

God's Great Gift of Baptism

I. It is NOT what we do in baptism.

II. It is NOT what baptism does.

III. It IS what God does through baptism!

Our first Sunday of Epiphany begins with the baptism of Jesus. 'Epiphany' means, "to manifest, or to show." We begin to understand who this is that was born of a virgin and who was prophesied about for centuries and proclaimed by angels. This morning I want to take the opportunity to examine what the baptism of Jesus means and what it means for us today.

Unfortunately baptism is misunderstood by many Christians today. This is no mere academic or theoretical debate but greatly impacts how one views God's grace, how we proclaim God to the world, and when and to whom baptism is offered and given.

Baptism in its simplest understanding simply means to wash. In the Gospel of Mark some Jews confronted Jesus about washing. We read: **"The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?""** (Mark 7:1-5). They were actually asking Jesus why he and his disciples did not 'baptize' their hands. Spiritually, baptism denotes a spiritual cleansing and renewal. This leads us to an important question: Why was Jesus baptized? What are we learning about Jesus this Sunday after the Epiphany?

First, we know that Jesus had no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) so that Jesus was not having any sins washed away. We do know that at Jesus' baptism Jesus prayed and, **"the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** (Luke 3:22). God, the Father

spoke and proclaimed Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Jesus' baptism marks the special beginning of his earthly ministry. Another thing to remember is that it was John the Baptist not Jesus who up to this point is the center of attention, in fact many of Jesus' first disciples were disciples of John the Baptist.

Jesus' baptism signifies that his life is going to for all who are later baptized into him. Paul makes this so very clear in Romans 6:3-4: **"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."** This is why today more than anything else we want to first understand baptism as a great gift from God to us. It is for this reason that we can easily proceed and examine what we believe, teach and confess about baptism as Lutherans.

The good news is that instead of dozens or hundreds of different views on baptism there are three simple understandings of baptism, one of the three is our own belief. Let's examine briefly the two understandings of baptism that are not our own.

The first understanding of baptism is that of the Reformed Church--the followers of John Calvin. Calvinism starts out with the idea that nothing can happen apart from God's will. This informs their theology. Calvinists look at the world and read the Bible and know that not everyone is saved--not everyone will be in heaven. Calvinism starts with this understanding and states that because not everyone will be in heaven then God must have specifically made some (most) people to specifically be destined for eternal damnation and hell. This is the famous double predestination. God made some for heaven and he made some for hell. That is simply the way it is. Where does baptism fit into this belief?

Calvinists believe that what is most important is what God first ordained even before you were born. If you were predestined to heaven and life with God then you receive the Holy Spirit immediately and directly. Baptism for the predestined is a blessing but only because one had already received the Holy Spirit and eternal life from God. Because of this teaching some Calvinists (including the original John Calvin) baptize infants and others do not.

Calvinists believe that baptism is a sign or symbol pointing us to Christ. Indeed John Calvin said this: "What is a sacrament? ...It is an external symbol by which we, on our part, give testimony of our piety toward the Lord, both before him and the angels as well as among our

fellowmen.”¹ Why do Calvinists perform baptism? Simply because God told them too. In other words Calvinists see baptism as an ordinance which is another word for law--it is something we do because we are commanded to do so. It is this understanding that leads us to the second major view.

The second major view we will simply label “decision theology.” Decision theology is very pervasive in the United States but is actually by far the minority understanding throughout church history and in the world today. Decision theology in many ways is the exact opposite of Calvinism. In Calvinism everything is God dependent: God sends some people to heaven and he sends other people to hell. In decision theology we have the opposite: where one ends up is based entirely on their own choice and decision.

In decision theology God is passive: he sits back and gives people the option of choosing him and hence having eternal life or rejecting him and going to hell. No matter what stripe or variety (and there are many) decision theology puts the ball in the person’s court--God will not act until after the person does. Think about what this means in baptism. If one must make a decision for Christ then they must be old enough to do so. This is why followers of decision theology not only do not practice infant baptism but they think infant baptism is a travesty and a bad thing.

What then is baptism for followers of decision theology? It is a proof or an action done to show what a person has done. In short it is something (a work if you will) that we do for or to God. This is why decision theology is the opposite of Calvinism on one hand but very much like it the other hand, in that it makes baptism a law or a work. It is this precise understanding of baptism that makes the Lutheran position so very hard to understand.

The follower of decision theology looks at the Lutherans who baptize infants and says that we are wrong because we are turning salvation into a good work--namely doing the work of baptism so that one may be saved. Why do they make this mistake? Simply because they view baptism as a work of man and hence the law. But this is not what we teach.

The third position on baptism is our own. Unlike the previous two Lutherans receive baptism as God gives it: not as a law or something to do, but the gospel and something to be received. Baptism is the gospel not the law. The single largest distinction between the Lutheran position and

the previous two is that baptism is something God does to us and not something we do to or for God. Baptism is gospel not law!

Why do we believe this? Because this is how the Bible presents it. First of all it is God who creates baptism, not man. Second of all God ties baptism with salvation and he makes promises with baptism. Let’s look at a few. When the Bible speaks of baptism it speaks of being baptized into. Who does baptism? It is not a work of man but rather the work of God. We hear the words of Paul in Romans 6:3, **“Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”** Note how the person is baptized into Christ--the person is passive not the active agent. We also have the clear words of Peter who teaches:

“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 3:18-21).

As Lutherans we believe teach and confess that baptism, as a gift of God is what God uses to give us grace, renewal, and everlasting life. Baptism is not magic with a power in and of itself but it is the power of God whereby he makes a people for his own. Who is this gift for? God tells us plainly: **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** (Matthew 28:19). Jesus died for the whole world and he sends his church with the gift of baptism to the whole world--young/old, rich/poor, man/woman, etc. Everyone can receive God’s gift.

Today this Sunday after the Epiphany we are reminded that God came for everyone, he died for everyone, and his death is enough to bring us into heaven. Jesus and nothing else. Jesus who comes to us freely and fully even when we are most vulnerable and needy. This is the gift that the Christ child brings and this is the gift that we celebrate and give to the world. Amen.

¹ Institutes, Bk. IV, chap.14