

LCMS

Frequently Asked Questions

Doctrinal Issues - Baptism

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Baptism

Baptism and its purpose

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

A: 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.

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Baptism saves? (2 pages)

Q: *I believe I understand the LCMS position on Baptism although it seems to lead down a troublesome path. As I understand you can be regenerated through Baptism and also regenerated by believing in Jesus, without Baptism, and then later baptized. The Lutheran position forces one to come to this conclusion of two ways to be saved, although both are by faith alone, just two different means. In Acts 10:44ff they believed and as a result were saved, filled with the Holy Spirit and therefore baptized. Eph 1:3 also speaks of salvation by the work of the Holy Spirit. If Baptism also saves, it must not save adults since an adult would not say I do not believe but I want to be baptized to get the faith to believe. If indeed the prooftexts of baptismal regeneration do actually refer to salvation, it must only be for babies since adults would of necessity believe before being baptized. And if they do only speak of babies who do not have the capacity to believe, why don't these verses say so. My question then is, what do you see wrong with my reasoning? You do not have to give me the prooftexts since I have known them and have studied them and have ready many articles and the catechism both from Lutherans and others.*

A: We are pleased to hear that you have thoroughly studied the Scriptures on the topic of Baptism and other literature dealing with this subject. Perhaps you are very familiar with the Large Catechism's treatment of Baptism, but we mention it here because Luther's treatise on infant baptism in this section is extremely useful. Luther goes to the heart of the foundational theological questions at issue over against errant understandings of Baptism present among those involved in the Anabaptist movement of his time.

Perhaps we can make a couple of points that seem pertinent to the issue(s) you have raised. First, as you have implied in your letter, it seems important to note that while Baptism is God's gracious means of conveying to human beings His saving grace revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Savior, it is not the only means. On the basis of the Scriptures we teach that the spoken Word of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16-17; 10:17) and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; 1 Cor. 11) are also means of grace. It is no less a miracle of God's grace at work that an adult should believe by hearing the words of the Gospel, than that an infant should receive through Baptism the Spirit who creates the very faith by which one receives incorporation into Christ (Romans 6:4 "We were buried therefore with him by [Greek: the instrumental *dia*] baptism..."). Adults who hear the spoken Word and believe eagerly seek to be baptized, not because it is a human rite symbolic of one's commitment or something to that effect, but because of what God promises in and through Baptism. It must be remembered that the only theological distinction between the spoken Word of the Gospel and Baptism is that the sacrament includes a visible element; hence, our Lutheran fathers commonly spoke of Baptism as "visible Gospel." The Scriptures distinguish Baptism and the spoken Word, but do not separate them; they are both means of grace. As you also no doubt are fully aware, we teach that it is not the lack of Baptism that necessarily condemns, but it is the despising of this precious gift that endangers faith, for God Himself has instituted it and attached His promises to it.

The Scriptures teach, of course, that there is only one Baptism (Eph. 4:5). There is no indication that God has limited this blessed means of grace to individuals on the basis of age or levels of maturity. Baptism is God's act, a divine testimony to what "grace alone" really means, whereby He imparts the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation to individuals, children and adults alike. And as our Lutheran fathers have always taught, Baptism confirms the grace of God upon adults who have already come to faith, and strengthens them in their faith, even as the Lord's Supper does.

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Who can be godparents/sponsors?

Q: *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?*

A: 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.

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How does faith play a role in infant Baptism?

Q: *How does faith play a role in infant Baptism? Is faith later taken care of when the child is confirmed?*

A: Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches that a person is saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Baptism, we believe, is one of the miraculous means of grace (together with God's written and spoken Word) through which God creates the gift of faith in a person's heart. Although we do not claim to understand how this happens or how it is possible, we believe (because of what the Bible says about Baptism) that when an infant is baptized God creates faith in the heart of that infant. This faith cannot yet, of course, be expressed or articulated, yet it is real and present all the same (see, e.g., 1 Pet 3:21; Acts 2:38-39; Titus 3:5-6; Matt. 18:6; Luke 1:15; 2 Tim.3:15; Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Parents and sponsors of a baptized child bear the responsibility of teaching this child God's Word so that the child's faith may remain alive and grow (Matt. 28:18-20). Confirmation is a time-honored church tradition (not required by God's Word, but-we believe-useful nonetheless) in which the child baptized as an infant is given the opportunity to confess for himself or herself the faith that he or she was unable to confess as an infant. Faith is not "created" at confirmation, but rather confessed for all to hear, so that the church can join and rejoice in this public confession, which has its roots in the faith which God Himself created in Baptism.

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Infant Baptism History (2 pages)

Q: You say that infant baptism is ONE way of salvation. Since this practice was unknown in the New Testament or even the early Catholic Church, it is speculative. The Bible says that repentance is a prerequisite for faith. I repented at five, so it can be early, but not in someone's arms.

A: Infants are included in "all nations" who are to be baptized (Matt. 28:19). Certainly they were included in Peter's Pentecost exhortation in Acts 2:38, 39: "Repent and be baptized everyone one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins....The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Whole households, everyone in the family, were baptized in the beginning of New Testament times, which in all probability included infants (Acts 16:15 and 33). [The "household" formula used here by Luke has Old Testament precedent, with special reference also to small children, as for example in 1 Sam. 22:16, 19; see Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 22-23.] In Romans 6, the Holy Spirit tells us in the Word that in Baptism we have been united with Jesus' death and resurrection—regenerated, dying to sin and rising to new life. That happens to infants when baptized (Gal. 3:27). "For as many of you who have been baptized have put on Christ." Baptism through the Word creates the faith necessary to receive salvation for infants. Infants can have faith. In Mark 10:14 Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." The Greek word in this text is "paidia" which means babes in arms. Infants can belong to the kingdom of God. "From the lips of children and infants, You have ordained praise...." Psalm 8:2. "Yet You brought me out of the womb, You made me trust in You even at my mother's breast" Psalm 22:9.

From the beginning of New Testament Christianity at Pentecost to our time, unbroken and uninterrupted, the Church has baptized babies. Polycarp (69-155 AD), a disciple of the Apostle John, was baptized as an infant. Justin Martyr (100-166 AD) of the next generation, about the year 150 AD, states in his *Dialog with Trypho The Jew* that Baptism is the circumcision of the New Testament." Irenaeus (130-200 AD) writes in *Against Heresies II 22:4* that Jesus came to save all through means of Himself -- all, I say, who through Him are born again to God – infants and children, boys and youth, and old men."

Similar expressions are found in succeeding generations by Origen (185-254 AD) and Cyprian (215-258 AD), and at the Council of Carthage in 254 where the 66 bishops stated: "We ought not hinder any person from Baptism and the grace of God....especially infants....those newly born." Origen wrote in his *Commentary on Romans 5:9*: "For this also it was that the Church had from the Apostles a tradition to give baptism even to infants." Origen also wrote in his *Homily on Luke 14*: "Infants are to be baptized for the remission of sins." Cyprian's reply to a bishop who wrote to him regarding the baptism of infants stated: "Should we wait until the 8th day as did the Jews in the circumcision? No, the child should be baptized as soon as it is born."

Augustine (354-430 AD) wrote in *De Genesi Ad Literam*, 10:39 declared, "The custom of our mother Church in baptizing infants must not be counted needless, nor believed to be other than a tradition of the Apostles." Augustine further states: "...the whole Church which hastens to baptize infants, because it unhesitatingly believes that otherwise they cannot possibly be vivified in Christ. In 517 AD, 10 rules of discipline were framed for the Church in Spain. The fifth rule states that "...in case infants were ill...if they were offered, to baptize them, even though it were the day that they were born...such was to be done." (*The History of Baptism* by Robert Robinson, London, Thomas Knott, 1790, p.269)

This pattern of baptizing infants remained in Christianity through the Dark and Middle Ages until modern times. In the 1500 years from the time of Christ to the Protestant Reformation, the only bonafide opponent to infant Baptism was the heretic Tertullian (160-215 AD) who de facto denied original sin. Then in the 1520s the Christian Church experienced opposition specifically to infant Baptism under the influence of Thomas Muenzer and other fanatics who opposed both civil and religious authority, original sin and human concupiscence. Thomas' opposition was then embraced by a considerable number of Swiss, German and Dutch Anabaptists. This brought about strong warning and renunciation by the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed alike. It was considered a shameless affront to what had been practiced in each generation since Christ's command in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) to baptize all nations irrespective of age. Historical excerpts are from "Infant Baptism in Early Church History," by Dr. Dennis Kastens in Issues Etc. Journal, Spring 1997, Vol. 2, No. 3.

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What about infants who die before being baptized?

Q: *What about infants who die before being baptized?*

A: In his book *What's the Answer?* ([Concordia Publishing House](#), 1960), LCMS theologian Otto Sohn addresses the question "What is the position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with respect to the fate of stillborn children as well as to baptizing them?" His answer speaks to your question about children who die before Baptism:

The position of our Lutheran Church on the first point in this question can best be expressed in the words of Dr. Francis Pieper:

"There is some basis for the hope that God has a method, not revealed to us, by which He works faith in the children of Christians dying without Baptism (Mark 10:13-16). For children of unbelievers we do not venture to hold out such hope. We are here entering the field of the unsearchable judgments of God" (Romans 11:33).

What is the basis of such hope? It is this, that God is not Himself bound by the means to the use of which He has bound us. That is to say that while Christ has commanded us to baptize all nations, God can save sinners without Baptism. He did so throughout the entire Old Testament. During the first 2,000 years we know of no special means of grace for little children. At the time of Abraham He instituted circumcision, but He did not thereby provide for little girls. It is for God to determine under what conditions He will receive children into His kingdom.

A most encouraging instance for the Holy Spirit's power to influence even unborn infants in a spiritual way is found in Luke 1:15, 41, 44, where it is stated that the unborn John the Baptist leaped for joy within his mother's womb when the unborn Jesus was brought into his presence by His mother Mary. Behind all this is the all-encompassing Gospel pronouncement that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world [including the little children] unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

As to the second point we might say: Whether individual Lutheran pastors have ever baptized stillborn children immediately upon their arrival, we do not know, and to our knowledge such practice has never been sanctioned by our church. Nor should it be sanctioned. The means of grace, including Baptism, are for the living only (Heb. 9:27).

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Why do Lutherans use the “sprinkle” method for Baptism?

Q: *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?*

A: 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" (Tit. 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 ministrant 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.

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Do I have to be re-baptized to join the LCMS?

Q: *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.*

A: 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-see Matthew 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.

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Does the LCMS baptize children of unchurched parents?

Q: *Would it not be better to baptize a baby of parents who didn't attend church--even though the parents do not attend? Is it right to keep a child from God if we have the opportunity to welcome the child? Perhaps this would open the doors of Heaven to the parents as well? Should we exclude them and not show them forgiveness beforehand?*

A: It has been the historic practice of the Lutheran church to welcome all children to Baptism, including those children whose parents may not be attending worship services—provided the parents give their consent and are at least open to bringing up this child in faithfulness to his or her baptismal covenant. Many times the Baptism of a child provides a wonderful occasion for bringing the Good News of Jesus and His salvation to a family.

The Lutheran practice has been not to baptize a child contrary to the will and/or cooperation of the parents. Of necessity, pastoral judgment will have to be made in the individual case, since circumstances vary. For this reason, too, lay members of our congregations are urged to speak with their own pastor about individual cases where they may have a particular concern or desire.

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Why baptize infants?

Q: *Why do Lutherans baptize infants?*

A: Lutherans baptize infants because of what the Bible teaches regarding:

1.) God's command to baptize (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). There is not a single passage in Scripture which instructs us not to baptize for reasons of age, race, or gender. On the contrary, the divine commands to baptize in Scripture are all universal in nature. On the basis of these commands, the Christian church has baptized infants from the earliest days of its history. Since those baptized are also to be instructed in the Christian faith, (Matt. 28:20), the church baptizes infants only where there is the assurance that parents or spiritual guardians will nurture the faith of the one baptized through continued teaching of God's Word.

2.) Our need for Baptism (Psalm 51; 5; John 3:5-7; Acts 2:38; Romans 3:23; Romans 6:3-4). According to the Bible, all people—including infants—are sinful and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). King David confesses, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). Like adults, infants die—sure proof that they too are under the curse of sin and death. According to the Bible, Baptism (somewhat like Old Testament circumcision, administered to 8-day-old-babies—see Col. 2:11-12) is God's gracious way of washing away our sins—even the sins of infants—without any help or cooperation on our part. It is a wonderful gift of a loving and gracious God.

3.) God's promises and power (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; John 3:5-7; Titus 3:5-6; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:1-4; Colossians 2:11-12; Ephesians 5:25-26; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Those churches which deny Baptism to infants usually do so because they have a wrong understanding of Baptism. They see Baptism as something we do (e.g., a public profession of faith, etc.) rather than seeing it as something that God does for us and in us. None of the passages listed above, nor any passage in Scripture, describes Baptism as "our work" or as "our public confession of faith." Instead, these passages describe Baptism as a gracious and powerful work of God through which He miraculously (though through very "ordinary" means) washes away our sins by applying to us the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection (Acts 2:38-39; Acts 22:16), gives us a new birth in which we "cooperate" just as little as we did in our first birth (John 3:5-7), clothes us in Christ's righteousness (Gal. 3:26-27), gives us the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-6), saves us (1 Peter 3:21), buries us and raises us up with Christ as new creatures (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:11-12), makes us holy in God's sight (Eph. 5: 25-26) and incorporates us into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). All of this, according to the Bible, happens in Baptism, and all of it is God's doing, not ours. The promises and power of Baptism are extended to all in Scripture—including infants—and are available to all. Parents and sponsors then have the privilege and responsibility of nurturing the baptized child in God's love and in His Word so that he or she may know and continue to enjoy the wonderful blessings of Baptism throughout his or her life.

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What if I were baptized in the Worldwide Church of God when they were considered a cult?

Q: *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?*

A: A. 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.

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