

The Door Opens by Faith, Not Baptism

Broadly speaking, many churches of this world teach that in baptism, Jesus Christ gives new birth to people, receives them as children of God and members of His congregation, and frees them from sin, death and the power of the devil. This teaching also holds that baptism requires faith and is not effective in and of itself. Thus they bind baptism and faith together, and teach that people must be baptized in order to become children of God because we are corrupted by inherited sin and need salvation.

However, in God's kingdom we understand, according to the revelation of God's Word, that children are believers and children of God from birth. By His suffering and death, Christ redeemed all people from the power of condemnation into the fellowship of righteousness and life (Rom. 5:18). Thus children also came to own the righteousness of life. Baptism is a holy sacrament, ordained by God, and is intended to strengthen faith. Children should be brought into its fellowship as early as possible. Baptism is the covenant of good conscience, and obligates the baptized one to deaden the power of sin within and thus preserve "in everyday penitence and repentance" the mystery of faith in a clean conscience (1 Pet. 3:21). Baptism gives strength to do this, and reminds a person of the grace covenant he or she has been brought into as a child.

When it is taught that a child is not a believer or a child of God until baptized, many questions and conflicts arise. Whose property, then, is the child when he or she is not yet baptized or the baptism has been delayed? If baptism is the place where we receive faith, why did Jesus place an unbaptized child as an example of faith, as the greatest in God's kingdom? In addition to this, Jesus says, "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). Every traveler on the way of faith knows that the tendencies of inherited sin have not gone away in baptism, but continually entice us unto sin. There are many examples in Scripture of how God has known and sanctified His child even before the child emerges from mother's womb. As Jeremiah writes, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee" (Jer. 1:5).

Sacraments demand faith of their partakers. However, according to the Augsburg Confession regarding the performing of sacraments, we understand that sacraments are valid even if the person who performs them is not righteous. It also means that different views on the use of the sacraments do not make them ineffective. Rather, sacraments are wondrous grace-gifts of God unto those who believe.

We must also remember that in different translations of Scripture, the teaching and wording of the baptismal command varies slightly, and can elicit different interpretations as a result. For example, in one translation of the Finnish Bible, the original proposed translation of Matthew 28:19–20 said: "Go ye therefore, and make all people my disciples, Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost and teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." However, the church council, with a majority vote, joined these two different matters into one statement by putting a colon in place of the comma so it read: "Go ye therefore and make all people my disciples: baptizing them..." This decision connected baptism to making someone a disciple, which is contrary to what God's Word teaches about personal salvation through faith alone (Rom. 5:1). We

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should also recall that not all of Scripture's expressions about baptism mean baptism with water, but also the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Great accord reigns within God's kingdom on this, that only by faith, through the grace of God, is a person saved. Others teach in opposition to this view, and their opinions vary as to how faith is received. In His mission command, Jesus gives us a clear duty to preach the gospel, "repentance, and the remission of sins...among all nations" to all created beings (Luke 24:47). Mark also admonishes, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15,16).

Adapted from *Päivämies*