



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion.

“Butter in the Sunshine”:

The Fragility of Faith and the Gift of Baptism

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This essay addresses the question: Is it important to be baptized before receiving Holy Communion? Those who challenge baptism as the sacrament that leads to reception of bread and wine give several reasons: 1) Turning someone away from the meal means the church is excluding someone from Christ Jesus' presence. 2) Because Jesus ate with sinners, the church should do so, as well. 3) The Holy Spirit blows where it will, and since we cannot know the heart of a person who desires to feast without first being baptized, the church must honor the experience of the unbaptized. Faith is the goal, they would say, and baptism is no more a source of faith than is Holy Communion. Both sacraments contribute to faith. 4) Welcoming the unbaptized to the table, it is said, does not deny the importance of baptism, because the pastor and congregation may, and probably will, still teach about baptism and encourage its acceptance.

These perspectives call into question major tenets of Lutheran teaching. From *The Use of the Means of Grace*, a document approved by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, we read: “Baptism Incorporates into the Church: In Baptism people become members not only of the church universal but of a particular congregation.”¹ Those who take this position voice concern over what seems to be a dismissal of the primary gifts received from God in baptism. For centuries, the church has considered baptism essential to faith because baptism — as both 1) washing with water and God's word, and 2) teaching — imparts faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, all Christians share a unity. The 1982 document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, upholds ecumenical agreement on baptism as sacramental incorporation.² This is not a small matter.

Martin Luther wrote that faith is a fragile thing, like “butter in the sunshine”³ which melts away quietly without appropriate care. Faith can dissolve and disappear, as well, because without God's help, human beings are not powerful enough to sustain faith.

This essay will hold that baptism incorporates a person into the body of Christ where, nourishment is found in word and meal for all of life.

Ways to Approach the Question

In order to explore eucharistic hospitality, we have to ask not only about the meaning of the sacraments but also about the meaning of faith, how we receive the Holy Spirit and baptism's role in the creation of the church. We can approach this question through several pathways. We can inquire of scripture: What do the scriptures invite us into? We can look historically: What did our ancestors do to bring new people into the body of Christ? We can examine the theology of the Reformation that insisted on justification by grace through faith as a counter to the prevailing practices that over-emphasized human accomplishment. And, finally, we can ask questions about the nature of the church: What creates and sustains the church? How did the early church understand the way a person was to become a member of the body of Christ? How do people today who want to eat the meal without being baptized understand what it takes to build up the body of Christ? The churches that welcome everyone to the table of our Lord today, without explicitly first inviting them to the waters of baptism, are responding to people who are not baptized but who want to join others at the altar table. Is that good for the individual and the body of Christ in the long run?

How does our treatment of the sacraments honor the intention of each of the sacraments and uphold our Lutheran understanding of God's gifts? In order to explore the question, it is necessary to look at the scriptural and liturgical origin of baptism, its purpose according to Martin Luther, its theology, and how a changed relationship between the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion alters Lutheran proclamation. Because this discussion is necessarily brief, please refer to the bibliography attached for further fruitful reading.

Origins

Looking at Scripture, we see that the church baptizes because Jesus was baptized,⁴ and at least in Matthew's Gospel (28:19-20), Jesus sent the disciples to make disciples, baptize and teach the commandments.⁵ As *The Use of the Means of Grace* asserts, "Baptism was given to the Church by Jesus Christ in the 'great commission,' but also in his own baptism by John and in the baptism of the cross."⁶ We might note that Jesus did not send the disciples out to make meals, telling the people that the bread and wine are his body and blood. Out of context, the meal does not readily make sense as a feast of forgiveness and new life. Mistaking what was meant by this meal, the early Christians were accused of being cannibals by those outside of the church who did not understand the meaning of this eating that took place when they gathered. People

need to be tenderly brought into the church to make clear the full import of the food as eucharist, as thanksgiving.

In the “great commission” we find a pattern to the invitation to become part of the body of Christ. The disciples were sent to meet strangers and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them in the fullness of Jesus’ way. This gift marks the ending of one way of life and the beginning of another: A life immersed in the reality of the triune God.

This is the logic of baptism. People are first given a new identity, and then are given food for the journey this new identity will bring upon them. The Christian life is, after all, a dangerous journey. Jesus learned who he was in his own baptism when the voice of God named him “my beloved Son.” Then his troubles began.⁷ Baptism ushers the baptized into a life of danger and challenge, requiring strength. Jesus’ own baptism, the cup he had to drink, is a model for our own baptism.

Scholars are not certain how Jewish ritual washing (a repeated cleansing) became the baptism of John (a one-time event), but what John initiated and Jesus embraced took hold. Through baptismal washing and teaching the essentials of the catechism (whether teaching or washing came first), the church grew. Baptism came to hold many images and meanings found in scripture, in writings of early theologians, and in Lutheran writings.

- Baptism is cleansing, washing with water and God’s word, removal of sin.⁸
- Baptism is God’s seal on the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism.⁹
- Baptism is incorporation into the Christian community. The one who is baptized belongs to a new household with a radically changed understanding of life, death and resurrection to eternal life.¹⁰
- Baptism is the great equalizer: all are called, all are equal in God’s eyes.¹¹
- Baptism makes new priests.¹²
- Baptism is rescue from death into the reign of Christ.¹³
- Baptism is being clothed in Christ, being brought *into* Christ.
- Baptism recapitulates God’s salvation of Noah’s family through the flood.¹⁴
- Baptism gives enlightenment.¹⁵
- Baptism is Jesus’ death.¹⁶
- Baptism is fire coming out of the water.¹⁷
- Baptism is grounding in the death and resurrection of Christ toward “newness of life.”¹⁸
- Baptism leads to the meal the baptized community shares in Jesus’ body and blood.¹⁹
- Baptism is “the making of Christians done in such a way that the act itself becomes a *life-long pattern of living*.”²⁰

- Baptism is likened to marriage in Paul's analogy linking baptism with love between spouses.²¹ Luther extends the metaphor: "The blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because in it God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort."²²

All of these understandings of baptism can be operative at the same time. None excludes the others.

As we grapple with eucharistic hospitality, we are faced with the statement in Luther's *Large Catechism* that Lutherans "do not intend to admit to the sacrament [of the Altar] and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come."²³ This was asserted, as well, in the *Didache* (ca. 50-150 CE)²⁴ and implied in *The First Apology* by Justin Martyr (ca. 150 CE)²⁵ and other early church orders. In Acts 2:41-42 the Pentecost event unfolds as a paradigm and order for future practice: "So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Early church writings — chief among them the book of Acts, the *Didache*, and the Apostolic Tradition (ca. 250-400 CE) — show an order to incorporation into the church. It is baptism first and then the meal.

We do not know whether churches actually did what is described in the church orders. Caring for the faith that has been handed down is not about adhering to old forms as if that alone had merit. The importance of past practices is more significant than just going through rote motions. Words purportedly from Gustav Mahler say it well: "Tradition is not the worship of ashes but the preservation of fire."²⁶ Even though we cannot know precisely what our ancestors did, we take what has come down to us from them as a guide to the deep meaning within what we are doing now.

Ask the Right Question to Know what Baptism Gives Us

In using the sacrament, the primary question is: What feeds faith according to God's Word? There are good reasons to alter practices in any age as evidenced by the many ways Christians live out faith today in different denominations. Let it be clearly said: There is not, historically, one right way to baptize, eat the meal or worship. Yet, theological change accompanies changes in sacramental practice. Those who believe that baptism is not needed for admission to the meal are asking: How can the church express God's welcome if the church insists that everyone be baptized before coming to the meal? Although this question sounds reasonable, it may be the wrong question.

- 1) When we challenge baptism as the sacrament that incorporates a person into the body of Christ, we may downplay God's role by over-emphasizing the churches' responsibility to welcome people to the body of Christ. Baptism is God's welcome to all people. The church's role is to invite people into God's welcome. "Baptism is a sign and testimony of God's grace, awakening and creating faith."²⁷ It is God's invitation into a mystery that, because of its rich and complex imagery and long heritage, also calls for continuous learning. "Baptism includes instruction and nurture in the faith for a life of discipleship."²⁸ As the church has practiced it for hundreds of years, people are baptized because the baptismal sacrament is the means by which, as *The Use of the Means of Grace* puts it, "God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church."²⁹ The church's role is to shepherd the newcomer by not misrepresenting the gospel as if it was law or by pretending that there is no call from God to be baptized. We demonstrate our welcome by making sure that everyone has the opportunity to encounter the outpouring of mercy that is baptism.
- 2) Focusing the question on how we (rather than God) welcome someone into Christian communion is acquiescence to cultural values because it places our intentions over those of God. The church should be proclaiming God's welcome: Here is new life for you. Free in the waters of baptism! Here is food for the journey. Free at the table of the risen One! Luther wrote: "Baptism signifies two things — death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification."³⁰ In short, baptism saves.

What, then, do we mean by salvation? Here is Luther: "To be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever."³¹ This is not somehow optional or unnecessary, let alone merely an obstacle erected to keep people from the thanksgiving feast. Baptism is our very life, the great gift offered to all who come seeking. All are welcome. For that reason, what Martin Luther and the Lutheran reformers, especially Melancthon, wrote about baptism must be part of our deliberations over its place in our congregations today. The Lutheran Confessions serve as our plumb line in determining how to flex our heritage and still abide within the convictions we have received from our ancestors and share with them today.

- 3) Asking how we are to welcome people to Christ's feast may put the church in a position that trivializes baptism. Our theological heritage tells us that baptism is dangerous and therefore of paramount importance. Why? The late Gerhard Forde wrote that baptism "is the primary attack on original sin." Baptism makes us new

because it intervenes “in the endless turning of the self in upon itself, thus breaking the self's incurable addiction to itself.”³²

Refusing baptism but requesting the meal may most graciously be viewed as a natural response to change. We hedge. We take baby steps. We want to test the waters. (What a fitting cliché for this issue.) We want to be the ones to decide. Aware of this very human bent, Gerhard Forde reminds us that “the very point of baptism is to save us from having to depend on our own decisions. . . . God refuses to pander to us. Grace is not cheap, or expensive; it's free. . . . The free gift alone destroys the self who wishes to stay in control.”³³ Being invited into baptism is terrifying indeed, because it is God's great tidal wave of grace bearing us into abundance of life. For the church to withhold this gift for fear of scaring people away is to abet a twisted notion of welcome and to deny the best of our own theology.

Luther's *Large Catechism* is clear that baptism's importance is based in the fact that it is “not something devised or invented by human beings...” and is “no human plaything but is instituted by God....” The Augsburg Confession insists that God's compassionate mercy is not “an indifferent matter, like putting on a new red coat.”³⁴ It is life itself.

Which is to come first?

Can the meal, as well as baptism, deliver us from sin, death and the devil, bring us into Christ's kingdom and give eternal life? Certainly, Luther's emphasis in both of the sacraments is on the power of God's Word to transform this world. And God's Word, alive and at work in the sacraments, forgives and renews. Baptism does this once; Christ's body and blood repeatedly strengthen.

The purpose of baptism is to immerse us in the triune God in order to join us physically and personally to the crucified and risen body of Christ. Baptism makes real for each Christian — in no uncertain terms — that each one *is* a person of faith, lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, and belongs in the same crucified and risen body of Christ received in the meal. All of these gifts are God's doing.

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¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Holy Baptism Principle #29, in *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 33 (hereafter *UMG*).

² *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

³ *UMG*, Holy Baptism Principle #1, pp. 19-34: "In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Holy Baptism is received by faith alone."

⁴ Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34.

⁵ Matthew 28:19.

⁶ *UMG*, Holy Baptism Principle #15, p. 21.

⁷ Glauca Vasconcelas-Wilkey alerted me to this observation from a sermon by Herbert Anderson.

⁸ Acts 2:38 and 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:9-11, 15:29.

⁹ 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Romans 4:11; Titus 3:5-7.

¹⁰ Acts 2:38-41; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Cor. 12:12-13.

¹¹ Galatians 3:26-29.

¹² 1 Peter 1:22—2:10.

¹³ Colossians 1:13-14.

¹⁴ 1 Peter 3:21.

¹⁵ Hebrews 6:2-4, 10:32; 1 Peter 2:9.

¹⁶ Mark 10:38-39.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Baptism of Christ: Sermon for the Day of Lights," at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2910.htm>, 2140, preaching on Elijah's defeat of the priests of Baal.

¹⁸ Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50; John 3:5; Titus 3:5-7; Romans 6:1-14; Colossians 2:12.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:2-3, 12:13; Acts 2:41-42; Revelation 22:14; Hebrews 6:4-5; 1 Peter 1:22—2:3.

²⁰ Gordon W. Lathrop, "Baptismal Ordo and Rites of Passage in the Church," in *Baptism, Rites of Passage, and Culture* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Department for Theology and Studies, 1998), 36.

²¹ Ephesians 5:26.

²² Martin Luther, "The Holy Sacrament of Baptism," *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 33.

²³ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., “Large Catechism, Fifth Part: The Sacrament of the Altar,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 467.2.

²⁴ Aaron Milavec, trans., *The Didache* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 9.5, p. 23: “(And) let no one eat or drink from your eucharist except those baptized in the name of [the] Lord, for the Lord has likewise said concerning this: ‘Do not give what is holy to the dogs.’”— also at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/didache.html>.

²⁵ See Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>, XLI – XLVII.

²⁶ I have been unable to find the source for this widely-quoted statement.

²⁷ UMG, Holy Baptism Principle #16 and Background 16A, p. 22.

²⁸ UMG, Holy Baptism Principle #19, p. 25.

²⁹ UMG, Holy Baptism Principle #14, p. 20.

³⁰ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 67.

³¹ Kolb and Wengert, “The Augsburg Confession—Article IX: Baptism,” in *Book of Concord*, 459.25 (see n. 23).

³² Gerhard O. Forde, “Something to Believe,” *Interpretation* 47, no. 3 (July 1993): 234.

³³ Forde, 234.

³⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 457.6.