

Baptism: Baptist and Lutheran Teachings Compared

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Several years ago a woman phoned in behalf of some fund-raising organization and, realizing she had reached a Lutheran pastor, volunteered the information that she had once been a member of the Lutheran church. She was Baptist now, she said, and did not see too much difference between her former and present churches. Her Baptist pastor preached the same as her Lutheran pastor had preached, she claimed; but she did concede that there was a different understanding and administration of the sacraments.

Many of our Lutheran people have heard Billy Graham or other lesser-known Baptist preachers, and they have been impressed with what they hear. The message has a true Gospel ring to it. Emphasis on the reliability of Scripture by some Baptists would make some Wisconsin Synod Lutherans feel closer to certain Baptists than to those Lutherans who do not accept the Bible as God's flawless writings. The only barrier keeping us apart, so it seems, is the sacraments. And as far as baptism is concerned, many Lutherans think that the difference lies largely in methods: total immersion versus some other form of applying water. The purpose of this study is to examine the differences between these two denominations regarding baptism and to offer some answers to questions that arise.

It should be borne in mind, however, that Baptists, like Lutherans, are not united in doctrine and practice. What we here present as Baptist beliefs may not be held by all Baptists.

I. Just what is baptism?

A. The word.

Edward T. Hiscox in *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* cites eight or so lexicographers and a number of theologians (including Martin Luther) who maintain that the Greek βαπτίζω means immersion. He tried to strengthen his case by showing that λούω means to wash; νίπτω to wash parts of the body; ῥαντίζω to sprinkle; and χέω to pour. Since Jesus could have chosen a word that meant something other than immerse, so the claim is made, He must have intended baptism to mean immersion. Hence, without immersion, so claim most Baptists, there is no baptism.

In response we note that these same Baptists do not apply the same rules of Greek precision when it comes to the Lord's Supper. Then they take the liberty of saying that the Greek word "is" really means "represents" or "symbolizes." They reject the simple meaning of the Greek and cancel the doctrine that Jesus' body and blood are present in the sacrament. Had Jesus wanted to say represent or symbolize He could have. He chose "is" to let us know that His body and blood truly are present in, with, and under the bread and wine. However, more importantly we need to realize that theological problems are not resolved by the dictionary or grammar.

The Holy Spirit, in recording Scripture, used words from pagan and secular background (the language of the people in the street) to convey His truths. Therefore, it is the usage of a word and its context, or the relationship of one portion of Scripture to another, that determines the precise meaning of a word. Two uses of the word baptize will serve to illustrate this point. In Mark 7:4 we read that the Pharisees did not eat until they had washed (Greek - baptized) their cups and tables. It is easy to understand the immersion of cups but not tables. Furthermore, in Nestle's Greek text we find the Greek word κλίνη which is more properly translated "couch" not "table." Thus, in Beck's translation we find: "...baptizing...couches." It does not make sense to force immersion into this verse when a simple washing or cleansing is meant.

In Luke 11:38 we find that Jesus caused a Pharisee to be amazed because He, Jesus, had not first washed (Greek - βαπτίζω) before dinner. It is hard to believe that the Pharisee expected Jesus to take an immersion

bath before dinner.—It appears that only a legalistic or fundamental mind would press the meaning of immersion into these two passages. We would say that the context calls for understanding these baptisms (Mark 7:4 and Luke 11:38) as applications of water in a manner other than by immersion.

Another use of the word “baptize” is found in Acts 19:1-5. In Ephesus Paul found certain disciples who were familiar with, and had been baptized, with John the Baptist’s baptism unto repentance. Subsequently, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus whereupon the Holy Spirit came upon them. The context here shows that one word, baptize, is applied to two spiritually different baptisms, one of John, the other of Jesus.

John himself said: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but...He [Christ] shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 3:11). This prophecy was fulfilled on Pentecost, and when people wondered what had happened, Peter explained that this happening had been foretold by the prophet Joel. In quoting Joel, Peter said: “I will *pour out* (Greek – ἐκχέω) of my Spirit...” In other words, Peter called it a *pouring out* when describing what John the Baptist had prophesied as a *baptism*. The context indicates that baptism can be a pouring out. From this, we of the Lutheran faith, understand baptism as an application of water, including but not exclusive to immersion.

But what about the above-mentioned claim that Luther insisted on immersion? In his essay titled “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Luther does refer to immersion baptism and says that he preferred immersion to bring out the meaning of death and resurrection. But, he wrote, “Not because I deem this *necessary*, but because it would be well to give to a thing so perfect and complete a sign that is also complete and perfect,” (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 36, p. 68 - emphasis added).

B. The act sacrament or rite.

The American College Dictionary defines a sacrament as a visible sign instituted by Jesus Christ to confer grace or Divine Life. Baptists do not consider baptism a sacrament but a rite a person must submit to in order to be considered a disciple of Jesus. Hiscox writes: “No person can rightfully or properly become a church-member except he be first baptized, as the distinguishing mark and profession of his discipleship.” (*Standard Manual*, p. 19). “The ordinances are not *sacraments*...conveying effectual grace to the soul and imparting spiritual life” (*S. M.*, p. 20). “[Baptism] represents the burial and resurrection of Christ, and in a figure declares the candidate’s death to sin” (*S. M.*, p. 19).

Harold L. Fickett, Jr. (*A Layman’s Guide to Baptist Beliefs*, p. 77) is somewhat more emphatic in declaring, “Baptism is not the means by which an individual obtains salvation; the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is completely antithetical to the teaching of God’s Word.” For Fickett, baptism is a *testimony* that the Christian makes to his saving faith in Jesus, that he has personally experienced the saving power of Jesus. It is an identifying of the Christian with the Christian movement, an act of obedience to the command of Christ.

To us this understanding of baptism seems to place the emphasis on self and a personal decision rather than the unaided grace of God. We would feel compelled to caution against self-righteousness and synergism in Baptist teachings regarding baptism. We believe and teach according to the definition given above that baptism is an act whereby God as the actor confers grace upon the one baptized. Our belief is based upon the following.

In the Great Commission Jesus told His disciples to make disciples of all nations baptizing them in (or into) the name of the Triune God (Matthew 28:19). In his book, *The Scriptures - How to Read Them*, Paul Kolander shows that unless there is good, scriptural reason not to do so, Scripture should be understood in the simple sense of the words written. The simple sense of this word of Christ says that people become disciples of Jesus by being baptized in God’s name. In other words, God’s name is placed upon the individual baptized. Put yet another way: The action is from God to man and not something man does to identify with God. This is what we mean when we label baptism a sacrament. And this is what Baptists reject in calling it a rite. In some respects they put baptism on the same level as Lutheran confirmation.

II. The need of baptism.

Until recently this writer was under the impression that the reason Baptists did not believe in infant baptism was their belief that infants were born innocent of any sin and therefore did not need forgiveness, that they became guilty through sinful environment and evil associations. Fickett (*Layman's Guide to Baptist Beliefs*) presents Baptists as holding to the doctrine of original sin the same as Lutherans do. Furthermore, he stressed the fact that "man is incapable of saving himself" since he is dead in trespasses and sin. Salvation is explained as an act of Jesus Christ and revealed to man by the power of the Holy Spirit. Objectively, the Baptist view of salvation seems to agree wholeheartedly with Scripture. Subjectively, however, we get a different picture. Fickett clearly and emphatically presents the Baptist belief that man (1) must repent and (2) have faith in order to be saved. But these requirements of salvation are presented in such a way that they appear to be acts of the intellect. Hidden from view is the previously enunciated doctrine that man is dead in trespasses and sins and this means completely dead (spiritually) so that he cannot repent and have faith. We believe and teach that the sinner cannot repent and have faith until life is put into him, and we believe that the very call to repentance comes from God and carries with it the power of life and the faith to respond. No one has yet improved upon Luther's explanation of this phenomenon (that God calls and God produces the response): "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith."

Despite their protestations to the contrary, the signal comes through loud and clear that man of his own volition and intellect must take the first step of faith that identifies him as a believer. The altar call has been employed effectively to induce people to take that first step. Consequently, people of the Baptist persuasion frequently can pinpoint the day and hour of their "conversion". A quote from a parish newsletter serves to illustrate this point, "...And groping in the dark, one night *I first discovered Him*" (From a Christmas poem by W. Kenneth Connolly, Pastor of Berean Baptist Church, Orange, Ca.).

Obviously, if baptism is to follow this act of the will, Baptists will consider infant baptism a bad mistake in giving parents and children a false hope and assurance. Their line of thought says that since an infant or small child cannot come to an intellectual recognition of sin nor take an intellectual step toward repentance, therefore, baptism was not intended, nor is necessary, for small children. Fickett maintains that infants are guilty of sins of ignorance and "...they are forgiven because of the atonement of Christ. Therefore, if a child dies before he reaches the age of accountability, he goes immediately to be with the Lord whether he has been sprinkled or not" (*Layman's Guide*, p. 70). Presumably, the age of accountability is that time when a child can of his own will responsibly repent and profess faith.

The question for Baptists is not whether or not an infant needs forgiveness. They agree that a child needs forgiveness. They do, however, question the need for an infant to be baptized. They say 'no' for two reasons: (1) The small child (infant) is not accountable for his sin and also does not understand what is going on in baptism. In fact, a small child is not even aware that it is being, or has been, baptized. (2) Furthermore, baptism, they claim, does not convey saving grace and therefore cannot confer forgiveness to the child.

For us forgiveness and baptism are virtually synonymous. The need for baptism runs hand in hand with the need for forgiveness. Not so with the Baptists. Baptism for them is necessary not for forgiveness but obedience to Christ's command. (It is an act of man toward God; they do not consider baptism an act of God upon man as we do). Following are several quotations from *The Standard Manual for Baptists Churches* by E. T. Hiscox which illustrate this point. "No person can rightfully or properly become a church-member except he be first baptized as the distinguishing mark and profession of his discipleship" (p. 19). "[Baptism is not a sacrament] conveying effectual grace to the soul and imparting spiritual life" (p. 20). "Baptism is not essential to salvation, for our churches utterly repudiate the dogma of 'baptismal regeneration'; but it is essential to obedience, since Christ has commanded it" (p. 20-21). "(Infant baptism) was not instituted by Christ ...and has neither sanction nor recognition in the word of God." "Baptism before faith and without a profession of it, contradicts and does violence to all New Testament teaching" (p. 128-130). "...corruptions perverted Christian faith and practice. Among these...an undue efficacy attributed to baptism. It was believed to have power and wash away sins and cleanse the soul for heaven" (p. 134). Fickett supports Hiscox: "Baptism is not the means

by which an individual obtains salvation; the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is completely antithetical to the teaching of God's Word" (*Layman's Guide*, p. 77).

III. The purpose of baptism.

As already shown in the previous section, the Baptist belief concerning the purpose of baptism is to comply with Christ's command. Being baptized is an act of submission to a divine ordinance which is necessary for full-fledged membership in the church. It is the response of a responsible, accountable Christian to the Savior's command. Briefly put, the purpose of baptism is to demonstrate obedience, the Baptists believe. Lutherans believe that Christ's purpose in baptism is to convey saving grace. Man's purpose in being baptized, or in having an infant baptized, is to receive that grace. This purpose is not right there on the surface of Christ's words of institution (Mt. 28:19), but it is implied, for where God places His name, there is also His blessing (Numbers 6:27, "They shall put My name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them"). And, certainly, when Jesus told His disciples to be baptizing and "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:20). He had in mind that His disciples should bring salvation to nations. There are other passages, however, which more clearly show God's grace in conjunction with baptism. Jesus said (Mark 16:16), "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Since Baptists argue that baptism follows faith, and salvation is the result of faith, not baptism—they cite John 3:16 where salvation is promised by faith without any mention of baptism—we point to Acts 2:38 ("Repent and be baptized...for the remission of sins.") where remission of sins is promised following baptism without an explicit mention of faith. Acts 22:16 ("Be baptized and wash away thy sins") says the same thing. Peter wrote (I Peter 3:20-21) that as in Noah's day eight souls were saved by water, "Even baptism doth also now save us." In the light of these passages, we maintain that faith and baptism go together to convey grace; in the case of infants, to bring or establish faith and in the case of adults, to strengthen faith. (Baptists admit that Acts 2:38 gives them some difficulty: "Repent and be baptized...for the remission of sins." "For" here is from the Greek εἰς which has the primary meaning of "in" or "into." The ordinary understanding of the simple Greek would be: Be baptized *into* remission of sin, or, *for the purpose of* remission of sins. Thus translates the KJV, TEV, Phillips, NEB, NASB, and RSV. But Baptist interpretation calls for the preposition εἰς to indicate result, instead of purpose. They understand this passage to read: Be baptized...*because of*, or *on account of* the remission of sins. This rendering forces the Greek and does not permit the text to speak for itself.

At this point some practical considerations are in order to understand the differences between Baptists and Lutherans. As we have seen, Baptists connect baptism with a decision of the human intellect. Since an infant does not have an accountable and responsible intellect, it cannot be able to have faith, they maintain. It is evident that Baptists knowingly or unknowingly associate faith with a mental process, the same process that functions when a person is asked: Do you believe? and the mind produces the answer: Yes, I believe. If faith is a matter of the mind, then we ask: What happens to faith when the believer is asleep? Has faith left him until he awakens and his mind is again conscious?

We take the position that faith is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Eph. 3:16-17 says: "...be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." In I Cor. 2 Paul rejects the intellectual processes of man and says that the Holy Spirit taught Him what to believe and teach. In Romans 8:16 Paul wrote: "The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit." In Romans 8:26 he says that, "The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered." And in I Cor. 6:11 he wrote: "No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." Clearly, the Holy Spirit works within the believer above and beyond the realm of human intellect.

It is impossible to reduce the person and work of the Holy Spirit to human understanding. The best we can do is to say that by baptism the infant receives the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the same as faith in a sleeping adult. As the intellect of the infant awakens to the morning of speech and understanding, an active, conscious faith awakens to the call of the Word. Without that Word nourishing that faith, the power of Satan and worldly influence will extinguish it.

That an “unconscious” infant can benefit from gifts of which its intellect is unaware is obvious from the fact that an infant is nourished by food, warmed by blankets, and healed by medicine and even surgery when it does not even know what food, blankets, medicine or surgery are. Certainly God, with whom nothing is impossible, is able to place a “sleeping faith” within a young infant. And who of us has not been thrilled with the simple expressions of faith from the lips of small children when first learning to talk, a faith acknowledged by the Lord Jesus (Mt. 18:6, “these little ones which believe in Me”) and so precious to Him that He affirmed that our faith must be as little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

IV. The Method of Baptizing.

As already indicated, Baptists claim immersion as the form or method of baptism used by John the Baptist and instituted by Christ. Part of their conviction comes from their belief that the word baptize means only “immerse” and part seems to be based on the significance of St. Paul’s words: We are buried with Christ by baptism into death (Romans 6:4). Fickett writes:

All of Christendom is agreed that baptism portrays the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. There is no conceivable way in which either sprinkling or pouring pictures a burial. When a man is buried, he is completely covered. Not one part of him is exposed. This is true whether that burial takes place in the ground or in a mausoleum. (*Layman’s Guide* p. 73-74)

Hiscox corroborates: “[Baptism] represents the burial and resurrection of Christ and in a figure declares the candidate’s death to sin and the world, and his rising to a new life (*Standard Manual*, p. 19; see also pages 93 & 102).

We Lutherans are more inclined to look upon baptism as a washing away of our sins, a cleansing of our body and soul as per I Cor. 6:11—Ye are washed—and other passages. We cannot deny, however, that we also look upon baptism as a drowning of our sinful nature. In answer to the catechism question: What does this baptizing with water signify? Luther answers: “It signifies that the Old Adam in us is to be drowned...”

Though the most common form of death by drowning is through complete submersion of the victim, death by drowning does not always happen this way. People have drowned with only their faces in shallow water; autopsies have revealed that people have drowned on their own vomit. And, when body fluids fill the lungs causing death, is not this a type of drowning? We do not believe that death by drowning necessarily means immersion in water or some other liquid.

But drowning does mean at least two things: death and water (or some other liquid) as the instrument of death. As a symbol of death by drowning, the application of water in baptism is the essential thing. The method of applying the water is unimportant. Since baptism symbolizes a death to sin (a symbol is a likeness, not the real thing) any amount or use of water can create the figure represented. If the person baptized must actually be “buried” under the water (Romans 6:4—We are buried with [Christ] by baptism) then what do we do when we come to Romans 6:6—Knowing this, that our old man is *crucified* with him that the body of sin might be destroyed?—We believe that a little water can represent burial just as easily as much water. Thus, it is generally believed that on Pentecost, when about 3,000 were baptized, a method of applying water other than by immersion was employed.

V. In Closing

O. Hallesby in *Infant Baptism and Adult Conversion* has some interesting observations which we believe are worth sharing. The following are not direct quotations but thoughts amplified for our use here.

A. Infant baptism. Some claim that Jesus did not command infant baptism. For that matter, He didn’t institute adult baptism either. He just said: Baptize all nations. Those who argue

against infant baptism argue from silence. (Hiscox quotes Luther: “It cannot be proved by the sacred Scriptures that infant baptism was instituted by Christ or begun by the first Christians after the apostles.”—*Standard Manual*, p. 130.) Applying the same logic to the Lord’s Supper would mean that no woman should partake, for no mention is specifically made that a woman received Communion. (Note: The quotation of Luther in no way says he was against infant baptism.)

- B. Children and the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus did not indicate that children automatically belong to the kingdom of heaven inasmuch as they are not accountable for their sins. But He did speak of children *receiving* the kingdom of God. (They did not have it; they received it.—Mark 10:15).

Baptists in effect say that children must become mature in order to be baptized and be assured of salvation. Jesus said that adults must become as little children to enter the kingdom of God. Mt. 18:3.

- C. Baptist Repentance. Baptists say that man must, by repentance, tear himself loose from his former sins and cease to love sin. But Scripture teaches that repentance is a sorrowful admission, wrought by the Holy Spirit, that man cannot wrest himself free from sin.
- D. Baptist Grace and Faith. Baptists teach that man, by his faith, must draw grace unto himself. Grace is, indeed, free; that is, he who seeks it can get it. Faith is the hand by means of which the sinner reaches out for and appropriates grace.

But Scripture teaches that faith is not a soul-exertion or a condition of the soul which makes us worthy to receive the grace of God. Neither is faith a power by means of which we should draw unto ourselves the grace of God. Grace is free. God rakes it upon Himself to impart salvation through Christ. Grace searches for the sinner. Grace has already found the sinner the moment the sinner begins to seek grace. Grace-produced repentance is an admission that one is as helpless to save himself as is a newborn infant. Viewed in this light, baptism gives to the helpless adult the very same blessing given to the helpless infant.—Infant baptism is an expression of just how free and unmerited the grace of God is.