

The Origin of the Custom of Sponsors at the Baptism of Infants and Its Value Today

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Sometimes people fall heir to certain gifts, whose value they do not know. Let us say for an example, a picture, maybe one which is even appealing to the eye, but, even by closest scrutiny and study, they are unable to ascertain whether it is a Rembrandt, a Manet, or a Churchill, or a copy and cheap imitation made by some unknown painter.

To some extent at least, this is true even of customs which have been or are still today observed by the church. Less than fifty years ago it was not at all unknown to us that old grandmas and grandpas would wash their feet prior to going to communion. It belonged to outward bodily customs which Luther describes as “fasting and bodily preparations are a fine outward custom, but he is truly worthy and well-prepared who has faith in these words, Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” Customs are one thing, the true institution of God’s Word quite another.

The customs of sponsors at the Baptism of infants, is still a custom and no wise commanded by God. When we seek to learn whether we have something apostolic, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran or Sectarian as to origin, it is much like grabbing into the big bag in a dark room and coming out with a hand full of something, but one still does not know if that is the real thing one is looking for. The dark centuries have dimmed the hope of finding the real answer to such a degree that otherwise sober writers of encyclopedias call sponsors at Baptism of infants an “ancient custom.” I used three sources of reference: *The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia*, the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* and the *Concordia Cyclopedia*. I found these in my library and regarded them as reliable as any other I could find elsewhere. The first mentioned is a very good source on Baptism, covering the ground, historical and theological well, but is utterly silent but for a chance reference on the subject of sponsors or godfathers. The *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* throws the best light on the subject, although it is lacking considerably in candlepower.

Now to the subject at hand. I would like to present it in three parts.

I. The Origin of the Custom of Sponsors

II. Some Pertinent Observations

III. The Value of Sponsors Today

I. The origin of this custom of sponsors.

It must be first mentioned and understood by all of us that when we speak of Sponsors we are only thinking of such who speak for children who are either babies or of an age where they can not intelligently speak for themselves. That infant Baptism was practiced from the beginning of its institution by Christ, yes, even by John the Baptist, is evident to all of us in the Lutheran Church and in most of the Sectarian churches. In fact, not only Christ’s command. makes that fact clear by the broad command: “Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, etc.”, but also the fact that the Jewish mind would never question the right to baptize the infants. To the Jewish mind it is unthinkable that a child should not share in the blessings of the parents. Circumcision had taught them to think thus. All males must come under God’s covenant. Hence, the early Christian church did not have to wrestle with the problem of the mode of Baptism, the age of the baptized and the related problems. There were no Anabaptists or Baptists in the apostolic days. However, apparently they did arise in the church at an early date, much earlier in fact than what we generally assume. They did not bear the name of Anabaptists at the time. They were given the name of the theological advocate of their day. It seems that they were already known in the fourth and fifth century of the Christian era.

These facts must be mentioned because the historians connect the custom of sponsors with the Anabaptist movements. However, it is difficult to tell where there is conflict and where not. The Greek church

taught immersion as the only right way and that implied often that they must be adults. Some claim even that Rome insisted on immersion for many centuries, that Luther was a believer in immersion, but apparently the Roman Catholic Church changed the mode both for infants and adults by a special decree of a council held in the city of Ravenna, 1311, which was the first of the councils ever to state that other modes such as sprinkling or cupping the water upon the child's head instead of immersing the child. Thomas Aquinas held this view earlier, though he believed it safer to immerse than to sprinkle. It appears that in some branches of the early Christian church in the period before its full development into the Roman Catholic the sponsors were used and this especially in their stand over against the Anabaptists. However, not all encyclopedias seem to be in agreement on that point.

Some development of the use of sponsors can be traced, quite clearly.

Some claim that sponsors were first used in the early church, possibly about the time of the Nicene Creed, in connection with adult converts which were so numerous that it was ordered that another Christian act as sponsor of the new convert and thus even present him to the minister. That is very likely the first use made of sponsors.

The second reference made deals with the infants. At the Baptism of the infant the parents were the ones who presented them. They took the usual vows for their child. However, that was ended by the Council of Mayence, 813, which forbade this. The Roman Catechism, according to *Schaff-Herzog*, defends the practice of sponsors instead of parents for the singular reason, and I quote: "that the difference between spiritual and the bodily education of a child, may be all the sharper emphasized." That sounds like Rome. Rome then already seems to think that the Church is the sole educator of the child. The sponsor could be useful in carrying out the wishes of Rome. Rome went to great length in later years "to detail with great minuteness the duties of sponsors," just as it did embellish the Baptism of both children and adults with lengthy rituals and ceremonies. They came by these added embellishments honestly, for already Justin and particularly Tertullian (who died between the years 220 and 240) who had written a treatise called *De Baptisma*, and had outlined such rituals. Much applied to adults, but it seems that many parts of the order of Baptism applied also to the children. To practice their order in our day would lengthen our service considerably, not to speak of the added preparations which would be necessary. The Roman Church also went so far as to state that the relationship between the sponsor and those whom they had brought to Baptism was so close that they were not permitted to join in marriage. If the two would marry the church would dissolve the marriage. Nor could the baptizer and the baptized. Favorite sponsors were deacons, deaconesses, widows, and consecrated virgins. However, priests, nuns, and monks were forbidden to serve as sponsors. Even the mundane came in for consideration. When it was noted that expensive presents were required or expected by the sponsors of the children and many could not afford to give them, many children went unbaptized. The church settled the matter at Avignon in 1337 when it was ordered that no more than a white dress and a wax candle be given the child. In some places even the number of sponsors varied. At times there would be a single sponsor. At times there would be three. In case of a bastard child, if the custom was that normally three sponsors were used, then the bastard child should have one, and if one sponsor was the custom of the area, the bastard child should have three.

Judging by the encyclopedias, there were many Protestant churches which did not use sponsors. Those that had the sponsors the duties were generally those that we know. As far as I know, most sectarian churches have witnesses, but not sponsors, though they call them godfathers and godmothers. It seems that no special duties toward the child are expected, although this may be in the mind of the parents that, if they should leave their children as orphans, these godfathers would take them into their homes. It would then be expected that the children would be brought up in whatever religion the godparents happen to have. The Baptists, of course, have no need of sponsors at all, because they believe in the so called Believer's Baptism, in which the believer makes his own choice in being baptized, and then only by immersion. It is interesting to note that they call the practice of sponsors as a teaching of the apostate church, that the Apostolic church never did baptize children. They also condemn as an error that little children are depraved sinners and that baptism per se is regenerative, in other words, not an efficacious means of grace. Since the Sectarial Churches call Baptism "an outward means of an inward grace," they have no real need of sponsors, but rather only of witnesses.

We see then that the custom of having sponsors is of purely human origin, that, evidently it was introduced in the church at an early date for purposes different from those ascribed to the practice today. We note also that the hand of Rome had a good deal to do with shaping this custom and in the usual efficient Roman fashion fenced it in with all manner of ceremonies and duties and strictly enforced them. Luther followed Rome very closely in keeping the custom and understandably so. He was far too busy dealing with the great problems of the Reformation. He followed the rule that what is not per se harmful could be kept in usage in the church of the Reformation. In that way he kept the eyes of the people upon the essentials rather than upon the outward customs and practices, which in themselves were not sinful. However, Luther did more good to the church by stressing the Christian education of the children and making it the duty of the parents to rear their children in the fear, nurture and admonition of the Lord. And through the parents it became the duty of the church in Luther's eyes. She could be the true helpmeet, but certainly not without the will of the Christian parents. One hardly need enlarge on that subject.

We too have inherited this custom of sponsors and practice it quite strictly today. But has it all the value we assume it has? Could the church exist without it? Sometimes it seems more important to have sponsors than to have the baby baptized. Even our people love customs. Once introduced, they are hard to change. Some among us consider it just short of a crime not to confirm children on Palm Sunday. I was even asked whether or not I was doing the wrong thing for children by confirming them in such seemingly unholy season as that third or fourth Sunday after Easter. The question was not whether they were properly indoctrinated. That seemed to be the least concern. But the day—Palm Sunday—that really was the day. The idea seemed to persist that Scripture demanded such a thing. So in Baptism they want sponsors, but in their own mind often think only of them as witnesses and care not that such who can not make a confession of faith without perjuring themselves, are made to confess what they themselves do not believe. Often a mother, grandmother, or some dear friend must be satisfied. They may have their feelings hurt. But these same relatives, if they would be asked the sponsor-questions, would stand there rather dumbfounded, hearing themselves answering in the affirmative questions on God and the devil they had never thought about before or even remotely believed. If they are shocked, I would not blame them. If they knew the full import and meaning of the questions they would even be more shocked. Yet, often enough our own people are greatly surprised, in spite of all instructions, over the fact that the Pastor speaks of Christian and Lutheran Christian sponsors and is adamant in his stand on the matter. Of course, somebody's feelings are hurt. The wisdom of the pastor is doubted and he may be called a little pope for even harboring such foolish ideas. Yes, it is hard to change customs and often even more difficult amid the introduced customs to hold to the directives of God's Word and thus keep from violating that which God has commanded. Surely, this requires some sober thinking on the part of both members and pastors. Customs are one thing, but God's Word is quite another. And customs surely should not be permitted to becloud the real institutions, purposes and directives of an all-wise God. and a loving Savior.

The customs of sponsors has become a football which has been kicked around considerably throughout the centuries. The papal hand has been laid to it many times, each time only leaving the custom more restricted, more canonized, more the subject of the ban than what it was before. It has a Roman flavor. Are we as a church to add more to it or shall we rather dispense with it? Before we answer that question let us look at some evident observations.

II. Some evident observations.

It is evident that even the prayers, the Scripture reading, the confession of faith and the questions asked the sponsors add nothing to Baptism. The simple act of baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is the true and efficacious means of grace given to us by God. These words of Christ's own command are the Gospel power needed to regenerate the heart of the child. If these words are omitted or other words such as I baptize thee in the name of Christ, there is no Baptism any more than if water in Baptism were omitted. The prayers, the Scripture reading, and even the confession of faith are added to the ceremony, because the need for calling upon the name of God, from whom this blessing comes, is felt by all. The confession of

faith, as our sponsorless forms indicate, is to signify or remind us regarding the great God, in whose Name the child is baptized, or if it be an adult, it is the same.

Although their usage is certainly not to be condemned, it seems that the church as early as the days of Justin (died 165) sought to enlarge upon the simple ceremony of Baptism as though the simple act were not enough. However, this was more often the case in the case of adults, where the church was concerned about the proper instruction of the adult prior to Baptism, possibly much the same as we do in the case of adults. As indicated earlier, in the case of Rome sponsors were a must. And are apparently still so regarded. And, of course, Rome has added many other things so that a great religious ceremony is the result.

As to the sponsors, we certainly can dispense with them. We should not hesitate to baptize any child without sponsors. The form without sponsors in our newer Agendas certainly is simple and well arranged. I believe that by leaving the sponsor questions out, the real issues in the Baptism of the child are brought out most clearly. It also serves well to instruct the congregation on the teachings of Christ involved in Baptism.

The sponsors can, of course, only be of value to the parents. The real intention is to have godparents for the children in the event the parents die or, in the case of mixed marriage, should the Lutheran parent die, that other Lutherans would see to it that the child was brought up in the Lutheran faith. But how few are there who take this responsibility seriously enough to do more than buy the godchild a gift at Christmas time? How unfit and irresponsible are not many of the sponsors, which, in a large family, have often been chosen out of sheer desperation by the time the family had the third, fifth, or tenth child? Strangers in an area are asked, to get sponsors from among their Lutheran friends. But often enough they do not have any close friend at hand., or are completely lacking Lutheran relatives or friends. Then sponsors become farcical. On top of it all, many such sponsors would not dream of taking the child of such strangers or even friends or acquaintances and rear that child for them in the Lutheran faith, in the event that the Lutheran parents die.

We know too, that in the event of the death of one or both parents, the godchild will not necessarily be taken into the home of the sponsor, but that rather the parents of the deceased children will take them into their homes, regardless of who was sponsor. Or maybe some brother or sister or even a dear friend is concerned enough to keep the children out of the orphanage. Or where are all the sponsors of the children from broken homes in our Lutheran church? Is it not rather true that such children are either with the grandparents or at a Children's Home or orphanage? And some are cast completely upon the State. If our sponsor-system were so effective, as we might think, how come that our charitable institutions are so filled? Is it not possibly because of the sponsors who did not take their promise seriously, that any number of newly confirmed promised more than they could keep, that all too often somebody wanted to hold the baby at the Baptism? And that they just had to have a man or young man to get one of the opposite sex? And wasn't Johnny Lutheran?

Furthermore, when young sponsors are chosen, especially unmarried Lutheran sponsors, there is still a question whether or not they themselves remain in the true faith. It is deemed possible that older sponsors may not live long enough to be of service to the child in the event of the death of the parents.

No doubt more could be said as far as the inadequacy of the sponsors is concerned. Older pastors could relate many a sad experience. Now let us turn to the value of the custom of sponsors for the Baptism of infants today and a sane approach to the whole problem.

III. The value for today and a sane approach to the problem.

From the above observations the question of their value is just about settled.

It is my opinion that this custom has very little value today. The church certainly will not suffer if the custom is dropped and the parents will not suffer either. If they would suffer, then the custom must be lived and applied as originally intended and as is clearly stated in the question asked the sponsors at Baptism, namely, "Moreover, after this child has been baptized, you should at all times remember him in your prayers, put him in mind of his Baptism, and, as much as in you lies, lend your counsel and aid (especially if he should lose his parents) that he may be brought up in the true knowledge and the fear of God, according to the teachings of the Lutheran Church and faithfully keep the baptismal covenant unto the end." If all things are really carried out as

the question states, “This then you intend gladly and willingly to do,” then answer by saying “yes”, there would be great value to it. But to assume here that all is well is a false assumption. There surely are exceptions and you and I know of them—but then we are rather dealing with the exception than the rule.

In our own minds we should be clear that there is a need for someone to be concerned about a newly baptized child in the event the child should lose its parents. Likewise, serious and God-fearing parents will ever want the assurance that someone will step in the event of their death, someone upon whom they can rely, someone who will see to it that the child is brought up in the fear of the Lord, learn the Catechism, be confirmed in the Christian faith.

Who are the logical people to do this very thing? Who is concerned enough about the child or children?

First, any Lutheran member of the family should be concerned enough about the orphaned children or such children of tender age who have lost their Mother. They may or may not be sponsors. Certainly they do not have to have the name of sponsors. Christian love demands that very thing.

However, according to God’s Word, the child has more real sponsors than it knows. By that I mean the Christian congregation, either the one to which they belong or the Synod, the gathering of the congregations. That the church is far more concerned about its children than what godparents or sponsors often are seems to be clear enough to us all. The congregation prays for the child and its Mother soon after the birth of the child. The church is made responsible by God, not only to baptize the child, but also to teach the child all things that Christ has commanded unto the church. To take the responsibility for rearing the orphaned child or the child from the broken home, is part of the duty of the church. Let us go back in our thinking to the days shortly after Pentecost. What concern the believers had for each other’s welfare, both spiritual as well as bodily. What pleasant words to read:

And all that believed were together and had all things common. And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. (Acts 2:42-47)

If we read in Acts 6 that they ministered unto the widows, did they forget the orphans? Not very likely, is it? Paul’s remarks to Timothy in I Tim. 5:8 surely imply more than the parents. They imply the church also and are so applied by us to this day. Maybe we should hear these words, “If any provide not for his own, especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel.” Then too, when a family applies for membership and is accepted by the Christian congregation, is it not the understanding that the family seeks the help of the greater body and the congregation gives them all rights and privileges granted by the church, such as Christian education, the privilege of attending services and becoming part-owners of all the properties and can and dare expect that when poverty and hardship strike a family through no fault of their own, the members will seek to reach out and help, if at all possible, to alleviate suffering and want? And the congregation knows that fact and, if it does not, it should.

If it becomes impossible properly to serve such unfortunate at home, such as the children who were orphaned in whole or in part or the home is broken up, such an agency as our Children’s Friend Society, or in some cases, even Bethesda, are maintained for that very purpose by the Christian congregations in an area.

But there is still another one who is deeply concerned about all children in the congregation and no less the orphaned and those from broken homes, and that is the God-fearing Pastor in the Christian congregation. He knows that they are Christ’s own sheep or lambs. As an under-shepherd or pastor, a shepherd, it is his duty to be concerned, to help and seek help, and prove himself a true friend of these unfortunate, especially if seemingly, there is none to be concerned. He does this most gladly out of love for his lambs and sheep, which have been entrusted to him when he was called. He too knows conditions in the family much better than most members and the little ones and others involved will trust him and his judgment. That they do, can be seen from the fact that they turn to the pastor for help, advice, and guidance.

To bring home to the congregation its duties toward the children of the congregations, I would suggest that the whole assembled, congregation would speak for the infant at Baptism and so become the true godparents or sponsors of the baptized child. What a help that would be to the parents! What a help to the congregation at large to bring home the responsibility and at the Baptism of each child, remind them of the God-given duty they have accepted! Eventually, it would stir up a deep and lasting interest in the whole question of Christian education. Each member would say, "I have accepted the responsibility to assist in the Christian education of the children of the church on grade school, Sunday school and high school level. I shall do my duty and accept this privilege even though I have no children of my own." In reality, is that not what we expect of our members and actually practice when we erect Christian Day Schools and Lutheran High Schools and ask for support in the operation and maintenance of the same?

It seems to me that we have a golden opportunity before us to make a change for the better, to go back to the fundamentals as taught and practiced by the early Christians. If the custom of sponsors is ancient, the custom of not having them is more ancient. In fact, it would not even be necessary for anyone actually to speak for the child as long as it is understood by the church that it is a helpmeet of the parents and of the Lord in this great work of seeing to it that the children of the Christian congregation are brought up in the fear, nurture, and admonition of the Lord. In that way we shall not lose sight of the directive, "Ye parents, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." One becomes the helpmeet of the other.

Then we can come back to the ancient custom of the parents bringing their children to the baptismal font, especially if both parents are members of the church or so minded to do this. If one is not a member and does not wish to be present in presenting the child for Baptism, a second person can well serve as a witness. It is well to have such witnesses, at least.