

The Rite of Baptism

Christians have been receiving God's gift of Baptism for nearly two thousand years. Thousands of adults and children have been baptised. Yet sadly, many inside Christian churches don't understand the blessing and comfort promised and given to them in their own baptism. And few people outside the Christian church understand why the true church on earth still continues this ancient practice.

There are 20th century Noah's who trust in the apparent "foolishness" of God in His saving power of Baptism. These modern-day Noah's are the target of sceptics who shout, "How foolish!" These sceptics claim that the water applied to a person in Baptism is the same as the sweat upon one's brow or the morning dew upon the grass. "Is not water used in Baptism, simply water?" they ask. "What does the water of Baptism have to do with the unseen, the eternal, and above all, with safety for sinners in the presence of a just and angry God?" The sceptics have everything confused.

The secret of Baptism's power lies in the simple biblical truth Luther explains in his *Small Catechism*. Luther clarifies that this is "*not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word.*" That's it! The simple water of Baptism is divinely connected to God's all-powerful and life-giving Word.

The following illustration might also explain the power of Baptism. The value of any money is only as good as the government's assets that back it up. The value and power of anything in this world, from the power of vitamins to the growth-producing power of the sun, comes solely through the power of God. God alone is the source, governor and sustainer of all life. Nothing in this world of created things and beings has any power or value apart from God, for "*In Him we live and move and have our being,*" (Acts 17:28). For this reason the Psalmist was able to say in praise to God, "*O Lord, You preserve both man and beast... For with you is the fountain of life*" (Ps. 36:6, 9).

St Paul found it necessary to remind the Corinthians who thought they were self-sufficient, "*And what do you have that you did not receive?*" (1 Cor. 4:7). In the same way, all today who believe they can take the initiative to come to God through their own wills need to examine the following sections of Scripture: John 1:13; 6:44-45, Romans 9:16. Only God who created the earth and covered over seventy percent of it with water, and only the Lord who created human beings with bodies that are composed of over seventy-one percent water, can add to water a new use, and thereby special significance. If we fail to see God's saving power in Baptism, we are simply attempting to pit man's foolish wisdom against God's divine promise.

Every time the devil tempts us to doubt that God can work through water connected to His Word, we need to have our hearts reassured by the testimony of the Scriptures. For example, the Old Testament tells of a general in the Syrian army by the name of Naaman who had been stricken with the life-threatening disease of leprosy. When one of the servants in his household, a girl kidnapped from Israel, told him that there was a prophet in Israel named Elijah who could heal lepers, Naaman decided to visit him. The prophet Elijah told the general to go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Very much like people today who ridicule the power of Baptism, the proud general refused. He ridiculed the advice, saying that the water of his own country would be better to use for washing.

Eventually the general did as the prophet commanded and thereby received the healing the prophet promised. Of course, on its own the Jordan River had no power to cure Naaman of his leprosy, but the power of the water that cleansed him was based upon God's command and promise through the prophet. God's life-giving Word, divinely connected to the water, produced the cleansing result (2 Kings 5:1-14).

Such is the case with the water used in Baptism. As Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*, “*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 [to it],*” (IV, 14). Luther described the water of Baptism as being like an envelope into which the Word of God is inserted like a nut in a shell (Smalcald Articles III, V. 1). The Bible gives many testimonies to the fact that the Word of God is not idle sounds but carries the presence of God Himself in all His creative power (Genesis 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 1 Peter 23-25). Because God has commanded Baptism, He has bound Himself to its water and its words to accomplish His will.