

What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Baptism – LEADER'S GUIDE

What is Baptism?

A miraculous means of grace through which God creates and/or strengthens the gift of faith in a person's heart. Baptism is a sacrament (see page 11)

The Biblical Foundation of Christian Baptism:

- Matthew 28:18-20
- 1 Peter 3:18-22
- Ephesians 5:25-26
- Titus 3:5-6
- Galatians 3:24-27
- Romans 6:4

Why is Infant Baptism controversial in the modern church?

- Genesis 17:12
- Leviticus 12:3
- Matthew 18:5-6
- Mark 10:14
- Acts 2:38-39
- Acts 16:15,33
- 1 Corinthians 1:16
- Colossians 2:11-12

Who is allowed to perform a baptism?

The power of baptism rests in Jesus' promise (John 3:5,6; Titus 3:5,6; 1 Peter 3:21), **not in the person doing the baptizing**. The Lutheran church therefore recognizes the validity of baptisms performed by laypeople.

Words from Martin Luther on Baptism:

- a. Why do we baptize all who come or are brought – including babies? (Luther 143)
- b. What happens to babies who die before they are baptized? (Luther 136, 137)
- c. Is baptism necessary for salvation? (Luther 145, 146)

136 The unborn are not to be baptized

No, infants are not to be baptized, that is, regenerated, unless they have been born. Otherwise many absurdities would follow. Thus the danger exists that an expectant mother may become weak and sick. Because of this, the fruit of the womb would then be baptized by pouring water on the abdomen of the mother. No, this should not be.

But the women who are present at the birth should kneel down and with a prayer of faith commit the endangered infant to God, who is mighty and able to do more than we ask. Without a doubt He will accept the infant for the sake of the prayer of the believers.

137 Commit unborn infants to God in prayer

Who would doubt that the children of Israel who died before having been circumcised on the eighth day were saved through the prayer of their parents based on the promise that God wanted to be their God? Therefore we ought to speak differently and more comfortingly with Christian people from the way we speak with the heathen or, what is the same thing, with reprobates. This we should do also in those cases in which we do not know God's secret judgment.

143 Baptize all only because of Christ's command, not because of their faith

You do not baptize children because, as you say, they do not believe. Why, then, do you preach the Word to old folks who do not believe but who may, in the course of time, probably come to believe? You certainly do this only because God has commanded it. For if you baptize me because I am able to say the words "I believe," then you baptize me on the basis of me myself and in my own name and on no other basis. Since, then, it is unknown to you whether the person being baptized is believing or unbelieving, the baptizing is done solely because of God's command and behest.

145 Faith saves without baptism, but not baptism without faith

A person can believe although he is not baptized; for Baptism is no more than an external sign to remind us of the divine promise. If one is able to get Baptism, it is well. Then one should take it, for no one should despise it. But if one were not able to get it or one were denied it, he is nonetheless not damned provided that he believes the Gospel. For where the Gospel is there Baptism also is and everything a Christian needs, because damnation follows upon no sin except unbelief alone. This is also the reason why the Lord says: "He that believeth not shall be damned." He does not say: He that is not baptized; but is silent about Baptism. For Baptism is useless without faith. It is like a letter to which seals are attached but in which nothing has been written. Therefore he who has the signs (which we call Sacraments) and not faith has seals only, seals attached to a letter without any writing.

146 Yet baptism is valid even though not believed

No matter what my relation to faith may be, whether faith comes to me or endures, my faith or lack of faith neither contributes anything to Baptism nor detracts anything from it. In fact, even though I were never to believe, Baptism would still be right and complete. For it does not depend on my belief or unbelief but on the ordinance and institution of Christ. If a designing Jew were now to come to us in order to deceive us, acted as if he wanted to become a Christian and desired Baptism, so that the pastor or priest would baptize him in the water before our eyes and speak these words: I baptize thee in the name and at the command of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, etc., then the Jew would be really and truly baptized although he would think nothing of it in his heart but thereafter would publicly mock and blaspheme the Sacrament. For if you do not believe despite the order and command of God, God is not concerned. Are His ordinance and command to mean nothing or to be nullified by your unbelief and misuse? Let it rather be as St. Paul says, Rom. 3:4: Although all men are false and given to lies, yet His Word and ordinance are to be true and immovable. Blessed are you if you believe it and use it aright. If you do not believe it, you receive it to your own damnation.

Regarding John 3:5-6:

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

An excerpt from <https://blog.cph.org/study/luther-on-the-new-birth-from-water-and-the-spirit-in-baptism>:

With this all false teaching and error against this teaching of faith and Baptism are knocked down. First, [the false teaching and error] of the Papists and the like, who seek righteousness and salvation from their own works. It says here that man’s own merit or holiness—produced out of the old birth from blood and flesh, or out of his own choice and opinions—can and does add nothing. Rather, there must be a different birth through holy Baptism, for which the person can do nothing himself, but through the divine will and grace the Holy Spirit is given through the externally preached Word and water, which are father and mother for this new birth, and through them one becomes new, pure, and holy before God, an heir of the kingdom of heaven.

Second, the assertions of the Anabaptists and similar sects are here overthrown, who teach people to seek the Spirit apart from or without the Word and sign, through special revelation and working from heaven above without means, etc. They even despise the dear Baptism, as if it were nothing more than only useless water. So they are in the habit of slandering: “How can a handful of water help the soul?” Nevertheless, Christ clearly says that the Spirit is present with that water and states that we must be born anew from this water. He certainly said this about real, natural water, with which John the Baptist baptized and also commanded his disciples to baptize. This is why St. Paul calls Baptism “a water bath through which the Church of Christ is cleansed” [Eph. 5:26]; likewise: “a bath of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” [Titus 3:5].

Yes, Christ arranges the words here in such a way and adds first the water and then the Spirit in order to show that we are to seek the Spirit not without and apart from the external signs, but know that the Spirit wants to work in, through, and with the external signs and office. Thus both remain together, and a person is born anew from the water through the Holy Spirit, or of the Spirit with the water. Otherwise it is certainly true that if the water were alone without the Spirit, it would be and do nothing more than any other water or bath, and of course there would be no new birth from it. That is why it does not say only “born from the water” but also alongside of and with the water “from the Spirit,” so that for this birth the Spirit is the husband,

Frequently Asked Questions (and answers, too!) from the LC-MS Web Site

QUESTION: Can you please clarify the Lutheran view of Baptism and its purpose? Does the child become a Christian when baptized?

ANSWER: Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches that a person is saved by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The Bible tells us that such "faith comes by hearing" (Rom. 10:17). Jesus Himself commands Baptism and tells us that Baptism is water used together with the Word of God (Matt. 28:19-20).

Because of this, we believe that Baptism is one of the miraculous means of grace (another is God's Word as it is written or spoken), through which God creates and/or strengthens the gift of faith in a person's heart (see Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:1-4; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Cor. 12.13).

Terms the Bible uses to talk about the beginning of faith include "conversion" and "regeneration." Although we do not claim to understand fully how this happens, we believe that when an infant is baptized God creates faith in the heart of that infant.

We believe this because the Bible says that infants can believe (Matt. 18:6) and that new birth (regeneration) happens in Baptism (John 3:5-7; Titus 3:5-6). The infant's faith cannot yet, of course, be verbally expressed or articulated by the child, yet it is real and present all the same (see e.g., Acts 2:38-39; Luke 1:15; 2 Tim. 3:15).

The faith of the infant, like the faith of adults, also needs to be fed and nurtured by God's Word (Matt. 28:18-20), or it will die. Lutherans do not believe that only those baptized as infants receive faith. Faith can also be created in a person's heart by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's (written or spoken) Word.

Baptism should then soon follow conversion (cf. Acts 8:37) for the purpose of confirming and strengthening faith in accordance with God's command and promise. Depending on the situation, therefore, Lutherans baptize people of all ages from infancy to adulthood.

The LCMS does not believe that Baptism is ABSOLUTELY necessary for salvation. All true believers in the Old Testament era were saved without baptism. Mark 16:16 implies that it is not the absence of Baptism that condemns a person but the absence of faith, and there are clearly other ways of coming to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit (reading or hearing the Word of God).

Still, Baptism dare not be despised or willfully neglected, since it is explicitly commanded by God and has His precious promises attached to it. It is not a mere "ritual" or "symbol," but a powerful means of grace by which God grants faith and the forgiveness of sins.

QUESTION: What are the teachings of the Lutheran Church regarding who may be a godparent for a child? Can non-LCMS individuals serve as sponsors? What responsibilities would the godparent be agreeing to?

ANSWER: In response to the question “Why does the church encourage the use of sponsors at Baptism?” *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (Concordia Publishing House, 1991 edition) summarizes as follows:

“Sponsors witness that those who receive this sacrament have been properly baptized. They also pray for them and in the case of children, help with their Christian upbringing, especially if they should lose their parents.”

The Catechism adds: “Only those of the same confession of faith should be sponsors.” One of the reasons for this practice is to avoid putting family members or friends who belong to churches of a different confession in a difficult or compromising situation, in which they would be asked to take vows that they may not be able to carry out in good conscience (given their own religious views and convictions).

The LCMS entrusts to individual pastors and congregations the responsibility of making decisions about finding ways to involve such people in the baptismal service (e.g., sometimes they are asked to serve as “witnesses” to the baptism).

Since decisions in this regard often depend on the specific circumstances involved, it is best to speak to the pastor himself about such matters. He would also be able to share more specific information about the form of the baptismal service used in his congregation and the precise wording of the vows that sponsors or godparents are asked to take.

QUESTION: The LCMS uses the “sprinkle” method of baptism, if you will. The people of the Bible, including Jesus, were baptized using the immersion method. Why doesn't our church follow the way Jesus was baptized by John?

ANSWER: On the basis of the evidence provided in the New Testament, it is not possible to prove that the term “baptize” always refers to immersion, nor that the Baptisms mentioned were all done by immersion — implying (in the view of some) that only Baptisms done by immersion can be considered valid.

In fact, taken as a whole, the evidence suggests otherwise. In some cases the term “baptize” is synonymous with “wash” (Titus 3:5-6; see also Heb. 9:19; Eph. 5:26, Acts 22:16; and Mark 7:1-4 — a passage in which some earlier translators considered the term “baptize” to include the washing of “dining couches”), and it is highly likely that Baptisms were performed in the early church by methods other than immersion.

Three thousand were baptized on Pentecost in Jerusalem, where no river exists and no mention is made of other large quantities of water that would or may have been used.

In fact, the shortage of water supplies in general in many parts of the ancient world would have precluded Baptism by immersion.

As the Supplementary Volume of The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible correctly notes, "It is unlikely that in Jerusalem, Samaria, Damascus, Philippi, Corinth, Rome, or Asia Minor enough water was always available for a full bath" (87).

It should be noted that very early in Christian history methods other than immersion were used and allowed. The Didache requires the adminstrant of Baptism to "pour water three times on the head" (7:3). No mention is made of immersion.

Early Christian art depicts Baptisms of persons standing in shallow pools with water poured on the head (see David Scaer, Baptism, 96-101).

Lutherans have therefore held that the manner of Baptism (that is, immersion, pouring, sprinkling, etc.) does not determine whether a Baptism is valid, any more than the manner of distributing the Lord's Supper (common cup, individual glasses) affects the validity of this Sacrament. Only the Word of God and the "element" (water), according to divine institution, makes a Baptism valid.

QUESTION: My wife and I, who belonged to different denominations, wish to become more permanently and actively involved in one of the local LCMS congregations. However, I have been too shy to ask the pastor if we would need to be re-Baptized in order to be full communicants.

ANSWER: The LCMS recognizes and accepts the validity of baptisms properly administered (i.e., using water in any quantity and/or mode, together with the Trinitarian invocation instituted by Christ, Matt. 28:19) in all Christian churches.

Assuming, therefore, that you have already received a proper Christian Baptism, there would be no need for you or your wife to be re-baptized, although completion of some form of instruction classes" or "membership classes" is normally required of non-Lutherans who wish to become communicant members of LCMS congregations.

Please discuss this with your pastor, who would be happy to discuss this issue with you and to answer any other questions you have about membership. There is no need to be shy — pastors encounter these kinds of questions all the time.

QUESTION: If one was baptized years ago in the Worldwide Church of God (when they were considered a cult) and would like to join the Missouri Synod, is it necessary to be re-baptized?

ANSWER: Our LCMS theologians have taken the position on the basis of the Scriptures that the Baptisms of non-trinitarian or anti-trinitarians are not valid Baptisms. While they may use a Trinitarian formula in their rite, they in fact deny the Trinity. In such cases, therefore, God's Word is not being added to the water, but rather a man-devised caricature of the words of Christ. Since such is the case with the former Worldwide Church of God, it would be necessary for one to be re-baptized.

A Brief Comparison of Beliefs and Practices

From <http://www.religionresourcesonline.org>

Baptism	
Lutheran	<i>Considered a sacrament. "Necessary" as commanded by Christ, however, not being baptized does not automatically condemn. By sprinkling, pouring or immersion. Baptisms performed by other churches are accepted when Biblical conditions are met. Infants are baptized.</i>
Adventist	It expresses a person's personal faith in Christ, who died for our sins. By immersion only. Baptisms by other churches are accepted on conditions.
Baptist	It is not entirely necessary for salvation. By immersion only. Baptisms of other churches accepted if done by immersion. Infants are not baptized. Candidates must first believe.
Catholic	Considered a sacrament. By pouring, sprinkling or immersion. Baptisms of other churches accepted when performed as Catholic Church prescribes. Necessary for salvation. Infants are baptized.
Christian Scientist	Baptism is not a physically manifested rite or ritual. Do not immerse, sprinkle or do any outward ordinance. Baptism is the spiritual purification of daily life.
Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints	Through the Atonement, Christ the Redeemer and Savior assured redemption, or resurrection, for all. Provides for salvation and exaltation according to our personal worthiness. The baptismal covenant is the first covenant a person makes with God. Members are baptized at the age of 8, the age at which they begin to take accountability for their sins.
Disciples of Christ	Done by immersion, showing one's obedience. Symbolic of death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Only those old enough to know what they are doing when they confess the name of Christ are baptized.
Eastern Orthodox	By immersion for the remission of sins and entrance into church. Essential to salvation must be performed by one holding proper priesthood authority. Required of all 8 years & older. Infants are not baptized.
Episcopalian	By immersion or pouring. In an emergency any Christian may baptize saying "in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Ghost". Necessary to salvation. Infants are baptized.
Jehovah's Witness	By immersion, in lake or river, no fonts in Kingdom Hall. Symbolizes being dead to old way of life. Baptism does not cleanse from sin. Infants are not baptized.
Methodist	By sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. Is only an outward sign of one's entrance into the church. Baptisms of other churches accepted. Not necessary to salvation. Infants are baptized.

<i>Baptism</i>	
Presbyterian	By sprinkling, pouring, or immersion which ever method is preferred by the applicant. Baptisms of other churches accepted. Not necessary for salvation. Infants are baptized.
Quaker	Do not believe in outward ritual of baptism. The ongoing spiritual process should not be treated as an event. Inward baptism and communion are most important to spiritual life.
Unitarian	Do not baptize. Members are admitted by the following covenant "In the love of truth and spirit of Jesus we unite for the worship of God and the service of man," or by signing statement of ethical purpose.
United Church of Christ	Done at time of confirmation and reception into church. Infants presented by parents or sponsor. Usually performed by sprinkling.

Specific teachings and beliefs can vary from congregation to congregation, and some of the beliefs listed above may be accurate in only a subset of that denomination's congregations, conferences, or regions. Others, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have teachings that are more tightly controlled from a central authority, and tend to be the same world-wide.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in ^[b] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered ^[a] once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which ^[b] he went and proclaimed ^[c] to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because ^[d] they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, 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, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Ephesians 5:25-26

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

Titus 3:5

⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

Galatians 3:24-27

²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Romans 6:4

⁴ 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.

Genesis 17:12

¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,

Leviticus 12:3

³ And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

Matthew 18:5-6

⁵ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, ^[a] it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Mark 10:14

¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

Acts 2:38-39

³⁸ And Peter said to them, “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. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Acts 16:15, 33

¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.

1 Corinthians 1:16

¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

Colossians 2:11-12

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

What is a Sacrament?

From the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, under “The Number and Use of the Sacraments”:

If we define the sacraments as rites which have the command of God, and to which the promise of grace has been added, it is easy to determine what the sacraments are, properly speaking. For humanly-instituted rites are not sacraments, properly seen because human beings do not have the authority to promise grace. Therefore signs instituted without the command of God are not sure signs of grace, even though they perhaps serve to teach or admonish the common folk.

Article XIII: The Number and Use of the Sacraments, vv 3–4, Apology of Augsburg Confession, The Book of Concord, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000, 219 – 220.