

BAPTISM

BAPTISM IS THE SIGN OF COVENANT

God has given promises to people and with them has made covenants, which He has strengthened with visible signs. God does not need signs to remember His covenant, but we weak people with poor memories need them.

God made the first covenant with Noah and his sons. “And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth” (Gen. 9:11–13).

God made a second covenant with Abraham. God called him and gave him a promise. Abraham accepted the call, believed the promise and was justified by faith. God instituted circumcision as the sign of the covenant. God strengthened this covenant by giving the Law to His people on Mount Sinai.

God made His third covenant in His Son, Jesus Christ. The Scriptures call it the New Covenant. Jesus instituted baptism as its sign. Just prior to His ascension into heaven, He said to His disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19,20). This covenant is the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation.

BAPTISM AND FAITH

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said to His disciples, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15–16). The order of God’s work is clearly evident: first the gospel, then faith, and after that baptism.

The same order appears in the familiar descriptions of repentances in the Acts of the Apostles. The Ethiopian Queen’s eunuch listened to the gospel that Philip preached to him as he explained Isaiah’s writings. The eunuch believed and wanted to be baptized. Philip said, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The eunuch confessed his faith, and Philip baptized him (Acts 8:26–40). Peter preached the gospel in the home of Cornelius and the listeners believed it; God gave them His Spirit, and they were baptized (Acts 10). According to these portions of Scripture, faith is first and it is followed by baptism.

In his treatise, “On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Luther discusses the unity of faith and baptism. He explains that baptism without faith is ineffective: “In like manner, neither does baptism justify or benefit anyone, but it is accomplished by faith in the word of the promise, to which baptism is joined. For faith justifies and fulfills that which baptism signifies.”

ARE CHILDREN NOT WORTHY?

In Scriptural instruction, baptism was not tied to any known age, but it speaks only of baptism. In the early congregation, persons of all ages were baptized in families. This is an example for us.

Infant baptism has divided the opinions of people. Already, at the time of the Reformation, there were people that opposed infant baptism, and such continue to exist. They do not approve of the baptism of infants, as the Scriptures do not contain clear instructions on this and they have the opinion that a child

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does not know how to believe. Luther fought powerfully against this understanding. In the Large Catechism, he wrote, “Here we come to a question (by which the devil confuses the world through his sects), the question of infant baptism. Do children also believe, and is it right to baptize them?” He responds to this question, “That the baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ is sufficiently proved from his own work” (Large Catechism, IV:47, 49).

When the disciples disputed about who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus took a child and presented him as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, as a “model Christian.” He exhorted them to care for children in His name and warned them about offending them because they believe in Him (Matt. 18:1–6). In another context, Jesus said, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14). According to the teaching of Jesus, no one is more worthy to receive baptism than a little child.

Infant baptism is also supported by the circumcision of the Old Testament, which was performed when the child was eight days old. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul considers baptism to be the spiritual counterpart of circumcision, “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus, the Lord, so walk ye in him...in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:6,11, 12).

There is reason to examine the faith of a child from the perspective of Christ’s redemption work. Christ was born as a person like we are. By sinless conception and birth, He sanctified our births. We are born into a redeemed and reconciled mankind, into the fellowship of the redemption work of Christ. For that reason, a small child believes and is justified by faith.

The opponents of infant baptism have the understanding that faith is a work of man by which he shows himself to be acceptable to be a child of God and to be baptized. But that faith, of which Scripture speaks, is a gift of God. Those who disparage infant baptism do not have righteousness of faith but righteousness of works.

BAPTISM AND GOOD CONSCIENCE

In baptism, God joins a child into the fellowship of His congregation to be cared for. The endeavor as a child of God begins there. When a child grows older, the battle against sin begins. Baptism obligates us to it. Paul writes to the Romans, “So many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in the newness of life” (Rom. 6:3,4).

According to the teachings of the Small Catechism, baptism signifies that the old Adam in us should be pressed down by daily sorrow and repentance. It must be mortified, with all its sins and evil lusts. In its place, the new man should daily come forth and rise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever (Small Catechism IV:3).

Many have been preserved in childhood faith and in the covenant of baptism, but many have lost their faith and good conscience, when endeavoring has been forgotten. The conscience has hardened and has ceased to rebuke. Faith has been replaced by unbelief. God has not forgotten them, but still seeks and calls them into His fellowship. When the lost one receives the grace of repentance and new birth, he returns to the covenant of baptism. He does not need to be baptized again, for the covenant is still in effect on God’s part.

BAPTISM AND INSTRUCTION

The commandment to baptize contains the duty to teach: “Teach them to keep all that I have commanded you.” As parents, we have a primary obligation to teach our children and to rear them in the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. Our own example is an important part of our work of childrearing. Children learn to value faith, God’s kingdom, and the holy values associated with them, if these matters are truly important to us.

The important things are seen in the life at home. The question is not of overwhelmingly difficult matters, but for example, evening prayers, asking forgiveness, and forgiving. Times for discussion and singing are also good. How blessed it is, if the children are raised so that all go to hear God’s Word, whenever the opportunity exists. Instruction in a Christian home is a two-way education. So often the child teaches us to believe. Once, my wife and I were discussing in a rather stern manner. The discussion was broken by our three-year-old firstborn saying, “Why are you arguing? Ask each other for forgiveness already.”

In connection with baptism, two or more godparents are named for the child. Their duty is to support the parents in the work of rearing the child. The godparent has received a great gift, a godchild, whose life he can follow as an adult friend. He can be happy and sorrowful with the child, listen to the child and show him love. The godchild also has received an important person to whom he can turn when he wishes. The godparent also has received a duty. When the child was baptized, the godparents and the parents were encouraged to rear him in the Christian faith. It signifies in the first place that, as the child grows, he comes to know what gift he has received in baptism. The gift of baptism is the covenant of a good conscience, as Apostle Peter writes about it (1 Pet. 3:21, 22). The most important matter in our lives is to keep faith and a good conscience.