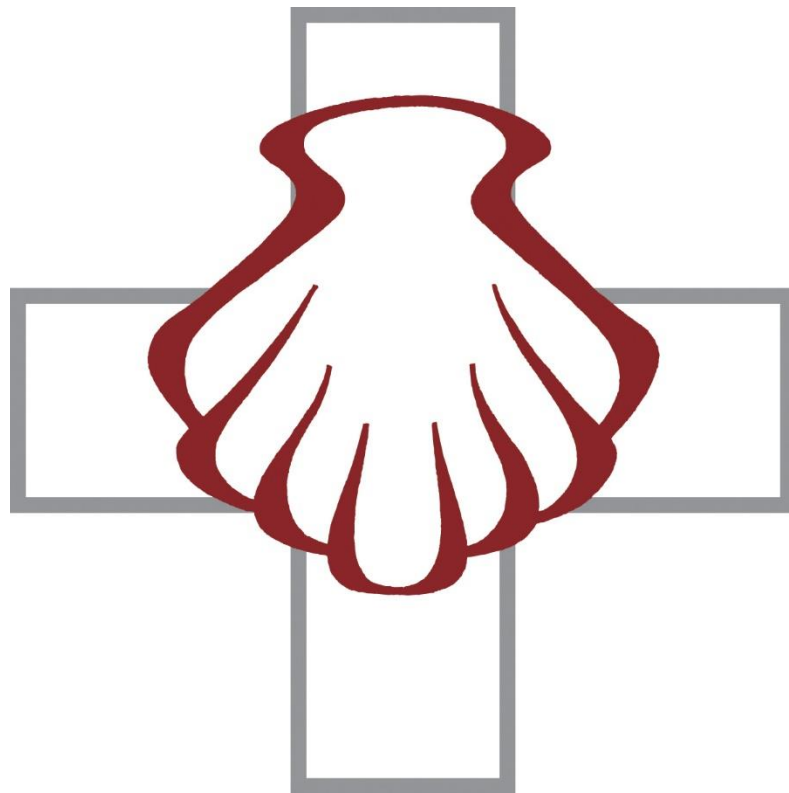




The Symbol
For
Holy Baptism



† BAPTISM—A CHRISTIAN'S SPIRITUAL BIRTHDAY †

Through Baptism God Gives Himself and All He Has

Your child's baptism is the most important and significant event in his life! Through holy Baptism God takes your child into His spiritual family, the Church. He makes your child His child as He gives your child His own powerful name--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--and with His name everything He has and is. The Bible says,

“In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”

(Galatians 3).

In baptism God mystically joins your child with Jesus Christ himself as St. Paul writes, *“We were buried with Christ 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. If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Romans 6). And so, everything Jesus is and has your baptized child is and has; the Father's verdict over Jesus at His baptism is the Father's verdict over your child, *“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased!”* (Matthew 3); Jesus' perfect life is your child's life, His death on the cross is your child's death, His resurrection from the dead is your child's resurrection, His ascension into heaven your child's ascension, and His sitting in power at the Father's right hand is where your child sits too, by faith.

It might be well for you to review what the Bible teaches about this precious sacrament by reading Luther's fine explanation of baptism in his Small Catechism (you can find this reprinted on the last pages of this little booklet or in Lutheran Service Book, page 325).

Baptism, a Gift from God Himself

The Church or Martin Luther did not make up baptism. The Bible tells us that God's own Son, our risen Lord Jesus Christ, gave us this precious sacrament. Before ascending back to heaven Jesus said, “*Go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28).

Just as Jesus chose and called each of his disciples personally by name during His ministry here on earth, so He still today calls people personally by name and makes them His disciples through this special act or sacrament of holy baptism.

Baptism Is Necessary for Salvation

On the basis of the Bible the Lutheran Church teaches that “*all people...are conceived and born in sin...and [that] this hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit*” (Augsburg Confession, Article II). This means that all children, including your own child, are lost and damned before being baptized and instructed in Christ's saving Word. Does the Bible actually teach this? In Ephesians 2 St. Paul writes, “*We were by nature children of wrath!*” And Jesus Himself adds the warning that whoever does not believe in Him “*will not see life but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3). Therefore it is imperative that children be baptized as soon as possible for while it is possible that the Lord can work faith in the heart of even an unborn infant who isn't baptized (like John the baptizer; see Luke 1:41 and 44), we can't make such exceptions the rule. Baptism is the ordinary means that God uses to spark new spiritual life and faith in the heart of a small child. And so our Lutheran Church also then teaches, “*Baptism is necessary for salvation [for] the grace of God is offered through Baptism...children should be baptized, for being offered to God through Baptism they are received into his grace*” (Augsburg Confession, Article IX).

That God uses this sacrament as one of the ways to save us from our sin is clearly taught in Scripture. St. Peter simply but clearly says, “*Baptism now saves us!*” (1 Peter 3:21). St. Paul the apostle agrees writing, “*Christ loved the Church...and made her holy, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word*” (Ephesians 5:26-27) and again, “*God saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5).

Infant Baptism?

Some today say that little children shouldn't be baptized since they can't understand what is happening and can't make any commitments to God yet. But such an opinion shows a complete misunderstanding of baptism. Baptism is not a work we do but a work which God does on and in us. The Bible says, “*God saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5). Even in our secular world babies are adopted every day even though they are too young to understand what is happening, nor does this really matter. For adoption does not depend on the child's understanding of it or agreement to it but depends entirely on the parents' love and commitment to the child and that the legal procedures have been followed properly. So also adoption by God is by grace alone; everything depends on God's commitment to the child and that the proper procedure God gave us has been followed—that water is applied to the child in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Infant Faith?

Others say that babies shouldn't be baptized because they can't understand or believe anything yet; they claim, “*A person has to believe to be saved for didn't Jesus say: 'Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.'* Since babies can't believe they shouldn't be baptized.” We agree up to a point. Certainly, babies must believe. But who says they can't? Belief or faith is a gift from God, a miracle worked in a

person's heart by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Who would ever want to say that the God who could “*raise up children for Abraham out of stones*” if he wanted to (see Matthew 3) can't work faith in a little baby's heart? In fact, God did just this in the heart of John the baptizer before he was even born! For St. Luke reports that when Jesus' mother Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, the still unborn John jumped with excitement at the greeting of Mary (see Luke 2:41 & 44).

Furthermore, faith does not mean one must know lots of facts or data (even though faith might be stronger the more one knows) but that one has confidence or trust in someone or something. Faith is really trust. All of us trust things or people about which we know very little. And every mother knows that her tiny baby trusts her even though he does not yet know her name, his parents' address or phone number, the names of his brothers and sisters, not for that matter, the fact that he is even alive!

All this comes later. Gradually the baby's faith or trust grows as his faith is filled in with knowledge. So also, with baptism. The Spirit can certainly work faith or trust in tiny babies for Jesus once even said, “*Don't cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin*” (Matthew 18). And as the child grows his faith is gradually filled with more and more content as his parents and the church teach him more about the God who is his creator, his savior, his sanctifier and the giver of all good gifts.

“Teach Them...”

While holy baptism is God's usual means today of calling people by His name and adopting them into His spiritual family, baptism is not some “*magic act*” as though one could be baptized and automatically go to heaven no matter what he does or does not do for the rest of his life. Jesus wants children (and adults) who have been baptized to learn to understand the meaning of their baptism—why they should love and trust in God. They must be taught how God created them, how He

suffered and died for their sins to pay for them their debt, how He rose from the dead for them to give them new life and hope, how He is coming back to take them to heaven, etc. They must be prepared to receive their Savior's true body and blood in the Sacrament of His holy Supper. To baptize a child with no intention of teaching the child about God from His Word would be as irresponsible as a young girl giving birth to a baby in an alley and leaving the poor child there to die. And so, Jesus not only tells us, "*Go and make disciples [by] baptizing them,*" but He adds, "*[and] teach them to observe all that I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28). As parents you should teach your children about Jesus and God's Word by having daily devotions and prayers with them, bringing them to Church and Sunday School, enrolling them in a Lutheran Christian Day School if one is available. Perhaps another good idea would be to celebrate your child's "baptism birthday" each year; after mealtime you might light his "baptism candle", remind him of why this day is special, talk about his sponsors, give him a little gift, read a short portion of Scripture which deals with baptism, and offer a prayer for him to God.

Baptism's Life-long Significance

Baptism is not just something that happens to a person early in life having no meaning or significance later on. Baptism should mean something to a Christian throughout life. In his letter to Rome St. Paul certainly teaches this when he writes, "*We were buried with Christ 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*" (Romans 6). In other words, the fact that God called me by name and gave me His name should mean something to me every day of my life. I should learn to say, "*I am baptized!*" and not just "*I was baptized.*"

So, what are some ways a Christian can use his baptism through his life? He should be able to believe and say--

1. I am a new person, no longer the Devil's slave but God's special child called by his own name; I should be living and acting every day so that people know I am God's child;

2. Since I am God's child and God is my Father I can be absolutely certain that God loves me and even when things go badly in my life I can be certain that my heavenly Father is still in control and is doing what is best for me for He promises me, *“All things work together for good for those who love God”* (Romans 8);
3. Nothing, not even death itself, can ever tear me from God or from His eternal love;
4. I know that God my Father will always forgive me and take me back when I sin;
5. All God's gifts and treasures are mine for Jesus' sake;
6. I know that when I die I will go to heaven for God has promised all His children that He is preparing a special place for them in heaven.

The early church father Tertullian (d. A.D. 220) once commented, *“We are little fishes according to our great fish, Jesus Christ. We are born in water and continue to live healthily only as we remain in the water.”* Martin Luther added the thought that like little children who may sometimes wander off from their mothers but when frightened come crawling back to their mothers, so we Christians must daily crawl back to our baptism to be reassured that God is still our Father and that we are still His special children. Teach this to your child.

Sponsors/God-Parents

Sponsors (or perhaps better, *“mentors”*) are not commanded by God in the Bible. Neither are baptismal sponsors necessarily the same as legal guardians. They were introduced in the ancient Church to serve as witnesses to the baptism and to see to it that the child was raised as a Christian in the event that the parents were to die before the child grew up. In our Lutheran Church sponsors must be confirmed Lutherans in good standing who understand and agree with the teachings of our own church body since they are asked to promise to see to it that the child is raised according to the teachings and doctrines of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, *“From ancient times the Church has observed the*

custom of appointing sponsors for baptismal candidates. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church sponsors are to confess the faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed and taught in the Small Catechism. They are, whenever possible, to witness the Baptism of those they sponsor. They are to pray for them, support them in their ongoing instruction and nurture in the Christian faith, and encourage them toward the faithful reception of the Lord's Supper. They are at all times to be examples to them of the holy life of faith in Christ and love for the neighbor" (baptismal rite). To ask someone to make such a promise who does not agree with the Christian faith as taught in Martin Luther's Small Catechism would be obviously be entirely improper.

Select your child's God-parents or sponsors carefully. Select someone who is not only a Lutheran in name but a practicing Christian as well and who, by his or her life shows that he/she believes in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Select someone who will pray for your child, someone who will remind your child of his baptism as he grows up (perhaps by sending a "*baptism birthday card*" or other such reminder every year), someone who will encourage you in your responsibility of raising your child as God's child.

When, in the rite of baptism, the sponsors are asked to answer certain questions for your child, this should not be misunderstood. They are not believing for your child since everyone (including infants) must believe for himself. They are merely saying what your child would say himself if he were old enough to verbalize his own faith (something he will, in fact, do later on when he is confirmed).

We do occasionally permit non-Lutherans to serve as "*witnesses*" to a baptism in exceptional situations. It should be made clear that "*witnesses*" are not sponsors; that is, they are not obligated as are sponsors to see to the child's spiritual growth and welfare. And so, in the baptism rite, the Minister deletes that section in which the sponsors or God-parents promise to raise the child as a Christian according to the doctrines of the Lutheran Church. To ask for such a commitment from non-Lutheran would obviously be entirely out of place.

The Rite of Baptism

You may find the rite of “*Holy Baptism*” in Lutheran Service Book, page 268ff. In our congregation the rite of baptism takes place at the beginning of the Divine Service, immediately following an opening hymn. You should arrive with your sponsors at least five or ten minutes before the service begins. A deacon will bring you forward when it is time for the rite to begin. We invite the parents to come forward with the sponsors. It makes no difference who holds your child during the baptism service just so long as whoever is holding your child is standing closest to the Minister.

Following a reading from Scripture and a brief comment about the significance of Baptism, the Minister will address your child, “*How are you named?*” Since your child is obviously too young to speak for himself please speak for him and give his name. Later in the baptismal rite the Minister will address several additional questions to your child; please answer for him. Note that you are not believing for your child; you are merely saying what he would say if he were old enough to speak for himself.

When your child is actually baptized the Minister will generally take your child into his arms since not only can he hold your baby more securely in this way, but it is also symbolic of our Lord's own actions, for St. Mark reports that when the mothers brought their little babies to Jesus for him to touch them, Jesus “*took them into his arms and blessed them*” (Mark 10). We are reminded by this action that the one who is receiving your child into God's Kingdom is not really the Minister; it is the risen Jesus himself! The Minister is merely the spokesman for our risen Lord. For we believe that “*when the called Ministers of Christ deal with us by his Divine command, this is as valid and certain as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself*” (Luther's Small Catechism).

Following the baptism, you will be given a “*baptism candle*” signifying that Jesus who is the “*Light of the world*” has entered and enlightened your child who was conceived and born blind and dead in sin.

Following the service, you will also be given several other mementoes including a baptism certificate. We hope these items will help you remind your child of this most significant day in his life.



*To Jordan came the Christ our Lord, to do his Father's pleasure;
Baptized by John, the Father's Word was given us to treasure.
This heavenly washing now shall be a cleansing from transgression
And by his blood and agony, release from death's oppression.
All that the mortal eye beholds is water as we pour it.
Before the eye of faith unfolds the power of Jesus' merit.
For here it sees the crimson flood to all our ills bring healing;
The wonders of his precious blood the love of God revealing,
Assuring his own pardon (M. Luther, Lutheran Service Book 406).*