

II: The Meaning of Holy Baptism

From this now learn a proper understanding of the subject, and how to answer the question what Baptism is, namely thus, that it is not mere ordinary water, **but water comprehended in God's Word and command, and sanctified thereby, so that it is nothing else than a divine water**; not that the water in itself is nobler than other water, but that God's Word and command are added.

(Large Catechism of Martin Luther, or the German Catechism)

Pertinent NT Texts

We will consider the NT texts in three groups:

- Theological
- Instructional
- Examples

Theological Texts

Then He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.
(Mark 16:15-16)

Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life. For if we have been joined with Him in the likeness of His death, we will certainly also be in the likeness of His resurrection. (Romans 6:3-5)

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Jesus replied, "I assure you: Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

"But how can anyone be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked Him. "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"

Jesus answered, "I assure you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:3-8)

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For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13; corollary with John 3:3-8)

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ like a garment. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

one Lord, one faith, one baptism, (Ephesians 4:5)

Cont'd

You were also circumcised in Him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah. Having been buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him and forgave us all our trespasses. (Colossians 2:11-13)

He saved us – not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

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In [the ark] a few – that is, eight people – were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:21)

Is Christ divided? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't know if I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to evangelize – not with clever words, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect. (1 Corinthians 1:13-17)

Cont'd

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. (Hebrews 10:22)

To Him who loves us and has washed washed us from our sins by His blood, (Revelation 1:5)

Cont'd

Then one of the elders asked me, "Who are these people robed in white, and where did they come from?"

I said to him, "Sir, you know."

Then he told me: These are the one coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:13-14)

Instructional Texts

"Repent," Peter said to them, "and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

And now, why delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on his name. (Acts 22:16)

Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (Matthew 28:19)

teaching them about ritual washings . . . (Hebrews 6:2)

Examples

- John 3:22, John 4:1-2: during Jesus' ministry
- Acts 8:12-16: Samaritans
- Acts 8:36-38: Ethiopian eunuch
- Acts 9:18: Saul of Tarsus
- Acts 10:47-48: household of Cornelius
- Acts 16:14-15: household of Lydia
- Acts 16:33: Philippian Jailer
- Acts 18:8: household of Crispus
- Acts 19:4-5: Ephesian disciples of John the Baptist
- 1 Corinthians 6:11: morally reprehensible people

Selections from the Large Catechism

. . . here stand God's commandment and institution, lest we doubt that Baptism is divine, not devised nor invented by men. . . I can boast that Baptism is no human trifle, but instituted by God Himself, moreover, that it is most solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we cannot be saved, lest any one regard it as a trifling matter, like putting on a new red coat. For it is of the greatest importance that we esteem Baptism excellent, glorious, and exalted, for which we contend and fight chiefly, because the world is now so full of sects clamoring that Baptism is an external thing, and that external things are of no benefit. But let it be ever so much an external thing, here stand God's Word and command which institute, establish, and confirm Baptism. But what God institutes and commands cannot be a vain, but must be a most precious thing, though in appearance it were of less value than a straw.

Large Catechism cont'd

For to be baptized in the name of God is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore, although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own work.

Baptism is quite another thing than all other water; not on account of the natural quality but because something more noble is here added; for God Himself stakes His honor, His power and might on it. Therefore it is not only natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water, and in whatever other terms we can praise it,-all on account of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word, that no one can sufficiently extol, for it has, and is able to do, all that God is and can do. . .

Large Catechism cont'd

Therefore I exhort again that these two, the water and the Word, by no means be separated from one another and parted. For if the Word is separated from it, the water is the same as that with which the servant cooks, and may indeed be called a bath-keeper's baptism. But when it is added, as God has ordained, it is a Sacrament, and is called Christ-baptism.

Where the name of God is, there must be also life and salvation, that it may indeed be called a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water; for by the Word such power is imparted to Baptism that it is a laver of regeneration, as St. Paul also calls it [in Titus 3:5].

Large Catechism cont'd

But as our would-be wise, new spirits assert that faith alone saves, and that works and external things avail nothing, we answer: It is true, indeed, that nothing in us is of any avail but faith, as we shall hear still further. But these blind guides are unwilling to see this, namely, that faith must have something which it believes, that is, of which it takes hold, and upon which it stands and rests. Thus faith clings to the water, and believes that it is Baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life; not through the water (as we have sufficiently stated), but through the fact that it is embodied in the Word and institution of God, and the name of God inheres in it.

Large Catechism cont'd

But if they say, as they are accustomed: Still Baptism is itself a work, and you say works are of no avail for salvation; what, then, becomes of faith? Answer: Yes, our works, indeed, avail nothing for salvation; Baptism, however, is not our work, but God's. . . God's works, however, are saving and necessary for salvation, and do not exclude, but demand, faith; for without faith they could not be apprehended.

We must regard Baptism and make it profitable to ourselves, that when our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say: *Nevertheless I am baptized; but if I am baptized, it is promised me that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.*

Baptismal Regeneration

. . . baptism is the instrumental cause of regeneration, and that the grace of regeneration is effectually conveyed through the administration of that rite wherever duly performed.

Note: The ISBE ascribes this doctrine generally to Roman Catholics, the Orthodox churches (both Eastern and Oriental), High-Church Anglicans, and Lutherans.

(International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)