use of this passage is truly grasping at straws, as it says nothing of accountability or spiritual bearing before God, but simply speaks of a human child's normal moral development. Lutherans, like anyone else, recognize that as children grow, they obviously become more aware of right and wrong. Even a lifelong atheist, as a child, will recognize that some behaviors are acceptable and others are not, and that they can opt to do one over the other. This says nothing of a person's spiritual state before God, however. Again, morality is not the same thing as saving faith. We may choose to do works of earthly good no matter who we are. Both believers and unbelievers grow up and learn to choose to follow good government laws, and to avoid evil actions like harming their neighbors. But we cannot choose God or do truly good and spiritual works apart from Christ. He has chosen us, not the other way around (John 15:16).

“I have sometimes heard the account of David and his first infant son by Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13-23) used as proof that infant children who haven’t yet been brought into God’s family are automatically bound for heaven. The thought is that David, in verse 23, seems to say that he is sure he will see his seven-day-old child in heaven.”

David’s first son by Bathsheba is struck with illness because of David’s sin. At seven days old, before the child is circumcised and brought into Abraham’s covenant, he dies. In verse 23, David says, “But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” Some Christians who hold to “believer’s Baptism” suggest that David is professing faith that he will join his child in heaven. By extension, it is thought that infants never needed to be brought into God’s family, whether by circumcision under the Old Covenant or Baptism under the New Covenant, in order to have a claim on heaven.

The fact that this is a very weak prooftext is evidenced by the reality that even those who oppose infant Baptism often don’t buy this line of reasoning. The passage isn’t talking about heaven at all. When David says that he will go to his son, he’s simply saying that he, too, will one day go down to the grave in death. But his son will not return to him — that is, will not suddenly return from the grave and join his father again in life on earth. It is a sad statement, not a hopeful one. David is coming to the same painful realization that all of us who have lost loved ones have faced: the difficult physical separation that death brings into our lives here on earth. Jacob makes a similar statement when he believes his son Joseph to have been killed: “All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son’” (Genesis 27:35). This is not to say that David or Jacob rejected the whole idea of heaven or the resurrection, but in these Old Testament contexts of extreme grief, it seems clear that “going to my son who has died” means “joining him in the grave, in death.” It is more of a modern expression to think of “joining my departed loved one” in the sense of “seeing him in heaven someday.”

For those who grieve the untimely death of an infant, there are certainly much better means of Scriptural comfort to offer than the vague and uncertain interpretation of the 2 Samuel passage. These verses have no relation to the subject of Baptism, an “age of accountability,” or heaven, nor are we given any hard facts about the spiritual fate of David’s child. It’s simply not a text that applies one way or the other to the issue.

**Section V.
Infant Baptism: Other**



V. Infant Baptism: Other

“The Bible connects Baptism and repentance, and sometimes talks about believing and repentance before it mentions Baptism. Isn’t that a qualification— no one should be baptized until after they are mentally capable of repenting and turning from sin?”

Repentance involves being convicted by God’s Law and receiving the Gospel in faith. These things are the work of God, not the work of man. Repentance isn’t a good work we do so that God will save us, after which we may be baptized. It is a blessing we receive from God’s Word. “God exalted [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:31). “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’” (Acts 11:18). “Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:25).

The Law is preached to a person, and then God’s Word says: “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins!” How is a sinner, who has no capability in themselves to turn to God, possibly able to be saved? Why does God’s Word command something that an unregenerate person cannot do? The answer is that God’s Word is performative— it does not merely demand, but creates the new reality. When God said, “Let there be light,” the darkness didn’t make a conscious decision to bring light into being. It was the power of God’s Word which created light out of darkness. In the same way, God’s Word says, “You must be perfect if you wish to have eternal life.” The disciples are shocked. Who then can be saved? Jesus answers that what is impossible with man is possible with God (Matthew 19:16-26). God the Son took on our sins and crucified them on the cross in his body. When we are baptized, his righteousness is credited to our account. Because God turns our hearts to him in the power of his Word and sees us with

Christ's perfect righteousness, we receive repentance and salvation. This is true for infants and adults alike.

Some people look at the word order of a verse like Acts 2:38 and decide that because Peter said "repent" before he said "be baptized," this necessitates that conscious and deliberate repentance must always precede Baptism; similarly with Mark 16:16. (Indeed, many Christians get so caught up in the word order of Acts 2:38 and Mark 16:16 that they miss the very clear and obvious fact that Baptism is described as being for the remission of sins and for salvation in these verses!) However, not only is repentance a gift as demonstrated above, but in Greek, this kind of word order has no significance to the point. If someone insists on word order, they would need only be pointed to Matthew 28:19, which says that disciples are made by baptizing—mentioned first—and teaching. But the order is not important. Adults hear the Gospel in faith and are taught, and Baptism confirms and strengthens that faith, giving life and salvation. Infants are given God's Word and the water of Baptism and are turned from sin to a new life in Christ, after which they are raised with God's Word. Both groups of people have repentance, Baptism, and salvation.

"Isn't infant Baptism Roman Catholic?"

Infant Baptism is Christian, and has been a practice of the Christian church since ancient times. Just because the Roman Catholic Church practices or uses something does not automatically make it wrong, evil, or "works-righteousness-oriented" — or else we'd have to get rid of pulpits, sermons, crosses, belief in the Trinity, etc. In addition, infant Baptism is the historic practice of not only Roman Catholics, but also Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Methodists, and others— the majority of Christians worldwide.

In the 16th century, Luther and those in agreement with him set out to reform some of the errors that were obscuring the Gospel in the Church of that time. Practices like the selling of indulgences (certificates of merit to remit punishment time in purgatory), prayers to the saints in

order to earn merit, and forced allegiance to unbiblical decrees of the pope had to go. But Lutherans were conservative and never desired to throw out the first 1,500 years of Christianity and start over again. They saw themselves as the natural continuation of the ancient Church, and as such, they wanted to root out the recent errors that had crept in— but to keep all that was good, profitable, beautiful, and helpful for proclaiming Christ and delivering the Gospel. By contrast, radical groups at the time of the Reformation desired to purge the church of anything that looked remotely Roman Catholic or had a connection with the historic Christian Church. This resulted in a ban on vestments; the destruction of stained glass, statues and other church art; the scrapping of formal, historic liturgies; and even a rejection of many biblical doctrines.

Many of today's Protestant churches, descendants of these reformers, still have a lingering paranoia about "all things Catholic" when it comes to external things like the use of candles, a liturgy, a crucifix, and so on. Strangely, this fear even occasionally enters Lutheran churches due to the influence of their surrounding Protestant neighbors— even though historically, Lutherans have not had any hang-ups with such things. More importantly and to the point, we cannot reject biblical doctrine and practice for the simple reason that the RCC also holds to them. This would be throwing the baby out with the baptismal bathwater!

The underlying assumption with this question is the thought that since Catholics reject salvation by faith alone, and they baptize infants, that therefore infant Baptism (and everything else Catholics believe or do) must be a "good work" being done to earn salvation. As outlined in Section II of this Q&A book, this is clearly wrong!

"Why aren't there any specific examples of infants being baptized in the New Testament?"

There are no specifically given examples of children, teenagers, or elderly people being baptized, either. And there are no special age

qualifications or restrictions for Baptism revealed to us in God's Word. The command to baptize is universal and inclusive. There's certainly no need to *assume* that none of the baptisms described in the New Testament were infant baptisms just because the writers don't mention the ages of the baptized.

The simple reason that we do read about so many conversions of adults in the book of Acts is because these are first-generation Christians. Adults heard the first proclamations of the death and resurrection of Christ from the apostles and became believers; they then passed this faith on to the next generation, their families and households. Acts deals mainly with the initial spread of the Gospel throughout the regions surrounding Israel, not with the way that the converted adults raised their own families afterwards. We do have a record in Scripture of entire households being baptized, which in all probability included small children or infants (Acts 16:14-15, 31-33, 1 Corinthians 1:16). Also mentioned in 1 Corinthians is the fact that all the people in the nation of Israel, under Moses, were baptized as they passed through the cloud and the sea (10:1-2). This event in Israel's exodus included individuals of all ages, including infants.

“Outside of the New Testament accounts, do we have written evidence that the early church baptized infants?”

Lutherans draw all of their doctrine from Scripture alone, and hold that the regenerative power of Baptism and the need to baptize infants can be clearly drawn from Scripture alone. But it is often necessary to demonstrate that this is not a new idea that was invented in the Middle Ages— rather, it is the practice of the church from the earliest days. From the second to fourth centuries, we have a united testimony from the ancient church fathers of both the prevalence and acceptance of infant Baptism (not to mention the fact that the church has always taught that Baptism saves— this was never seriously contested at all in church history until the more radical sector of the Reformation in the 16th century).

- Irenaeus (120-202 A.D): “For he came to save all by means of himself— all, I say, who by him are born again to God— infants, children, adolescents, young men, and old men” (*Against Heresies* II.22.4).
- Hippolytus (170-236 A.D): “And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family. And next they shall baptize the grown men; and last the women” (*Apostolic Tradition* 21.3-5).
- Origen (185-254 A.D): “I take this occasion to discuss something which our brothers often inquire about. Infants are baptized for the remission of sins. Of what kinds? Or when did they sin? But since ‘No one is exempt from stain,’ one removes the stain by the mystery of Baptism. For this reason infants are baptized. For ‘Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Homily on Luke 14:5).
 [After quoting Psalm 51:5 and Job 14:4] “These verses may be adduced when it is asked why, since the Baptism of the church is given for the remission of sins, Baptism according to the practice of the church is given even to infants; since indeed if there is in infants nothing which ought to pertain to forgiveness and mercy, the grace of Baptism would be superfluous” (Homily on Leviticus 8:3).
 [After quoting Leviticus 12:8 and Psalm 51:5] “For this also the church had a tradition from the apostles, to give Baptism even to infants. For they to whom the secrets of the divine mysteries were given knew that there is in all persons the natural stains of sin which must be washed away by the water and the Spirit. On account of these stains the body itself is called the body of sin” (Commentary on Romans 5:9).
- Cyprian (d. 258 A.D.): “In respect of the case of infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought

very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man... Spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by carnal circumcision... we ought to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins — that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another” (Letter 58 to Fidus).

- Augustine (354-440 A.D.): “For from the infant newly born to the old man bent with age, as there is none shut out from Baptism, so there is none who in Baptism does not die to sin” (Enchiridion; ch. 43).

Of all the early Christian writers, Tertullian (160-230 A.D.) was the only one who stated a personal preference against infant Baptism. The majority of his objection, however, was due to his incorrect belief that sin after Baptism was almost unforgivable (he still understood Baptism to be for the remission of sins). Tertullian ended up joining a heretical sect called the Montanists, which had a weak view of original sin and a false doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

“Isn’t it unfair and illegitimate for a parent or anyone else to ‘force’ faith on their child? Shouldn’t each child be given the option of making the decision for themselves, in order for that faith to be real and personal? After all, no one can believe for another person.”

This argument resonates perhaps more strongly than any other in the North American mindset. In a nation that places such great emphasis on an individual’s freedom and right to choose, many cannot connect with what seems to us like a much more archaic idea of children

inheriting their faith from their parents even from infancy. This idea of real, personal faith being exclusively the product of your own decision-making has dominated the American religious consciousness ever since the spread of emotion-driven revivalism in the mid-19th-century.

There are several problems with objecting to infant Baptism on these grounds. First of all, we don't get this self-asserting, individualistic "right to choose" attitude from the Bible when it comes to salvation. We do see God making covenants with his people and calling them completely apart from their own choosing— even the youngest of people. Of the prophet Jeremiah, God says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). God's actions in dealing graciously with the people of Jerusalem are summed up in a passage where he describes every single action he did for them from infancy onwards, with no contributions or even assent listed on the part of the recipient (Ezekiel 16:1-14).

We see many actions happening corporately or by household when it comes to God's blessings and salvation, including Baptism. At the close of the book of Joshua, the great leader tells the people of Israel to choose which other gods they would like to serve if they intended to break the covenant God made with them, but: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). Likewise, many households are described as being baptized all together (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Who are these people to insist that everyone in their house follow the Lord or be baptized? They're the heads of their households!

We also see many people being brought to Jesus and being blessed by him who could never have come on their own initiative or steam. When Jesus sees the faith of the friends of the paralytic who was brought to him, he says to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). Likewise, children and infants were brought to Jesus so he could bless them— they could not come on their own. Jesus warns against hindering little ones from coming to him, since the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. In these cases, the faith of the parents or friends served as a vehicle to get a person to Jesus, and Jesus

honors their faith by bestowing his forgiveness and healing on the helpless one in need of his care. In these cases, it is not a matter of the faith of the parent “saving” the child, or the parent’s faith counting as the child’s faith. Rather, the parent’s faith is simply aiding the child to get to Jesus, who creates a real, personal faith in that child by receiving it into his Kingdom. In a similar way, a parent with a flagrant disregard for God will instill this same mentality in their child and aid them along a path of destruction.

After all, many who dislike the thought of “forcing” the faith on a child through infant Baptism tend to have no problem “forcing” other important things on their children. They gave birth with no assent from the child, raised them a certain way, and instilled a number of ideas into their head without the child even realizing it. In fact, when a good Christian parent raises their child in the faith, brings them to church every Sunday, and reads the Bible with them, how can they pretend that the child’s later-in-life “decision for Jesus” was really that child’s own individual, objectively-made choice rather than a practically inevitable inheritance? Part of this mistaken idea might simply be a parent’s desire to praise their own children for their cleverness rather than admit that they had been steering the child in this direction all along. But there is no shame in the role of a Christian parent raising their child in the faith from infancy, even as Timothy received the faith from infancy from his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5, 3:14-15). This does not make faith less “personal” or less of a reality in the life of the young recipient of God’s gifts. Unfortunately many children, when they grow up, do come to fall away from their faith later in life. But it is still the privilege, duty, and God-given responsibility of the parent to “train a child in the way he should go” (Proverbs 22:6).

“Does Baptism lose most of its significance if you’re too young to have a conscious memory of the event?”

Does being born lose most of its significance if you can’t retain a conscious memory of the event? Of course not. We are born into this life

in which we're still living; we wouldn't have it had we not been born. In the same way, we were born into God's family through Baptism, and continue to live a baptized life today.

As believers we are called upon to "remember our Baptism" — that is, to remember the fact that we have been baptized into Christ. It is good to recall that Christ has brought us from death to life, forgiving us and empowering us to live new lives for him. If our Baptism lost significance because we didn't have a conscious memory or awareness of it, then it wouldn't be significant or effectual while we sleeping, or if we got a disease like Alzheimer's or amnesia. Baptism is meaningful, powerful, and significant because it is God's work, not the work of our imaginations and memories.

"Infant Baptism seems to just give people a 'free pass' to heaven. Shouldn't there be more to a person's conversion than that? Plenty of people think that because they've been baptized they can do anything they want and don't have to grow in their faith."

There are a lot of issues to deal with in this question. First of all, the initial objection is very telling: "How dare we think of God giving people a free pass to heaven! Surely at least a little bit of our salvation is dependent on our own work or intentions?" The answer is a resounding "No!" Salvation is completely a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is a very good thing that we get "free passes" to heaven through Christ, or we'd never get there!

Second, there is obviously supposed to be more to a person's life of faith than the ten minutes of their baptismal ceremony. Baptism inaugurates this life, and then faith must be continually fed and nourished by God's Word for it to grow strong. We are completely and totally justified in Christ when we receive his Gospel in faith through Baptism— we are converted. But we also experience conversion throughout our Christian lives as we are regularly convicted of our sins through the Law and receive forgiveness through the Gospel. This is a

pattern throughout our lives, not a one-time event. A person may not be baptized and then neglect God's Word for the rest of their lives in unrepentance. To do so is to let God's gift of faith wither and die, and to reject Christ and his forgiveness and to fall away. Pastors are to firmly instill this understanding in the minds of parents who seek Baptism for their children.

Simply because there are many people who abuse God's gift of Baptism does not mean that Baptism has no validity. The Gospel and God's other many gifts to us are often misused, but they are no less precious and true because some misuse them. Anyone who would regard Baptism as a ritual that saves them in spite of their current lack of faith and despising of God is fooling themselves and is living contrary to God's Word.

“If we hold that Baptism forgives sins and brings even infants into God's kingdom, why not just go around and baptize every infant we can find? God can sort out the details later.”

This was something I pondered when I first joined the Lutheran church. Why keep the gift of Baptism to ourselves? If God works objectively through this means, why not “be safe” by baptizing everyone we can find and simply hope that they are raised in the faith?

There are reasons why this isn't a good idea. People are not baptized as individuals into a vacuum. They are baptized into Christ's Church, born again and joined together as members of his body. Baptizing an infant without the intentional concern of nourishing that faith in God's Word is as irresponsible as giving birth to an infant with no intention of feeding or caring for it in any way after it is born. A child has indeed received a new life, but without food, it will die. Baptism isn't a “magic bullet,” but an inauguration into a life-long and eternal relationship with Christ. The same concern applies to parents who wish to have their child baptized, but don't intend to faithfully raise the child in God's Word and with his Church, where they can be built up in their faith through Word and Sacrament. No one should be baptized simply

because it is a nice idea or a tradition to do so, but because a new life with Christ is recognized.

“What is meant by the term ‘believer’s Baptism’?”

“Believer’s Baptism” tends to be used synonymously with “adult-only Baptism” by those churches that practice it. The idea is to make a contrast between those churches which practice infant Baptism, and those who are only willing to baptize “believers” (by which they mean adults, teens, or older children— those with a well-formed capacity for moral choices). The implication is that only adults or people of a certain degree of intelligence can believe, and so be baptized.

For those who accept infant Baptism, however, this is a very misleading term. Infant Baptism *is* believer’s Baptism because we hold that infants can have faith— in fact, faith receives the benefits of Baptism. Faith itself is a gift given by God through his Word, and it clings to the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which saves us from our sins. We are incorporated into the death and resurrection of Jesus through Baptism (Romans 6:3-5). As such, we do not baptize infants *because* they believe, as though it were a legal precondition to fulfill. We baptize them because of the command and promise of God, who works our salvation single-handedly, trusting that he blesses infants and adults alike with the gift of faith which receives the benefits of Baptism. Lutherans and many other Christians find it very ironic when some refuse to consider infants and young people to be worthy of the term “believer,” since the Bible repeatedly gives us infants and children as prime examples of true faith.

It is worth asking the question, “Are only believers in Jesus saved? Are unbelievers condemned?” Most Christians with a high view of Scripture will certainly say, “Yes.” But for those who advocate adult-only, “believer’s” Baptism, that would mean (if they intend to be consistent) that it is not possible for infants or mentally-impaired people to be saved at all! At this point, exceptions to the rule are usually attempted. But it’s true— only faith in Jesus saves, and we are not shown

any alternate plans of salvation anywhere in God's Word for different kinds of people. Thank goodness that attaining our faith and our salvation is not dependent on us, but on God's free gifts and promises!

"I was baptized as an infant. Does this mean that other Christians who hold to 'believer's Baptism' don't believe that I'm really saved?"

Some may, some may not. Chances are that they don't believe that you have been actually baptized at all. However, they should be able to tell by talking to you that you believe in Jesus' death on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins, and that Christians are saved by God's grace through faith. This will likely convince them that you are in fact a saved believer, but they may assume you are living in disobedience to God by not "truly" being baptized.

Sometimes, misinformed Christians assume that all those who practice infant Baptism, and believe Baptism to be effectual, are somehow replacing Jesus with Baptism in their lives. They mistakenly think that we trust in Baptism apart from Christ and treat it like a human work. This is because for them, they really do believe that Baptism is a human work, a mere ordinance that we only do because Jesus said so. And so they assume that all other Christians also understand Baptism this way. It is helpful to explain to them that we do not view Baptism as a law or a good work that we do to earn salvation through obedient human actions— rather, it is a gift and a work of God and communicates everything that the Scriptures says it does, through Christ.

"I'd rather not consider the possibility of infant Baptism because that would suggest that you think that I'm a bad parent for not bringing my children to Jesus in this way."

This is probably a major reason why the very thought of infant Baptism is avoided by many, especially parents of older children. By

suggesting that infants ought to be baptized for their good, a parent of children is likely to go on the defensive. No one wants to think that they aren't doing the best for their kids, or that they're depriving them of precious blessings that could easily be theirs. They might also deduce that if it turned out to be true that Baptism saves even the smallest of people, they'd feel a terrible burden of guilt for having withheld it from their own children. It can be a difficult issue to address, because the question may not be phrased this way— it can be an unstated, subtle feeling that never gets brought out into the open. Parents may simply assume that those who believe in infant Baptism are constantly looking down at them as bad parents, even if this is actually rarely the case. It can be very difficult for such people to address the issue with objectivity and honesty, feeling that it is easier to harden one's self and stay defensive.

The issue is not about bad parenting. It's more about misinformation, and a certain understanding of Scripture. All parents, myself included, have times when they look back and wish they'd done things differently. Most parents have also been subject to misinformation by well-meaning doctors, pastors, or other authorities. Each of us are also always continuing to grow and learn in our faith. Lutherans know that those Christian parents who have chosen not to baptize their children for some reason *do* desire what is good for their children, and want them to be saved. Many bring their children to church, read the Bible with them, and talk about Jesus, all of which are excellent and praiseworthy things. We would encourage Baptism as a means of assurance and comfort for these parents, not to shame them. Even today it's not too late for our children to receive God's Gospel gifts, even if mistakes were made in the past. We do believe that Baptism is a command of God as well as a great gift for our children and that it is wrong to neglect it, but this has nothing to do with the way we regard the parenting skills of others.

The issue goes both ways, as well. Plenty of Christians may consider advocates of infant Baptism to be bad parents for instilling a "false hope" in their children, sometimes assuming rightly or wrongly that the parents have no intention of raising their child in the Christian

faith. Rather than taking things personally and assuming what other people think of us (much of which is really inside our own heads), we should gently lay such assumptions aside and strive to face issues like this with as much objectivity as we can.

“Are you saying my kids aren’t saved or aren’t going to heaven just because they haven’t been baptized yet?”

Quick answer: No. We don’t presume to judge the salvation of other people’s souls, but as Christians, we can and should use God’s Word to see what it says about salvation and how we receive it.

First, it would be misleading and possibly dangerous to simply assume that some children or adults are automatically saved apart from faith in Christ. The Bible tells us that we are all sinners who are saved by grace through faith, and that apart from Jesus there is no salvation. If we mean to base our beliefs on the truth of God’s Word, there’s no real comfort in telling ourselves that we need not be concerned about the salvation of certain peoples or age groups, because such an idea has no basis in God’s Word.

Second, God always saves through Baptism, but he doesn’t only save through Baptism. He also delivers the Gospel through the preached Word, and it is clearly possible for a child or adult to hear the preached Word and receive it in faith before they are baptized. But this is no reason to despise Baptism or to withhold it from children. In Baptism we have a sure promise from God that he welcomes even the smallest people into his kingdom through faith, giving them life and salvation through the Gospel. He gives us this gift for our comfort and assurance.

The Lutheran teaching about Baptism and faith actually gives the most hope and comfort to the children of these Christians, because of the emphasis on faith being God’s work, not our own. So even before a child has cognitive abilities, it is possible for them to hear God’s Word and to receive the gift of faith and the Holy Spirit. A number of the parents asking this question are Christians in churches that don’t think that very young children can be “believers” at all. They are actually thought of as

unbelievers (or called some invented term like “pre-Christians,” which is just a nicer-sounding way of saying “unbeliever”). Ironically, Lutherans are probably more likely to regard many of these young children as believers than their own parents or pastors are.

“What if a child was intended to be raised Christian and baptized, but before the opportunity arose, they died, perhaps by miscarriage? Must they be condemned?”

For some reason, it is sometimes assumed that those who believe in infant Baptism also believe that babies who die from miscarriage or in childbirth are automatically sent to hell. This is not the case! Indeed, no Christian group that I’m aware of believes in the automatic condemnation of the children of Christians before they are able to receive Baptism, such as in the case of miscarriage or stillbirth. Lutherans, and any other Christians who claim the Bible as their sole authority for doctrine, are obliged to point out that the Bible just doesn’t give us a clear-cut answer or example for these specific cases. But again, the Lutheran teaching on God’s Word, and the nature of faith and salvation, provides a great deal of comfort for those dealing with a tragedy like this.

For starters, because God’s Word is a powerful means of grace— not merely a way of conveying information about God which we must cognitively accept in order to be saved— it is certainly possible for the child in the womb to receive God’s Word and be blessed with the gift of faith and the Holy Spirit, even as John the Baptist was. Indeed, helpless children are given to us as our model for freely receiving God’s gifts.

Also, we believe that it is God’s desire that all be saved. He does not have a list of people that he wants to condemn, or who have stood as condemned from eternity past. We believe that Jesus’ death on the cross won salvation for all people, not just a few, and that God in his great mercy is eager for people to receive the benefits of the cross of Christ.

Finally, we know that God hears the prayers of those Christian

parents who pray for God to receive their children and to make them his own in faith. We have many Scriptural examples of parents coming to Jesus in faith, and Jesus acting in the lives of those children as a response to their parents' faith, such as the case of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:21-43). Ultimately, we trust in our heavenly Father's mercy and place the situation in his hands, knowing that he works all things for our good. We have a God who himself knew the death of his only Son, a God who hates the painful results of sin even more than we do, and sent his Son to undo sin and death forever. He is with us in all of our suffering, and desires to comfort us with his free salvation.

One thing that Lutherans will not say, in an attempt to share God's word of comfort to grieving parents in these circumstances, is something like: "We know that God is just, so based on this attribute we can be sure that he will do what's fair and grant salvation." First, private opinions on what we think God ought to do are no secure basis for faith or doctrine. And more importantly, we do not appeal to God's *justice* when we speak of salvation, but to his undeserved *mercy*. According to his justice, God has every right to condemn sin. Holiness and power are also attributes of God, but they are terrifying to face. There are none who deserve salvation or can speak of God as though he ought to give salvation in order to be "fair." He does grant salvation in Christ, because he is merciful!

**Section VI.
The Baptism of Jesus**



VI. The Baptism of Jesus

“Jesus wasn’t a sinner, so why was he baptized?”

This is a question that any Christian might ask, regardless of how they view Baptism. Even those who reject the power of Baptism for the forgiveness of sins will acknowledge that Baptism is for sinners. So why was Jesus baptized if he wasn’t a sinner? John the Baptist was also amazed at Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, deigning to be baptized: “But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Matthew 3:14) How a Christian answers this question tends to reveal what they believe was Jesus’ primary purpose in coming to earth, and why he did many other things that he did.

Some will say that Jesus was baptized simply to be an example for us. They correctly note that this event marked the beginning of his formal ministry, but suppose that he was being baptized just so that his disciples would follow his example and be baptized, too. And so when Jesus instituted Christian Baptism after his resurrection (Matthew 28:18-20), it is thought that he did so just to make a law, an ordinance, for his disciples to follow. So often, many of the things that Jesus did are seen purely in this sense. Jesus’ ministry is seen as giving people good advice and rules to follow. His death is viewed largely as something that should be a good example for us to live a life of self-sacrifice to God. This is the creed of “What Would Jesus Do?”: Jesus as the ultimate Good Example.

But the fact is that although Jesus did give us sage wisdom, words of Law, and a stellar example that we strive to follow, he did not come just to be another law-giver. Our problem was that humanity was dead in their sins. They had already failed at following the good example that Moses had provided through the Law of God. How much more would they fail in attempting to be exactly like God’s perfect Son!

The answer makes much more sense if you accept the truth of the saving power of Baptism. Why was Jesus baptized— and why did he come to earth in the first place, born of a woman, live among us, preach and teach, die on the cross, rise again?

This is what we confess about Jesus' works in the Nicene Creed: "*Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven...*" As Jesus describes his mission: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). When Jesus was baptized, he did so to fulfill all righteousness, as he told his cousin John. In being baptized, Jesus was identifying with sinners who stood condemned under the Law. By receiving Baptism, he took the sins and burdens of humanity onto his own body, and imparted his own perfect righteousness into the baptismal waters. When he died on the cross, all of our sins were crucified there with him, done away with once and for all. And so all who receive Baptism in the name of Jesus become clothed with his own perfect righteousness (Galatians 3:27). This is the glorious "great reversal" of our faith! Our sins become Jesus', and his perfection becomes ours. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus' Baptism does inaugurate his public ministry of preaching, like the anointing of a prophet or king. It also shows his humility in his association with sinners. The bottom line is that everything Jesus did, he did for us and for our salvation. Baptism is not a work of the Law, but God's work of the Gospel in us. In the words of the hymn "O Love, How Deep": "*For us baptized, for us he bore / His holy fast and hungered sore / For us temptation sharp he knew / For us the tempter overthrew.*"

"Jesus was 30 years old when he was baptized. Does that mean that we shouldn't be baptized until we are fully-grown adults?"

Jesus was also baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and a voice came from heaven as the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Unless you've regularly seen all of these things at a Baptism, we can only conclude that Jesus' Baptism was quite a unique experience! If we remember that Jesus was not baptized merely to give us an

example of regulations to follow, we will be much more comfortable with the fact that not every single aspect of anyone's Baptism has ever been an exact replica of Jesus'. (It is worth pointing out, however, that the Baptism of Jesus does clearly reflect many important realities of our own Baptism. In Baptism, heaven is open to us, we receive the Holy Spirit, and God calls us his own child, with whom he is pleased, for the sake of Jesus.)

Jesus was not baptized as an infant because his Baptism had a different purpose than ours did. First, the Law of Moses did not require infants to be baptized, but rather circumcised on the eighth day, which Jesus was. Jesus was not a sinner; we are sinners at birth, and this is why we need Baptism. Jesus was baptized later, at the inauguration of his public ministry, to publicly identify with sinners. Christian Baptism was not instituted by Jesus until after his resurrection, as given in the Great Commission.

“Jesus was brought to the temple to be dedicated as an infant. Following that example, isn't it enough to dedicate our infants to God, not baptize them?”

First of all, Jesus never had a baby dedication ceremony. He was circumcised when he was eight days old, and a little later he was presented in the temple according to the Law of Moses, which required all firstborn males to be consecrated to the Lord, as well as a sacrifice for purification (see Luke 2:21-24; Exodus 13:2, 12; Leviticus 12:1-8). Modern baby dedications, suffice it to say, bear no resemblance to this Old Testament sacrificial process, nor are they necessary for us since the Law was perfectly fulfilled in Christ.

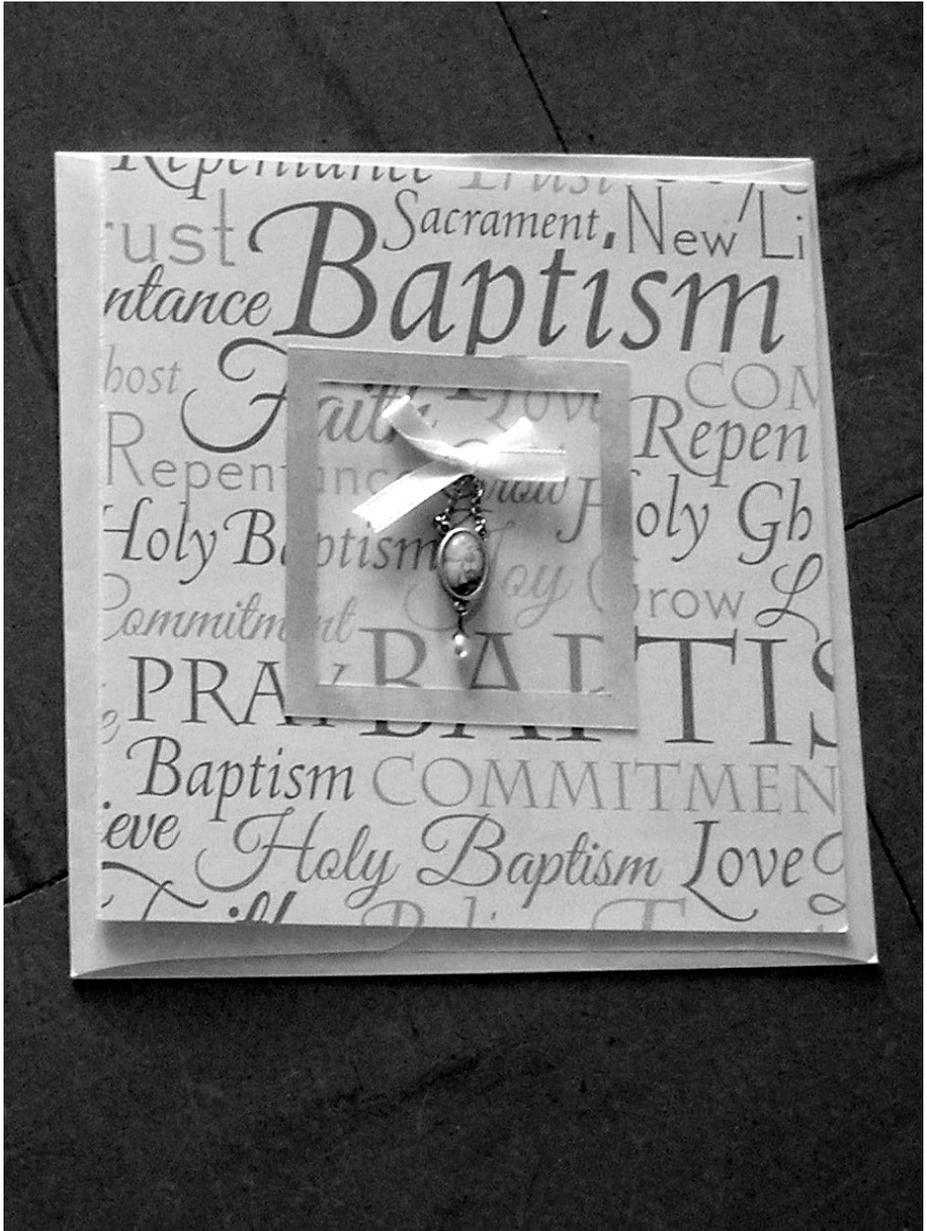
It is a good idea for parents to remember the responsibilities they have to raise their children well, bring them to God's house, and share his Word with them. When infants are baptized, in fact, parents are solemnly charged to do just this. However, all the promises in the world that parents can make do not compare to the promises of God given through Baptism. Ultimately human promises can fail and be broken.

Having a ceremony merely for humans to make promises to God, but not to actually *receive* his promised blessings, is a recipe for disaster. In Baptism, salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life are offered. Why reject these Gospel blessings of God in favor of mere human promises to be good parents?

Baby dedication ceremonies carry neither the command nor the promises of God, because they are man-made inventions. More dangerous is the idea of trying to fulfill the Old Testament ceremonial Law simply because Jesus did so— in fact, he did so because we were unable to! We are no longer required to circumcise our children, present our first-born males in a temple, or offer sacrifices for sin. And we are certainly not encouraged to invent vaguely similar ceremonies with no Scriptural precedent, believing that we are following Jesus' example by doing so! Baptism, by contrast, does carry the command and promise of God, and should not be neglected.

This may seem like rather harsh criticism for an optional little church ceremony that is used by Christians who simply want to ask God to bless their children. There's nothing wrong with asking God to bless a child, of course. We should often ask God's blessings for our loved ones. The aspect of the practice that is likely to offend the sensibilities of Lutherans (and many other Christians) is that it ends up functioning as a replacement and a sort of parody of infant Baptism, without delivering the benefits of life and salvation that Baptism offers. It becomes a public proclamation that "this child is *not* being baptized." It is also problematic if Christians believe that they are following Jesus' example by participating, because they misunderstand the nature of Jesus' own "dedication" as an infant firstborn son under the Mosaic Law.

Section VII.
Other Practices Related to Baptism



VII. Other Practices Related to Baptism

“What are some of the outward differences between the rite of Baptism for an infant versus a baby dedication?”

There are a number of spiritual differences between a Baptism and a dedication, as discussed previously. What you see happening during an infant Baptism and a baby dedication will be notably different as well.

Both of these practices tend to happen during the course of a church service, often at the beginning or end, because both are believed to contain testimonies of faith for the church to share in. Both tend to involve the family of the baptized as well as the congregated believers pledging to see that the child is raised in the Christian faith and given access to God’s house and his Word.

Because those who baptize infants generally hold that Baptism makes one a child of God and a member of the Church through the forgiveness of sins in Christ, infant Baptisms tend to be a much bigger deal for a family than a baby dedication. The child is often dressed in a fancy white baptismal robe, presented with gifts for the occasion, and given a formal party afterwards. Photos are taken and keepsakes are treasured for years afterward. Some families make it a habit of remembering a child’s “baptismal birthday” and treating the day as a celebration all its own. Throughout a baptismal ceremony, many Scriptures are read that state the promises of God in connection with Baptism, and the promise of God to receive children into his kingdom through faith. The child will receive the sign of the cross from the pastor to signify their redemption through Christ, and after their Baptism they are welcomed as a new member of Christ’s Church. The emphasis is on God’s grace given freely to a helpless infant, and a reminder that although we are all unworthy sinners, God’s forgiveness in Jesus extends to all.

An infant dedication, by contrast, is a very modern invention that came to pass mostly to fill the gaping hole left for infants in the church

that inevitably came with the rejection of infant Baptism. It is a way of making sure that babies of Christian families are recognized as being present among the congregation and being perhaps “potential Christians,” even if they aren’t held to really be believers. This slightly awkward scenario means that the attention is primarily shifted onto the parents, who promise to raise their children well, bring them to church, and share the Gospel with their families. An emphasis might be made on the child making his or her own “decision for Jesus” if and when he or she is deemed ready in the distant future. Although cards are sometimes given to commemorate a dedication, it is not usually the formal and more elaborate celebration that characterizes a Baptism. The emphasis is on parental and congregational responsibility, as well as the child’s future responsibility to make good decisions.

“Why do many churches have baptismal ‘sponsors’ or godparents? What qualifications should sponsors have?”

Sponsors (godparents) are a good baptismal tradition, but not necessary. They are chosen by the parents of a baptismal candidate to provide spiritual growth and help to the child, especially in the event of the death of the child’s natural parents. In the olden days, a godparent would actually become the legal guardian of the child in this event. Today, this is not a legal given.

A sponsor must be willing to pray for the child, set a good example in Christian living, and encourage the child to stand firm in the faith into which they have been baptized. A child who is baptized in a Lutheran church would receive the best encouragement in their faith from an active and faithful member of the Lutheran church.

“What is the point of a baptismal candle?”

A baptismal candle is an optional, symbolic gesture that may be used during a rite of Baptism. It points to the new life given by Christ in

Baptism, and is given to the family to keep as a reminder of the event. Candles, certain kinds of clothing, and other such details that might be seen during a Baptism are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, and may be used or set aside according to our Christian freedom.

“Why are people who are baptized, whether young or old, often wearing a white gown during or after their Baptism? Is there any reason that confirmation students and pastors tend to wear white robes, too?”

It’s a very old tradition for the newly-baptized Christian to receive a white robe after being baptized as a picture of being clothed with the holiness and righteousness of Christ, as Scripture says: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). White garments are often used as images of holiness and purity in the Bible (Mark 9:2-3; 16:4; Revelation 3:4-5, 6:11; 7:15, 19:14). Nowadays, it has become common for people to wear white robes during their Baptism as well.

Confirmation is a chance for young people to reaffirm the fact that they received Christ’s righteousness and salvation in Baptism, and their intention to continue in this faith which was begun in them when they were baptized. The ongoing connection with Baptism is suggested by the white robes which some confirmation students wear as part of the ceremony.

Most Lutheran pastors wear either a white robe called an alb, or a surplice worn over a black robe, as a part of their vestments on Sunday. White is always used as the color of holiness, so a white robe on the pastor suggests the Office of the Holy Ministry to which he has been called. In all of these cases, a white robe represents God’s good gifts to his people, his purity and salvation. Although none of the robe-wearers are righteous or holy in and of themselves, the white robe that covers them is a good representation of the gifts they have received through Christ and the fact that their sins have been covered over by Christ.

“Is the practice of confirmation, a special period of instruction and profession of faith for older children, essentially a parallel of the profession of faith and instruction that happens before an older child or teen receives ‘believer’s Baptism’ in a different church?”

At first glance, there may appear to be some similarities between a Lutheran confirmation and the public profession of faith or “testimony” that is required for older children or adults to be baptized in some churches. However, in these churches with different notions of Baptism, these practices are conceptually coming from completely different places and should not be considered to be interchangeable.

The point of the public profession of faith and instruction before Baptism, as put forward in church bodies which deny infant Baptism and its efficacy, is that such profession with the mouth by the individual is necessary before a person can become a Christian. Only after this public commitment is stated may the candidate be baptized. Some of these churches, when looking at the Lutheran practice of confirmation, think of the instruction and profession given through this rite as “validating” the Lutheran’s infant Baptism, or “making it work.”

Lutherans do not believe that confirmation gives Baptism its validity or power. They hold that Baptism is valid in and of itself through the power of God’s Word and promise. Obviously, those who are baptized as infants are expected to be continually taught the faith that they have been given and grow in their understanding throughout their whole lives. Confirmation is about “confirming” what God has already told us: we were made his children through Baptism, and we intend to continue on in that Christian faith which God has already graciously worked in us. Practically speaking, confirmation instruction is used to make sure that older children are well-versed in the basics of the Christian faith so that they can properly examine themselves before receiving the Lord’s Supper, that they might eat and drink to their benefit (1 Cor. 11:27-29). The rite of confirmation is not “essential” in the Lutheran faith; it is a practice used for the sake of good order, as one consistent, concrete way of following Jesus’ command to teach the faith.

“Why do baptismal fonts tend to have eight sides?”

Baptismal fonts often have eight sides to represent a new creation. God created the world in six days, resting on the seventh. The eighth day represents the new life and creation, as Christ rose from the grave on the first day of the week (the “eighth day,” after the Sabbath). We read that eight people were saved on the ark in the days of the Flood, and so eight-sided fonts remind us that we too are saved through the waters of Baptism (1 Peter 3). The eighth day is also when children were brought to be circumcised under the Law of Moses and made part of the family of God according to God’s covenant; according to the new covenant, Baptism replaces circumcision. “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:11-12).

“What is a ‘christening,’ and is it different from a Baptism?”

The words “Baptism” and “christening,” especially when referring to infants, are most often used interchangeably. Both terms tend to refer to the church rite where water is applied to an individual in the name of the Triune God, welcoming the person into God’s family of faith.

Historically, christening also referred to the part of the baptismal service where the child received his or her Christian name. The idea was that being baptized into God’s name and being made a new creation meant receiving a whole new identity, and the child’s name was revealed for the first time. To be “Christ-ened” is, most properly, to be brought to Christ, to be made a Christian; hence the connection with Baptism.

The word “christening” sometimes carries different nuances. Occasionally, you will find churches that actually refer to *infant dedication*

as a “christening,” encouraging parents to let the child be baptized later in life upon the child’s profession of faith. If you’re not sure what a particular church means by the word “christening,” it’s helpful to ask. But christening is usually understood to mean the same thing as Baptism. For example, if you know of a child receiving Baptism, a christening card tends to be equally appropriate.

“How are baptisms in a Lutheran church similar or different to ‘symbolic-only’ churches’ baptisms, with regard to the role of the congregation as witnesses participating in the ceremony?”

It’s generally considered ideal in any church for the congregation to be able to witness a Baptism, though often for different reasons. For many churches who consider Baptism to be symbolic-only, the Baptism ceremony really ends up revolving around the individual making a public profession of faith to a large group of people, to demonstrate the sincerity of his testimony and “decision for Jesus.” The ceremony is often viewed as primarily a way to fulfill Jesus’ statement to confess him before men and not be ashamed. The washing with water can take on a secondary importance to this goal, since it is after all not considered to be effectual.

Baptisms in the Lutheran church also involve confessions of faith as an important component. The Apostles’ Creed as a summary of the Christian faith is used as a baptismal creed, and has been since the early days of the church. Lutheran congregations rejoice to see baptisms in their midst because it is always good to witness the work of God and be reminded of the blessings God gives each one of us through Baptism.

A church which considers Baptism to be effectual will differ in some ways with regard to congregational participation. Although it is always considered important (for obvious reasons) for there to be witnesses to a Baptism, sometimes it becomes necessary to administer an emergency Baptism for one who may be near death. These baptisms usually do not happen in a church in front of a large group, but of course

they are still considered perfectly valid. Christians who deny the efficacy of Baptism would consider the notion of “emergency Baptism” to be nonsensical, not only because Baptism is thought to carry no spiritual benefit but also because there is no large church group before which to reenact the symbolism of Baptism. A Lutheran might point to the fact that in the New Testament, the early church and throughout history, baptisms were not merely a chance for a theatrical show or to “share your testimony” to the masses, but were often administered quietly and quite privately. So while the local church needs to recognize a Baptism in their midst, it is far from necessary (though always nice) for the whole congregation to actually view the Baptism itself.

“In a Lutheran church on Sunday morning, what can be seen and heard that recalls Baptism?”

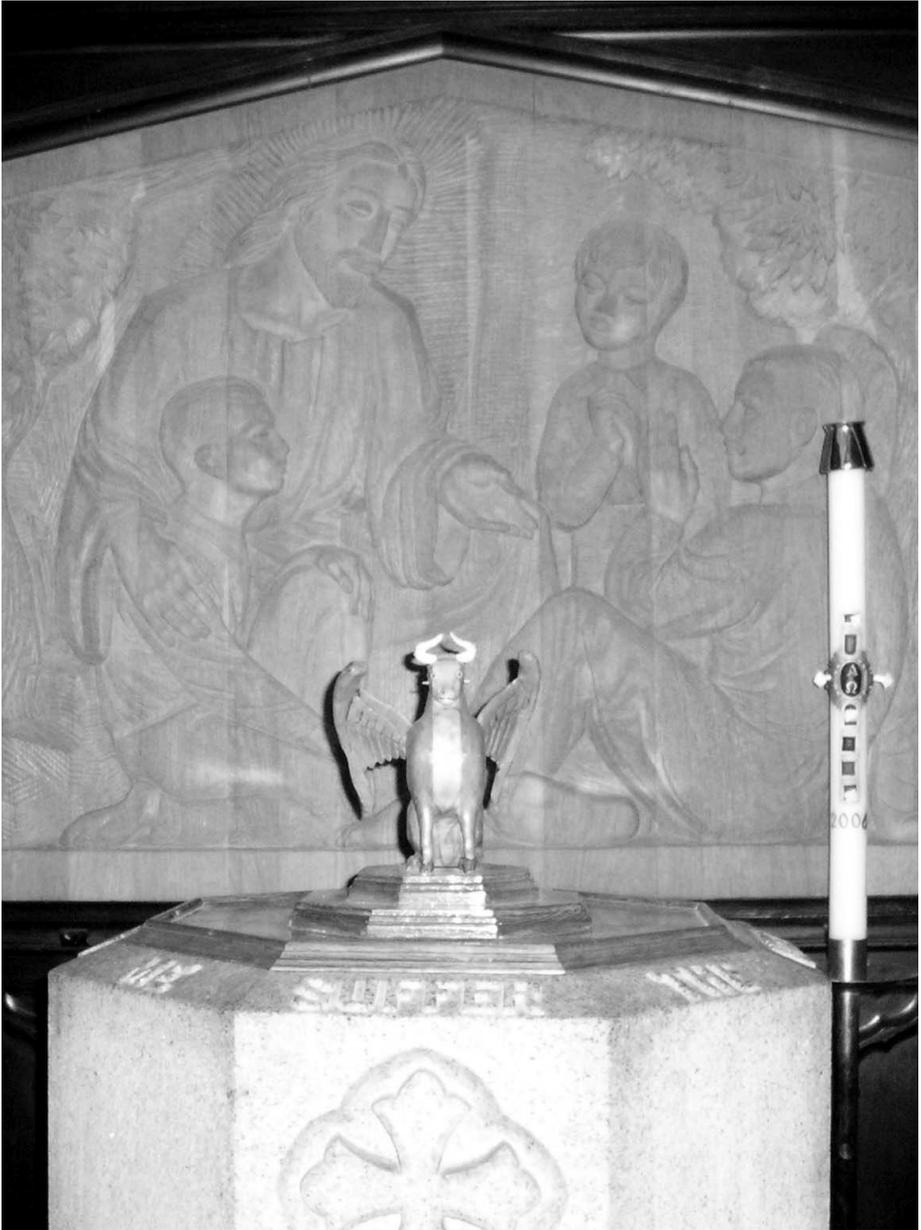
During the course of a Sunday morning service at a Lutheran church, you will observe many things that are related to Baptism. This is because the Word and Sacraments, the vehicles of the Gospel to us, are so central to Lutheran theology.

First of all, many congregations place their baptismal font in a prominent place in the sanctuary, often right at the door (to remind people that they enter Christ’s Church through Baptism) or front and center, in front of the chancel and the altar (to recall the fact that we may approach God’s holiness because he has cleansed us through Baptism). Churches that esteem Baptism sometimes also have pictures, symbols (like the shell with three drops of water, signifying the Triune God), banners, or stained glass windows that may contain references to Baptism.

In the service itself, everything is begun in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, accompanied by the sign of the cross, an ancient Christian gesture. This is a reminder of the fact that we have been baptized into this name (Matthew 28:19), and received the sign of the cross first when we were baptized, marking us as one redeemed by Christ (compare Revelation 22:3-4). It is because of this

baptized life that we may return to God in repentance when we have sinned, which leads into the Confession and Absolution. We also remember our Baptism when we recite the Apostle's Creed, which has served as a baptismal statement since the earliest days of the church. It describes the work of the Triune God on behalf of his people. The service closes with a benediction in the name of the Trinity, and the sign of the cross.

Section VIII. Questions about Specific Verses



VIII. Questions about Specific Verses

“When 1 Peter 3:21 talks about Baptism saving us, it also says that it’s not the physical washing that saves us, but the pledge we make to God to live with a clean conscience before him, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, Baptism is about the promise and pledge that we have to make to God.”

Peter is drawing a parallel in 1 Peter 3, comparing the Flood of Noah to the act of Baptism as two ways that God saved his people through water. Lutherans know full well that we are not saved by a mere physical washing, a removal of dirt from the body. Baptism is much more than that— it’s a cleansing of our very souls and consciences, making us clean, holy, and forgiven before God, as the verse says, “through the resurrection of Christ.” It is not our pledge and promise to God, but God’s pledge and promise to us. We are not saved by promises we make to God; Scripture is very clear on this. The reason that Baptism saves (as the plain words of the verse state so clearly) is not because it makes us externally clean, but, through the power of Christ’s death and resurrection, God makes us internally clean through this means. We find similar statements in Romans 6 about how Baptism connects us to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

It’s also worth noting in this verse— lest the word “symbolizes” used in the New International Version of the Bible confuse anyone— that Baptism itself is not described as the symbol. The Old Testament Flood is the thing described as the symbol (though also an historical reality). Baptism, by contrast, is the *fulfilled reality* in Christ that now saves us, of which the Flood was a foreshadowing or correspondence.

“The Bible may say ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,’ but right after that it says that ‘whoever does not

believe will be condemned.’ So it’s not lack of Baptism that condemns you, but lack of faith. Faith is the only important thing in this verse.”

There’s no argument from Lutherans that lack of faith is what condemns— even for those who have been baptized. However, that does not negate the clearly-stated first part of Mark 16:16 which so many Christians are eager to ignore: Baptism and faith, hand-in-hand, are mentioned in connection with *being saved*. Lutherans are okay with both halves of that verse; they both make perfect sense in terms of Lutheran teaching. Even one who is baptized and is saved may later reject the faith (and in so doing, ultimately reject their Baptism) and receive condemnation as a result. But caution should be taken if a pastor or church is eager to discard part of a verse in the hope that another part will eradicate the bit they don’t like. If Jesus, speaking in this verse, did not want people to think that Baptism (in faith, of course) saved anyone, but that “only faith” was important, why mention Baptism here at all?

Instead of considering the straightforwardness of this verse and the way it connects Baptism and being saved, some will try to focus on the *order* of belief and Baptism, as if to use it as a sort of proof text for adult-only Baptism (i.e. “You must be intellectually competent before being saved, and then you may be baptized”). A Lutheran would object on the grounds that faith is not about intellectual competency, and also that this verse is not presenting a time line for “belief” and “Baptism.” The Great Commission says that disciples are made by Baptism and teaching the Word (Matthew 28:19), but we don’t regard that as a time line, either— disciples may also be taught the Word and have understanding of it before their Baptism. The important thing is that Baptism, the Word, and faith all go together in God’s act of saving us, regardless of which appears to precede which. We may not cut any of them out of the picture and pretend that one of them is all-important while the rest have nothing to do with salvation. Faith rests securely in Christ’s Word and clings to it. Baptism is water with that saving Word. They are inseparable.

“In Acts 8:9-17, we read about the Samaritans who do not receive the Holy Spirit the same way as other believers did. They were baptized because they received the Word and were saved, but didn’t receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came down and laid their hands on them. And in Acts 10, we have what looks like the opposite scenario— the Holy Spirit comes on the Gentiles before they can be baptized. Does this prove that the Holy Spirit and Baptism don’t necessarily go together, or that Baptism doesn’t do anything?”

These two passages are universally acknowledged by Bible scholars to be special and unusual occurrences, and a number of explanations are possible for what is happening here (none of which involve denying the efficacy of Baptism). Notice that in both passages, the Gospel is at last being publicly proclaimed among non-Jews.

First, we know that God was at work among these Samaritans because they heard and believed his Word. This belief only comes about by the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). What the Samaritans received when the apostles laid their hands on them was a display of the external gifts of the Holy Spirit which were evident in the days of the early church— this display was called an “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit. It does not mean God was not involved in their lives before this laying on of hands, or that he did not work through his Spirit in their baptisms. One common explanation of why this outpouring was delayed until the apostles arrived is because something new was happening: the Samaritans, traditionally the enemies of the Jews, were turning to Jesus. This display happened the way it did, in a parallel to the day of Pentecost, to prove to all that in Christ, there was no Samaritan inferiority. It also may have been important for these Samaritans to recognize the authority of the Jewish apostles, which they may have been tempted to reject because of long-standing Jewish/Samaritan animosity. In the book of Acts, these early and special external outpourings of the Spirit are pointed to as hard evidence of God’s blessing and approval on his church (Acts 5:32, 11:17). It would have been important for these Samaritans to have been recognized by the

Christian community, particularly the apostles, as God's people in Christ.

In the Acts 10 passage, Peter is preaching to the Gentiles, who believe his Word and receive the Holy Spirit. Peter's Jewish friends are surprised and amazed that the Gentiles have received this outpouring, and Peter says, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (v. 47). So they are immediately baptized. Notice how closely Peter connects Baptism (with water) and the reception of the Holy Spirit— that was indeed understood to be the norm. Those of us who accept the power and efficacy of Baptism can certainly accept that the Spirit works through the Word, before a person is baptized. The Holy Spirit is not confined to working through Baptism only. But we do hold that he always works through Baptism, and always works through the Word. So there's no particular problem with people receiving the Spirit through the Word before they are baptized, as well as the Spirit working to confirm and strengthen their faith in Baptism.

It is most likely that these two scenarios are unusual in the book of Acts because of the entry of the Gentiles into the Christian church, and the need of a special confirmation of their legitimacy. But neither passage rejects the fact that the Holy Spirit works through Baptism, or contradicts the many Scripture passages which affirm this truth (Acts 2:38, Titus 3:4-8, etc).

"In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that he was thankful that he did not baptize many people, because Christ didn't send him to baptize but to preach the Gospel. Why would he say that?"

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 deal with a situation in the church in Corinth where there were factions among the believers. Some said, "I follow Paul"; others said "I follow Cephas"; others said "I follow Christ." Paul points out that no believer is baptized into the name of Paul, but into the name of Jesus. Therefore he says: "I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you

were baptized into my name.” Paul did not want the church to be divided over petty issues, such as which pastor or apostle happened to be the one to baptize them. The important thing is that they were all baptized into the name of Christ.

Paul was not sent primarily to baptize (although, as he makes clear, he has baptized some), but to be a missionary and preacher. Others in his company, or elders in the churches he founded, would have the task of administering Baptism. This is just a matter of a delegation of tasks; it certainly doesn’t mean that Baptism wasn’t important or an essential part of the early church. Paul had received a unique commission as an apostle to the Gentiles, and his experiences specially fashioned him into a preacher and a spokesperson. By contrast, any local pastor could administer a Baptism. Baptism is simply water with the Word. But although it is much easier to baptize than to preach, it did have the potential to be a time-consuming task, and also (as Paul notes in this passage) could result in these strange situations arising where Christians split into factions based on who was baptized by whom. So looking back, Paul is glad that he himself wasn’t in charge of administering the baptisms so he wouldn’t unwittingly add extra fuel to the controversy.

We read something similar in John 4:1-2: “The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.” It certainly could have caused dissension if those who had been baptized by one of the disciples ended up with an inferiority complex because they knew that others had received Baptism from Jesus’ own hand. The point is that a Baptism is good and valid if it is in Jesus’ name, not on the basis of which person administered the water. Jesus and Paul may have both set precedents for pastoral ministry here: the local clergy are given the task of baptizing their flock, not the “celebrity preacher” who comes to town.

This passage *does not* suggest that Baptism stands in opposition to the Gospel message, or has no great importance regarding salvation, or should not be done by pastors. Taking a closer look at the specific situation Paul is addressing in Corinth clarifies the issue.

“I’ve heard some explain Acts 2:38 by saying that the phrase ‘for the forgiveness of sins’ should really be rendered ‘because of the forgiveness of sins’— that is, be baptized in light of the fact that your sins have been forgiven, not in order to obtain forgiveness. Is this a valid reading of the verse?”

Acts 2:38 reads, “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.’” Even those who oppose the idea that Baptism forgives sins are forced to admit that this verse certainly *sounds* like it’s saying that Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and results in the reception of the Holy Spirit. (That’s because this is the most obvious, straightforward reading of the text.) But because so many Protestants have the preconception that Baptism is a human work and therefore cannot save, many elaborate measures have been taken to explain away this troublesome text— none very successfully.

First of all, the Greek word *eis* (translated *for*) can also be rendered *into*, *to*, *unto*, and *so that*, all of which are consistent in meaning with *for*. The word *eis* is never translated *because of* anywhere in the Bible in any English version that’s out there. Some common translations do use the alternate wording, “so that your sins will be forgiven.”

Second, Jesus used the exact same Greek phrase in his Words of Institution at the Last Supper: “Shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Jesus’ blood was shed not because people already had forgiveness, or so they would think about forgiveness or “have a view toward it,” but in order that they would actually obtain it. Likewise, Peter told the crowd at Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. If they had already obtained faith and forgiveness, why were they being told to repent? Peter is telling them to do both, repent and be baptized (the word *and* connects both words inextricably) for the receiving of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. If repentance is for the forgiveness of sins, then so is Baptism. The word *eis* cannot mean *for* in regards to repentance and *because of* in regards to Baptism.

Another attempt to discredit the plain meaning of the verse comes from those who grammatically restructure the sentence into:

“Repent for the forgiveness of sins, and be baptized into the name of Jesus.” The problem is that Peter didn’t structure his sentence this way because he didn’t mean this! Reworking Bible verses this way would cause no end of distortion and twisting of the meaning of God’s Word. But perhaps the most common approach to the verse by those who oppose the efficacy of Baptism is simply avoidance of what they deem to be an incredibly difficult text. I once heard an evangelical pastor quote Acts 2:38 and leave out the reference to Baptism altogether, as though Peter had only said, “Repent for the forgiveness of sins” and really didn’t mean what he said about Baptism at all. This can only be seen as a less-than-honest approach.

“If Baptism were really necessary for salvation, it would be mentioned in all the Scripture verses that talks about being saved, but it isn’t.”

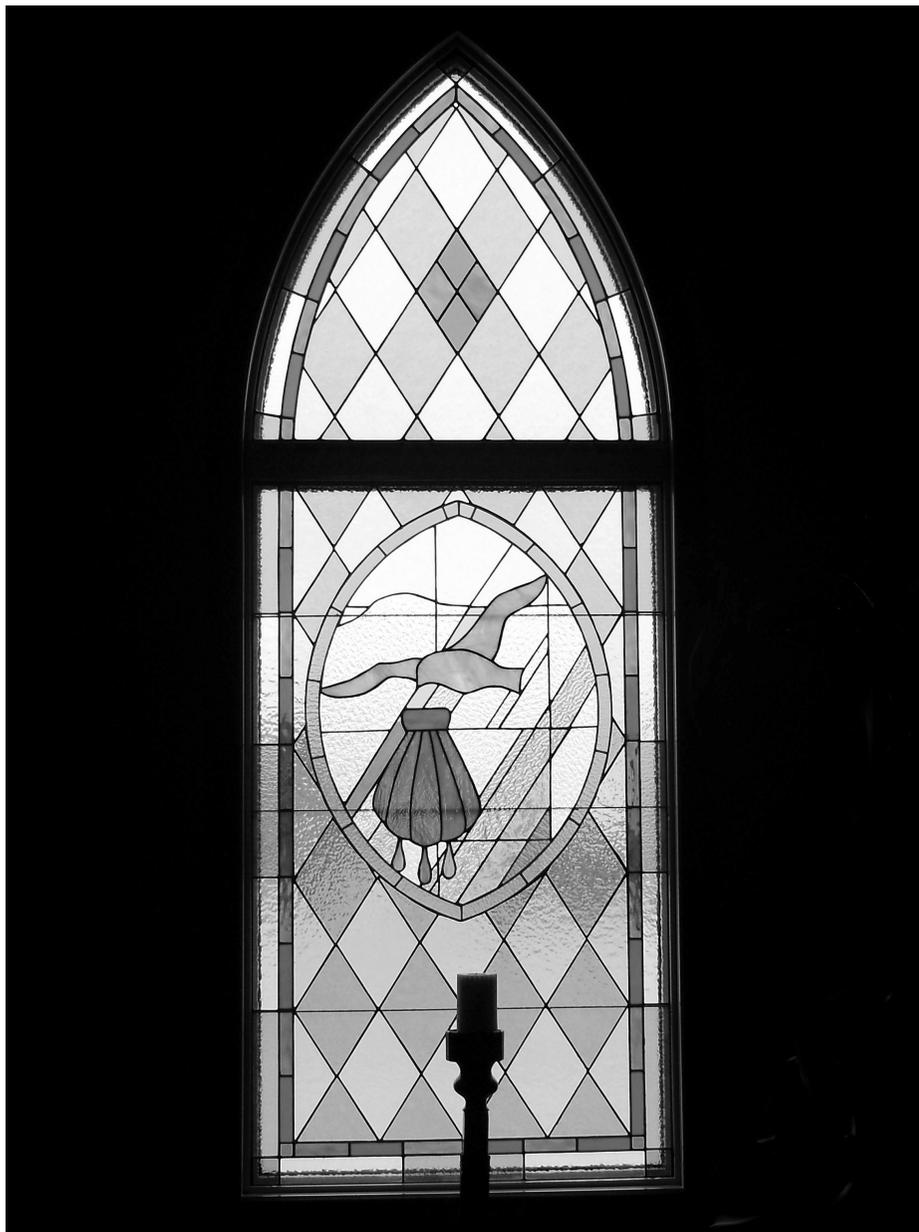
Certain Bible verses, like John 3:16, are well-known as “the Gospel in a nutshell.” Some feel that if Baptism had a significant connection with salvation, it ought to be mentioned every time salvation is mentioned, especially in these popular verses. I have actually heard it claimed that when Baptism is mentioned in the Bible, it is never mentioned in connection with salvation and forgiveness. This is patently and incredibly false, as numerous Scriptures have shown already.

For starters, we do not look at our favorite single Scripture verses to the exclusion of the rest of the Bible, as though all the important details were summed up in our favorites. John 3:16 is an excellent verse, but it doesn’t happen to mention that Jesus died on the cross for us. Surely we don’t take that to mean that Jesus’ death has nothing to do with our salvation! Acts 2:38 says to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, but there are many other aspects of faith that it does not mention. This is why we’re given the entire Bible, not just tiny segments. (For example: Looking at the rest of John 3, instead of only verse 16, reveals Christ talking about entering the kingdom of God by being born again of water and the Spirit– Baptism. The chapter also

refers to the Son of Man being “lifted up,” a reference to his crucifixion. The Bible wasn’t even originally divided into individual verses when first written, so the whole argument becomes a moot point.)

The Bible talks about Baptism repeatedly as an agent of salvation, forgiveness, and new life with Christ, and its testimony about Baptism is consistent throughout. But even if Scripture were to only mention Baptism a couple of times, it is still the infallible Word of God and we would not be at liberty to dismiss a single word of it, as though verses that happen to not mention Baptism somehow contradict the ones that do.

Section IX. Other Objections and Common Fallacies



IX. Other Objections and Common Fallacies

“Luther was okay, but he and his followers didn’t go far enough with the Reformation. They couldn’t quite bring themselves to break away from a lot of the Roman trappings that they should have gotten rid of, like the Baptism of infants, so they tried to find creative ways of explaining the practice so it fit into their new theology.”

A common refrain that you hear about Lutherans is that they “didn’t go far enough” with the Reformation. It is true that the Lutheran Reformation was conservative, and the Lutherans strongly opposed what they considered to be radical departures from the historic Christian faith, as urged by other Protestant sects. Some modern Christians end up describing Luther and his followers as essentially a bunch of weak-willed cowards who secretly liked the Roman church too much to accomplish the real goals that the Reformation should have accomplished, and simply re-worked certain Roman ideas into a “faith alone” setting.

These Christians have obviously read very little of Luther. He was a very bold, earthy, in-your-face personality who was constantly risking his life for his teachings and convictions on grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone. When the Lutheran reformers encountered Roman ideas which violated any of these principles, they came down *hard* on them— no more praying to saints, purgatory, buying indulgences, etc. They didn’t try to tiptoe their way around these issues in order to justify common Catholic practices that they happened to like. And when the Lutherans disagreed with the conclusions of the more radical Protestant reformers, such as related to Baptism for example, they gave strong Scriptural reasons for doing so, accusing their opponents of rejecting the clear words of the Bible in favor of human reason and speculation. The reformers knew that much church heresy throughout history, such as the Arians, came from those who would

disregard the plain meaning of the Word in favor of “spiritualizing” everything that was deemed too offensive to human reason. Groups uneasy with the concept of the Trinity or the idea of Jesus being both God and man would re-define the word “is,” or insist that figures of speech and metaphors were being used to describe Jesus’ nature. The Lutheran reformers believed that the radical Protestant reformers were doing the same thing with Baptism and other issues: elevating their human reason above the clearly-stated Word of God.

“People who believe that Baptism saves are using it superstitiously, like it’s a talisman or some kind of magical act.”

Few things will shoot down a serious discussion on Baptism like someone breaking out the word “magical.” The efficacy of Baptism is scoffed away flippantly, put in the same category as a parlor trick believed in by ignorant masses. To deal with this attitude, a few things must be remembered.

First, Christians have no faith in magic; they do believe in miracles. What we call magic is either a sleight-of-hand trick, or a supernatural act aided by power from below; a miracle is a supernatural act performed by God. Christians contend that Baptism, through the power of God’s Word (not the mere act in and of itself), does indeed save and that God is more than capable of keeping his promises and working miraculous faith in the lives of people through it.

Is there a lack of practical belief in a miracle-working Christ in many evangelical churches today which consider themselves conservative and Bible-believing? These churches, who have no problems accepting that God spoke the universe into existence through his Word as the Spirit hovered above the waters, balk at the notion of God speaking a Christian into existence through water and his Word. These churches are okay with the idea of Jesus miraculously feeding 5,000 men, but the idea of Jesus giving his body and blood to eat and drink is held to be patently impossible (shades of John 6). Some

Christians believe in all sorts of mystical personal experiences of God talking to them, yet do not believe that Christian prayer actually *accomplishes* anything other than a change in our own personal attitudes. In short, there is a semi-Gnostic approach to faith happening: miracles are fine as long as they either look really fancy, or don't offend human reason too much, or happen mostly inside our heads in some abstract and undefined way. This sense of disdain at God working through plain, ordinary physical means is one that keeps popping up again and again, and it's not a new problem.

Consider Naaman, the Syrian officer who goes to Israel to be healed of his leprosy by the prophet Elisha. Naaman isn't even greeted personally by the prophet, but receives a Word of the Lord from him: he is to go and wash himself in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is furious at the indignity of it all. Besides, it doesn't seem all that spiritual to go take a bath in a dirty local river. He expected the man of God to come out, wave his hand over the spot (*presto-chango!*) and heal him in an impressive display (2 Kings 5:10-12). If Naaman hadn't had sensible servants advising him, he may have missed God's miracle altogether due to his scorning of the ordinary means of water and God's Word. So it is with us and Baptism.

It certainly is possible to use Baptism, or any other gift of God, in a superstitious manner. We see in Scripture again and again how people use God's gifts superstitiously, and no doubt superstitions abound among Christians in every church under the sun. But this doesn't discredit the validity of the gift, nor is it kind to assume that most or all Christians who accept that Baptism saves are merely gullible and superstitious.

“Parents who get their infants baptized do it just out of peer pressure from their surrounding community, not because they have sincere convictions that it benefits their child.”

Do people baptize their infants just because everyone else is doing it; it's expected of them? That would involve knowing the motives

of all such Christians, which is neither possible to judge nor ours to know, but clearly this doesn't touch the question of whether such baptisms are truly efficacious. Granted, Baptism should never happen without careful teaching of what is happening, and as a rule, such instruction always takes place. If a parent chooses to act hypocritically when it comes to the Baptism of their child, that's up to them, but Baptism still carries God's Word of promise.

Acting out of peer pressure in the Christian church is actually most rampant where people's emotions are being manipulated. It's common at certain youth rallies to see young people walking the aisle to accept Jesus or be rededicated largely because of the mob mentality and emotional manipulation being used to sway them. This is a throw-back to revivalism, and the belief that the Holy Spirit's presence must be "felt" through the use of human means to excite and move people to believe in Jesus. Personally, I was baptized at the age of 10. I knew, when I asked to be baptized, that other friends of mine would be baptized soon. How much of those expectations were what drove me down the aisle? It's hard to say, but surely peer pressure played a role. Those who conduct modern-day revivals are well aware of the peer pressure issue, and have tried to be a little more careful to talk to the person individually, attempting to guarantee the sincerity of their "decision." Any honest person will admit that peer pressure is always there in such venues; in fact, it tends to be deliberately manufactured.

Those who deny the saving power of Baptism, considering it to be a human work or "ordinance" instead, often try to gauge the sincerity of those asking for it. Some churches insist that a person be a full-grown adult before they should even consider asking for Baptism. But how sincere is sincere enough? Who can judge just how mature a person's faith must be, especially since our faith is always maturing? How do we determine just how little peer pressure a person has encountered in connection with the idea of Baptism? It's impossible. This is the problem of making Baptism our work— we will always cast doubt on its legitimacy. But if Baptism is God's work for us, we never need doubt it.

“I consider my Baptism to be an outward symbol of an inward change, a memorial of me committing my life to Jesus. Isn’t this the more biblical expression of what Baptism is all about?”

All Christians should seriously consider whether or not they are comfortable with the sort of language *the Bible itself* uses to describe Baptism. Christians who view Baptism as being only a symbol often use phrases like “an outward sign of an inward change,” or talk about a “memorial of my personal commitment to Christ.” Likewise, they are very uncomfortable with the phrase in the Nicene Creed, “I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission [forgiveness] of sins,” or any talk about Baptism saving the believer or washing away their sins. Which phrases truly reflect the language the Bible uses to talk about Baptism?

Despite the modern popularity of the expressions, the Bible never describes Baptism as an outward sign of an inward change. In fact, the Bible never calls Baptism a mere symbol or a memorial at all, although the act of Baptism may contain elements of both. This is the sort of language that the Bible itself uses when describing Baptism: “Baptism now saves you” (1 Peter 3:21); “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16); “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away” (Acts 22:16); “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

Every now and then I browse the card section of Christian bookstores and look at the Baptism cards they offer. If it is a standard evangelical/Protestant store, they will not carry books or other products that support the idea that Baptism saves. The cards they have for Baptism will usually include a printed Bible verse, but rarely do the card sentiments or the quoted Bible verses ever actually mention Baptism! There are verses about commitment or about God’s goodness, and sentiments about living a Christian life, but few actual Baptism verses. Why? I suspect it’s because the Bible verses that do mention Baptism seem to come right out and suggest that Baptism is indeed efficacious, which would not fit into the store’s theological leanings.

It's okay for Christians to occasionally describe their theology in terms that aren't strictly found in the Bible. The Bible doesn't use the word "Trinity" or other words that Christians over the years have used to describe biblical truths. But there is a problem when Christians take strong offense with the language that God's own holy Word uses to describe something like Baptism, and have to replace the biblical language entirely with invented phrases or ideas.

“Wouldn't a belief in the saving nature of Baptism lead to all kinds of power abuses by the church? Can a pastor or priest really claim to hold a person's salvation in their hands like that? Salvation should be more of a personal thing between me and God, not the result of some priestcraft.”

Once the idea is explained, a person who objects to the efficacy of Baptism may understand that Baptism isn't a work we do to save ourselves— it is something done *to us*, after all. But they may still object to the fact that a mere fellow mortal can impart God's grace and forgiveness through God's Word and water. Accusations of a pagan sort of priestcraft arise; the technical term for this is “sacerdotalism.” Aren't all Christians priests? Is this giving one man in a robe too much power as an extra mediator between God and man?

The whole idea that Baptism saves, and that the youngest of children may be baptized, does take feelings of power squarely out of the hands of the individual. Everything depends not on us, our good decision-making skills, or our self-assertions, but on God graciously bestowing his Word of promise to the needy and humble. And God works this miracle of salvation through his church, and in so doing, joins all the baptized into one corporate body. You can imagine the protests this could elicit among our highly individualistic, rights-oriented North American culture.

One reason for the extreme sense of individualism and autonomy in certain popular evangelical circles is the fear of the church or pastor having too much power, resulting in abuse or persecution. Better to

leave matters of salvation to the individual, it is thought, so that they don't consider the church or its pastor a "mediator" of salvation. But does salvation come to individuals directly, apart from the church? The church and the church alone is in the business of delivering the Gospel. Christ's church consists of all believers, incorporated into one body. As a body, they call pastors to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. The church does not belong to an individual pastor or priest, but to Christ, who saves people by means of the Gospel which the church proclaims. You can't really separate salvation and forgiveness from God's people, the church. Even one Christian individual telling an unsaved person about Jesus is the church at work. In an emergency situation, most churches that accept infant Baptism will allow for a layperson rather than a pastor to administer Baptism— Lutherans do not believe pastors have a mystical power conferred on them through their ordination.

Are power abuses by pastors possible? Certainly, as they are in all churches at all levels. The Reformation happened as a reaction against unscriptural practices which were endangering God's people by withholding the pure Gospel for them. (Some examples would be the selling of indulgences, or a pastor or priest who is unwilling to baptize a child unless they are paid first.) The point is that abuses of power should always be addressed and dealt with— but just because the church calls pastors to do things like preach, baptize, and administer the Lord's Supper, does not mean that such abuse is inevitable, or that we should consider the Gospel that the pastor brings as ineffective! Luther and his followers strongly advocated the "priesthood of all believers," but that doesn't mean we abolish pastors. Rather, we support them and each other, recognizing that God has given them to us to care for us and deliver the Gospel to us, both through the preached Word and through Baptism. This reflects again the reality that God works through means, in this case, through our vocations— just like it is part of the parent's vocation to bring their children to church and to Baptism.

“The thief on the cross wasn’t baptized, but he was still saved.”

I’ve never been quite sure just why people try to use this as an argument against the saving nature of Baptism. First of all, we don’t know that the thief on the cross *wasn’t* baptized, since John the Baptist baptized a considerable number of Jews (Mark 1:4-5). Are people assuming that no one who has been baptized will end up becoming a thief or criminal before coming back to repentance?

Second, there’s no need to reference even the thief on the cross—*none* of God’s people were required to be baptized in the Old Testament, yet we hold them to be saints in the faith. Jesus instituted Christian Baptism in the name of the Triune God after his resurrection, so referring to events before this time as a way to formulate our doctrine on Baptism isn’t necessarily helpful or relevant. The saints who came before this time were still saved through faith in Christ, and held to the signs and promises that preceded Baptism. “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:1-4).

Third, lack of faith is what condemns, not lack of Baptism *per se*. A person can receive faith and be saved through other Gospel means, through the Word, in the rare case of Baptism being unavailable to them. A word of promise personally spoken by Christ himself, as this scenario describes, is certainly sufficient! You can’t deduce from these highly unusual occurrences that Baptism isn’t important or doesn’t save, however.

“Baptism is just a ceremony, a human ritual. I don’t see why any Christian should attach such importance to it when what counts is the spiritual reality of dying to our old selves and living new lives as Christians.”

Absolutely no Christian who takes any stock in God’s Word can describe Baptism as just a human ritual or ceremony. Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit was instituted and commanded by Christ himself (Matthew 28:18) carried out by his disciples (Acts 2:38, 8:12, etc), and carries the authority of God. Even those who reject the efficacy of Baptism should feel ashamed if they are using such contemptuous terms to describe something instituted by Jesus as a hallmark of his Church. Unfortunately, sometimes Baptism is spoken of with flippancy or contempt by Christians who should know better, simply because they are trying to downplay its significance in the life of the believer. In the past few decades, even the ceremonial aspects of Baptism have been treated with a great deal of irreverence by far too many churches— one hears about “hot tub Baptisms” and “pool party Baptisms,” ideas which in the not-too-distant past would have shocked and embarrassed even the most ardent Christian opponents of Baptism’s efficacy.

The big problem here is the old idea that anything physical — like water being poured onto a person — is “unspiritual,” and only feelings, ideas in our heads, or our own subsequent good works count as being “spiritual.” It all goes back to remembering that God works through real, physical means. Because we are people with real bodies in a physical world, God communicates to us through things like written words on a page, the sound of preaching, the Incarnation of our Savior, fellow Christians, and simple water. If this is how God has promised to meet us, we have no right to scorn his chosen means as “unspiritual.”

If Baptism is just a human ceremony that we shouldn’t consider so desperately important, why would Jesus bother turning it into a formal Christian institution? Did Jesus come to be another Pharisee teacher, setting up and commanding outward rules and rituals in addition to or as replacement of Moses’ Law — rituals that don’t deliver

any spiritual benefit to us, but just provide us with one more way to potentially become disobedient? This would seem strange considering that Jesus' own stated mission is preaching the Gospel and saving of the world.

It's important to come down hard on man-made rituals and ceremonies that are thought to save us and bring us to conversion. Some of those inventions include altar calls, praying the "sinner's prayer," rededications, emotional "spiritual highs," or feelings of great sincerity in one's commitment to God. Those things have no Word of Gospel promise attached to them, yet many point to those moments as proof of their conversion and salvation. We need to rather be pointing to God's work for us, as it is given to us in Scripture, if we want real proof and assurance— not man-made inventions and subjective experiences.

"You people seem to talk about Baptism more than you talk about Jesus!"

While this is literally quite unlikely, the Christian who rejects the efficacy of Baptism is not used to hearing Baptism mentioned all that much in sermons, Bible studies, and Christian conversation. And they are certainly never used to hearing about Baptism as meaning, "Jesus delivered to you personally." To a Christian for whom Baptism is not seen as a means of grace, "Baptism" and "Jesus saving" are kept in very mutually exclusive categories. So to hear Baptism extolled frequently in Lutheran sermons or devotions can sound confusing at best, as though Lutherans aren't talking about Jesus at all, but rather just some religious water ritual in their distant past.

The reason that Lutherans esteem Baptism so highly and talk about it so much is precisely because they understand it to mean "Jesus giving himself to me, personally; the Gospel for me, saving me." They do not separate Jesus and his presence from Baptism— they define Baptism by Christ's presence given to the believer. Jesus' death on the cross to save sinners is actually something you're guaranteed to hear constantly in confessional Lutheran churches, throughout the liturgy, hymnody,

sermons, and Bible studies. Baptism is simply spoken of much more in Lutheran circles than in other evangelical circles because Baptism is how Lutherans believe that Jesus' death and resurrection is applied to the individual.

Luther writes, "Therefore we always teach that the Sacraments and all external things which God ordains and institutes should not be regarded according to the coarse, external mask, as we regard the shell of a nut, but as the Word of God is included therein" (*Large Catechism, Baptism, 19*). In order to understand why Lutherans value Baptism, other believers need to put aside their presupposition for a moment that Baptism is a mere external ceremony, and try to understand what the Lutheran believes about it. Lutherans don't esteem Baptism because it's a neat ritual. They esteem it because of what it contains inside: the Word and name of the Triune God, the Gospel promises of life and salvation, Jesus' death on the cross for us.

"I asked a pastor/friend once why they believe what they believe about Baptism, and they weren't able to give me a sensible answer at all. That convinced me that there is no good reason for the positions they hold."

It may be only human to have this initial reaction when we feel that a friend has let us down, but whether or not the friend was able to give a concise response which satisfies the inquirer, at that time, is no grounds for rejecting his beliefs out of hand. Many Christians, when confronted by atheists (for example), cannot give proper answers for some of their beliefs in a way that satisfies or convinces the atheist. Sometimes, the Christian can even panic and draw a mental blank from being put on the spot. Does this mean Christianity isn't true? Certainly all believers need to clearly know what they believe and why, so they can give a proper witness to it. Pastors, especially, need to be able to teach and explain the faith to others. But ultimately, if we are serious about determining whether something is true or not, we can't base our analysis on one or two people who have been put on the spot.

For one thing, it's entirely possible that the question, as asked, made no sense to the hearer in the way it was stated. Conversely, it's possible that a good answer was given, but was not understood properly. This Q&A book shows again and again that many Christians are actually coming at certain words like *faith* and *Baptism* with utterly different definitions and preconceptions. One of the reasons I put this book together is to try to do a little bit of "translation work" so that those who reject the efficacy of Baptism can better understand where the Lutheran is coming from, and vice versa.

As for pastors who are unable to articulate the faith clearly, this is especially regrettable. However, circumstances should be considered. On countless occasions, pastors have preached sermons that have made other Christian visitors upset, because he preached contrary to the visitors' own doctrinal sensibilities. What often happens is that as the pastor greets people on the way out the door after the service, he gets accosted by an angry questioner. The pastor might be stunned by the reaction and unprepared for an emotional barrage, especially as he's focusing on greeting his parishioners; the questioner might feel brushed off as a result. But the polite thing to do, if you want to ask a pastor a question, is to arrange a time to meet with him, or to send him a note or e-mail asking for clarification and answers to questions. Most pastors are more than happy to provide these resources to those who ask. It is always more charitable to assume that reasoned answers to the questions you're asking do exist, even if after much consideration you conclude that your opinion still differs.

"Why does the Lutheran church and others consider 're-Baptism' to be such a terrible thing? What if someone who was baptized as an infant started attending another church where they had to be baptized again in order to become a member there?"

A person is "re-baptized" when their first Baptism is considered invalid. This most often happens with people who were baptized as

infants, and are told by another church that their first Baptism was not a true Baptism, that it didn't count because they were not able to make a profession of faith at the same time. They are then re-baptized by this other church.

The problem with this is that it is an insult to God's gift of Baptism to you. It is a statement that God's action and his Word were not enough to save you, but that your own words, decisions and intentions are what really save you. You can't be re-baptized as an adult, or join a church which rejects infant Baptism, without ultimately conceding that your own infant Baptism was absolutely worthless.

If someone who has been baptized legitimately as an infant feels the need to be re-baptized, they should talk with their own pastor to determine what the reason is. There may be incorrect understandings of Baptism in the picture, or they may be trying to ignore biblical doctrine for the sake of pleasing a loved one. Whatever the reason, their pastor should be able to help and provide appropriate guidance and resources. It is always important to remember that we should *never* participate in church rites, or take out church membership, for the sake of convenience or conventionality. The beliefs and convictions of your church matter, and by joining a church you publicly state yourself to be in full agreement with their teaching.

Many churches nowadays will actually accept new members who were baptized as infants, even if the church itself rejects the validity of infant Baptism, without insisting on another Baptism. They may consider the member's confirmation ceremony to be a sufficient public profession of faith which retroactively "legitimizes" the infant Baptism. While this may sound generous on some level, it is actually an act of compromise on the part of the church of their own beliefs. For the sake of getting more people in the door, this church is abandoning its own historic stance and teachings on the necessity of adult-only "believer's Baptism." The pastor of such a church may say, "If the person feels that their infant Baptism was significant for them, I don't want to take that away from them." In other words, truth is relative and feelings are more important than obedience to God's Word. Such a church should be avoided simply for its lack of courage to stand for its own convictions.

“I’m dating someone that I hope to marry someday, and that person absolutely refuses to consider Baptism for infants. But otherwise, we have a lot of other similarities when it comes to faith— we both believe Jesus died to save us. So is it really that big a deal if I don’t plan to have my children baptized until later on in their lives— as long as they’re baptized eventually?”

Questions of faith, including ones that may cause controversy, should be discussed and resolved in advance, before a couple decides to get married. Baptism and other questions pertaining to how children will be raised in the faith are desperately critical, but unfortunately are often issues that fall by the wayside when couples only focus on their feelings for one another when considering marriage. Parents especially need to be of one heart and mind when it comes to an issue like the Baptism of their infant children. When this does not happen, the risk of the children growing up without a clear Christian identity increases greatly, to say nothing of the possibility that they may never be baptized. To ignore the issue, or to write it off and avoid discussing it, is to automatically take the position that Baptism doesn’t matter much. God’s Word doesn’t allow for that attitude.

“People who believe in Baptism working forgiveness, or in infant Baptism, haven’t really thought the issue through or looked into God’s Word. They’re just blindly going along with tradition.”

Although I spent much of life in churches which deny the efficacy of Baptism and will not baptize infants, it was God’s Word that convinced me that Baptism saves through the resurrection of Christ, that it is a Gospel gift received in faith. Hopefully the rest of these Q&As demonstrate that for Lutherans and other Christians, the issue is entirely a matter of God’s Word and promises, not just a blind tradition.

A person raising such a question ought to honestly and openly ask themselves if it is not perhaps their own church tradition which is turning a blind eye to the evidence of both Scripture and the entire history of the Christian Church. How many evangelical Christians are ever really made aware of the arguments in favor of Baptism as a means of grace, or the fact that no one in Church history seriously doubted the efficacy of Baptism until the 16th century? Many, perhaps most, simply go along with the tradition they are given. In my experience, it is common to ignore the implications of the many Scriptures which link Baptism to salvation and to assume that church leaders can explain them away. I have listened to pastors, because of their incorrect first principles that faith is a good work of ours and cannot involve God working through means, spend a whole sermon trying to explain why verses about Baptism must actually mean the opposite of what they clearly seem to say. Especially shocking to me was once hearing a pastor quote Acts 2:38 while conveniently *leaving out* the verse's reference to Baptism—a major red flag.

The issue of Baptism is one which requires all believers in Christ to take a close look at the Scriptures and the evidence. It also requires patience and time. Someone who was taught their whole life that faith is the good response within us that we bring to God to get salvation, and that Baptism does nothing for us, is not likely to be convinced to the contrary overnight. But getting rid of the stereotypes that are indicated by this question is a necessary first step to understanding those who hold a high view of Baptism.

“Why even bother arguing about Baptism? The Gospel is the primary thing; all these other details are just secondary. Why be divisive over it?”

Only a person who rejects the saving work of Baptism could make such a statement. Baptism is the Gospel delivered to us. It is not of minor importance! Some assume that if many Christians disagree on a faith issue, it must by definition not be important because it's so much

more critical to maintain an outward show of unity. But this is dishonest, and also ignores the many warnings of the New Testament writers to avoid false teachings which first originated within the midst of the church itself. It's obvious that those who hold that Baptism is just an empty water ritual would think of Baptism as a "secondary," not-so-critical teaching. But for the majority of Christians, Baptism is intimately connected with salvation and the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins — this cannot be deemed "secondary."

The Christian faith does not consist of a number of isolated doctrines, assembled like a patchwork. There is only one doctrine — the doctrine (teaching) of the apostles, which we are called to preserve in its entirety, rejecting all that is contrary to it. "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Timothy 1:13-14). Why is this so important? Because all Christian doctrine touches on the Gospel, which is the cornerstone of our faith. All false teaching is an affront to God's Word, a departure from the revealed truth of God, and so has the potential to be very harmful or even fatal to a person's faith. Having a false understanding of Baptism, or the Holy Spirit, or any other teachings we may consider to be "secondary," profoundly impacts on how we view Christ and our salvation. For example: some Christians have the misunderstanding that a person must be baptized again and again to show their commitment to God. However, this view of Baptism can and often does lead to despair and even a loss of faith, because instead of a true focus on Christ, the focus is on our good works and commitment to God we exhibit through Baptism. Since "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:7-9), the apostles constantly insisted that false teaching must be nipped in the bud before it had a chance to do its damage. The damage that false teaching does is that it takes our eyes off Christ, puts the emphasis on ourselves, and so robs us of the assurance of salvation which God desires us to have.

We live in a world where it's considered rude or even hateful to suggest that someone else might be wrong about something. We don't want to ruffle feathers or be a troublemaker. Our world is also one where

the church takes the defense of Christian teaching much less seriously than our fathers in the faith did. We aren't willing to say anything about our faith that will cause us to feel slight discomfort in the presence of others, much less suffer real persecution for our convictions. It should be pointed out that we are not called to be obnoxious in our convictions, either — no Christian should belittle others, have a superiority complex, or be mean-spirited. However, we are called to stand firm in our beliefs, rather than compromise at every turn or pretend that certain teachings of God's Word don't really matter too much.

Baptism is an important doctrine because it is intimately linked to salvation. Faith must cling to God's Word and have the comfort of the Gospel; anything else it tries to apprehend can destroy it, leading to false hopes or despair. A Christian can certainly still be saved if they have an incorrect perception of the nature of their Baptism. And believers are called to be gentle and respectful when explaining and giving reasons for their beliefs (1 Peter 3:15). But matters of eternal salvation are matters of life and death, not to be treated lightly. Above all, we simply desire for people to know the comfort of God's salvation for us, and to receive the Gospel with joy and to their benefit.

Appendices



Appendix A

At a Glance: Beliefs about Baptism

Lutherans <i>don't</i> believe...	Lutherans <i>do</i> believe...
...that Baptism is a human work that saves you.	...that Baptism is a work of God that saves you.
...that Baptism and not Jesus saves, or that Baptism “in addition to Jesus” saves.	...that Baptism is used by God to save you by delivering Jesus to you personally.
...that it is “unspiritual” to think of God using physical means like water to communicate the Gospel and bring salvation.	...that God is <i>always</i> using physical means to communicate the Gospel and save; consider the Incarnation, the cross, the printed words of a Bible, a pastor preaching, etc.
...that Baptism is just water.	...that Baptism is water with God’s Word of promise, the Gospel, and God’s holy name which he places on us.
...that faith is unnecessary for salvation with regard to Baptism.	...that faith is necessary to receive the benefits of Baptism. God also creates and sustains faith through Baptism.
...that once you’re baptized, you can never fall away and it doesn’t matter how you live the rest of your life.	...that faith is essential to salvation, and that even a baptized Christian can shipwreck their faith by rejecting the Gospel and living an unrepentant life.

Lutherans <i>don't</i> believe...	Lutherans <i>do</i> believe...
...that your own attitudes, memories, or feelings about Baptism are what make your Baptism real and legitimate.	...that the Word of God makes Baptism legitimate; your faith does not define or validate Baptism (just like it does not define or validate Jesus), but receives it.
...that infant Baptism is Roman Catholic and can only be considered a "church tradition."	...that infant Baptism is Christian and fully Scriptural, and for this reason has been accepted as a universal Christian practice.
...that applying the water the wrong way invalidates a Baptism.	...that Scripture does not specify a way that the water is to be applied, and so it should not be made into a law that binds people's consciences.
...that infants can't have faith.	...that the Bible plainly teaches the reality of infant faith, as well as the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation.
...that the Bible ever suggests an "age of accountability."	...that the Bible considers the judgment of the Law, and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ, to be true for all people regardless of age or mental ability.
...that those who reject the efficacy of Baptism aren't saved or haven't been legitimately baptized.	...that God's work of Baptism is true and valid even for Christians who misunderstand its nature.

Lutherans <i>don't</i> believe...	Lutherans <i>do</i> believe...
<p>...that saving faith is responding positively to God, committing your life to him, surrendering your all, determining not to sin anymore, etc.</p>	<p>...that saving faith is simple trust, passive and receptive, and all are capable of it through the power of God given to us when he regenerates us and makes us his children. We do recognize that faith <i>results</i> in good works.</p>
<p>...that an infant being brought to Baptism is being saved by the faith or works of their parents or the pastor.</p>	<p>...that parents fulfill their God-given vocation by bringing their children to Jesus, who creates a personal faith in that individual through Baptism. Baptizing and delivering the Gospel is the vocation of every pastor.</p>
<p>...that Baptism is a “secondary” issue, while the Gospel is “primary.”</p>	<p>...that Baptism and the Gospel are so intimately related that this is a misleading distinction. All Christian doctrine should be kept pure and considered important.</p>

Appendix B

At a Glance: A Lutheran Picture of How God Saves Us



Objective justification: Jesus' death on the cross 2000 years ago pays for all of our sins.



The Holy Spirit works through...



...the Word and Sacraments (the means of grace) to accomplish...



Subjective justification: Jesus' death on the cross and forgiveness of sins is applied to the individual. Faith is created and sinners are turned to God and saved.

It's common to see little diagrams, particularly in evangelical Protestant circles, that attempt to outline how a person becomes a Christian. They tend to have different emphases depending on what that church group thinks is true or important about how a person is saved. Some pictures focus on the individual needing to "make Jesus the Lord of their life" by putting him, and not other things, in the center of their priorities. Some pictures show a timeline, starting with a person as an unbeliever, then encountering the Gospel message and "accepting Jesus into their hearts," followed by the person climbing a perpetually upwards stair of holy living until they die and go to heaven. Still other pictures show a gulf between sinful man and God, with the cross forming the bridge which the individual is responsible for walking across in order to get to God. None of these pictures are really too accurate in portraying how a Lutheran views conversion and salvation. For one thing, in these other Protestant diagrams, Baptism would be put in the "good Christian living" or "sanctification and good works" category, rather than spoken of in terms of salvation. So, here's my attempt to make a brief diagram of a Lutheran picture of salvation, which also shows how Baptism comes into play:

- From the earliest days since the Fall into sin, all of mankind is separated from God by their sin and rebellion against him. We also commit willful sins against God, and being dead in our sins are incapable of coming to him to be restored. But God, who is merciful, sent his Son to die for us, taking all of our sins and paying for them on the cross. Our salvation and forgiveness were secured 2,000 years ago by Jesus (Romans 3). As such, the diagram begins with Jesus on the cross.
- Although Jesus took away the sin of the world as the perfect Lamb of God, not everyone in the world has faith and is saved. How does the individual today obtain saving faith, especially since we are disposed to be enemies of God?
- The answer lies not in what we do, but in what God does. Since we can't go back in time, God delivers the Gospel to us in the here and now through his Word and Sacraments. The Bible says

that “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17, ESV). God’s Word tells us about Jesus, and has the power to change our hearts. This Word is delivered to us sacramentally— through physical means— so we can apprehend it. It is spoken through a fellow Christian, read on a printed page, delivered with water in Baptism, received in the Lord’s Supper. Through these Gospel gifts, the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in us, and we obtain the benefits of Jesus’ cross today. We are incorporated into the very death and resurrection of Christ himself, receiving forgiveness, life, and salvation (Colossians 2:11-15). Faith itself is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8), and grasps the promises of the Gospel.

- Remaining in Christ through the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, the Spirit causes growth in faith and good works throughout our lives (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, Philippians 1:6). This is what sanctification is about. This diagram is meant to demonstrate that our salvation is 100% God’s doing. Conversion is God reaching down to us, not us reaching up to God. It’s not a matter of “God taking 99 steps, and you taking the 1 step.” It’s not, “God has done everything, now all you need to do is...” We believe that God does everything needful for our salvation and so receives all of the credit.

In short, all Christians teach that Jesus died on the cross for us. They also teach that people must receive the benefits of the cross today. Where we differ is in our understanding of *how* we are to receive Jesus’ death for us and be saved. Other pictures of Christian conversion might be conceived, but this is one simple way to show the relationship between the cross of Christ 2,000 years ago, and how its benefits are applied to us today in terms of Lutheran sacramental understanding. This picture also shows the centrality of justification and Christ crucified in Lutheran theology, whereas many other churches make sanctification, moral striving, and human action the bottom-line focus of their teaching. For Lutherans, the Gospel is not a chance, one-time occurrence in the life of the believer— it’s the beginning, middle and end of our faith.

Appendix C

Recommended for Further Reading

Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, a Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord. CPH, 2006.

Andrew Das. *Baptized into God's Family.* NPH, 1992.

Joachim Jeremias. *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries.* Westminster, 1962.

Tim Pauls. *You Ask About Faith: Questions Teens are Asking.* CPH, 2008.

Uuras Saarnivaara. *Scriptural Baptism: A Dialog between John Bapsted and Martin Childfont.* Wipf and Stock, 2003.

David P. Scaer. *Baptism: Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series, Vol. 11.* Luther Academy, 1999.

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