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THE SACRAMENT OF

# Holy Baptism

*A Practical Guide for Lay Teachers*

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From *Ordinary Means* — newsletter.larryherzogjr.com

## Introduction: More Than a Ceremony

If there is one doctrine where confessional Lutheran teaching differs most visibly from the assumptions of mainstream American evangelicalism, it is the doctrine of Holy Baptism. In much of the Protestant world, Baptism has been reduced to an outward ceremony—a public declaration of a decision already made, a symbolic act that “doesn’t really do anything.” The person is the actor; God is the audience.

The Lutheran Confessions—and far more importantly, the Scriptures—teach the exact opposite. In Baptism, God is the actor. Baptism is not our work toward God; it is God’s work toward us. It is not a symbol of something we have done; it is a means by which God does something to us and for us. He washes away sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, as the words and promises of God declare.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher—whether you teach adults or children—you need to understand what Baptism is, what it does, why we baptize infants, and how to recognize and correct the errors that those you teach will almost certainly encounter in the broader culture. This is especially urgent in adult classes, where participants may bring years of assumptions from Baptist, evangelical, or non-denominational backgrounds that treat Baptism as merely symbolic. This paper will equip you for that task.

## 1. What Is Baptism? The Catechism’s Teaching

Luther’s Small Catechism devotes an entire section to Holy Baptism, organized around four questions. These questions and their answers form the backbone of what every teacher in your congregation should know and be prepared to teach.

### First: What Is Baptism?

*Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word.*

— Luther’s Small Catechism, Part IV, First

Luther’s answer immediately corrects two errors. Against those who would exalt Baptism as a kind of magical water, Luther says it *is* water. Against those who would dismiss it as *mere* water, Luther says it is not *just plain* water—it is water combined

with God's Word. The power of Baptism is not in the water itself but in the Word of God that is joined to the water. Where God's Word is present, God is at work. This is the fundamental principle of the means of grace: God has chosen to deliver His gifts through ordinary, physical elements joined to His Word and promise.

The scriptural basis is Christ's own institution in Matthew 28:19-20: "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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Baptism is not a human invention or a church tradition. It is Christ's own command, and it carries Christ's own authority and promise.

## Second: What Benefits Does Baptism Give?

*It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.*

— Luther's Small Catechism, Part IV, Second

This is where Lutheran teaching diverges most sharply from the prevailing American Protestant consensus. Luther does not say Baptism symbolizes forgiveness, pictures rescue, or represents salvation. He says Baptism works forgiveness, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation. These are not metaphors. They are declarations of what God actually does in and through Baptism.

The phrase "to all who believe this" is essential. Baptism is not a magical rite that works apart from faith. Faith and Baptism belong together. But note the direction: it is not that faith makes Baptism valid—as though our subjective mental state determines whether God's promise is real. Rather, faith *receives* what Baptism gives. Baptism is the objective gift; faith is the open hand that grasps it. The promise is there whether you believe it or not—just as a check made out in your name has value whether you cash it or not—but the benefits are received through faith.

The Augsburg Confession affirms this in Article IX: "Our churches teach that Baptism is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through Baptism, and that children should be baptized. They are received into the grace of God when they are offered to God through Baptism."

## Third: How Can Water Do Such Great Things?

*Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit.*

— Luther's Small Catechism, Part IV, Third

Luther anticipates the skeptic's objection: "How can plain water do such extraordinary things?" His answer is disarmingly simple: the water alone does nothing. But the water is never alone in Baptism. God's Word is joined to it, and

where God's Word is present, God's power is at work. The agent in Baptism is not the water, not the pastor, not the parents, and not the faith of the one baptized. The agent is God Himself, working through His Word joined to the water.

Luther cites Titus 3:5-8 as the scriptural anchor: "He saved us...by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Notice: it is a *washing of regeneration*—not a washing that symbolizes regeneration, but a washing that *is* regeneration. The Holy Spirit is at work in Baptism, creating new life, granting faith, and uniting the baptized person to Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4).

#### Fourth: What Does Such Baptizing with Water Indicate?

*It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*

— Luther's Small Catechism, Part IV, Fourth

Here Luther teaches that Baptism is not merely a one-time event in the past. It has ongoing, daily significance for the Christian life. The baptized Christian lives each day in the reality of Baptism—dying to sin and rising to new life. This is what Luther called the *baptismal life*: a daily return to the promises made in Baptism, a daily drowning of the old sinful nature, and a daily rising of the new creation in Christ.

This means that when a Christian sins and repents, they are not starting over from scratch. They are returning to their Baptism—to the promise God made to them in that water. Repentance is not finding a new relationship with God; it is returning to the one He already established in Baptism. This is enormously comforting for the terrified conscience and is a truth your students desperately need to hear: your Baptism still stands. God's promise to you has not expired.

## 2. Infant Baptism: Why We Baptize Children

The baptism of infants is one of the most common points of confusion and contention that your students will encounter, especially if they have friends, family, or coworkers from Baptist or broadly evangelical backgrounds. It is therefore essential that you understand not only that we baptize infants but why.

### The Scriptural Basis

Several converging lines of scriptural evidence support the practice of infant Baptism:

- **Christ's command is universal.** "All nations" (Matthew 28:19) includes infants. There is no age restriction in Christ's institution of Baptism. To exclude infants is to add a condition that Christ did not add.
- **Peter's Pentecost sermon includes children.** "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,

and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children” (Acts 2:38-39).

- **Household baptisms in Acts.** The New Testament records multiple instances of entire households being baptized (Acts 16:15, 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). In the ancient world, a “household” included children. The burden of proof lies on those who would claim these households contained no infants, not on those who assume they did.
- **Jesus welcomed little children.** “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14). If the kingdom of God belongs to such as these, why would we withhold from them the means by which God brings people into His kingdom?
- **Infants are sinners who need salvation.** Original sin applies to all human beings from conception (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12). If infants are sinners—and they are—then they need the forgiveness that Baptism delivers. To deny Baptism to infants is to deny them a means of grace at the very moment they most need it.

### The Theological Logic

The objection to infant Baptism almost always rests on the assumption that faith must precede Baptism—that a person must first make a conscious decision to believe, and then be baptized as an expression of that decision. But this assumption smuggles in precisely the error taken up in the companion guide, *Distinguishing Law and Gospel*: it makes faith a human work rather than a divine gift. If the Holy Spirit creates faith through the means of grace—and He does (Romans 10:17; Titus 3:5)—then Baptism itself can be the instrument through which the Spirit creates faith in the infant. We do not baptize infants *because* they believe; we baptize them so that the Holy Spirit may work faith in them *through* Baptism.

Moreover, the insistence that a person must understand and consciously decide before receiving Baptism imposes a standard that Scripture never requires. We do not fully understand how the Spirit works—Jesus Himself said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). The inability of an infant to articulate faith does not mean the Spirit cannot create faith in that infant. God is not limited by our cognitive categories.

### The Historical Witness

The practice of infant Baptism is not a medieval invention. It is attested in the earliest centuries of the church. Irenaeus (c. 130-202 AD) refers to the baptism of infants and children. Hippolytus (c. 215 AD) includes instructions for baptizing children in his Apostolic Tradition. Origen (c. 185-254 AD) explicitly states that the church received the practice of infant Baptism from the apostles. The denial of infant Baptism is the innovation; the practice itself is ancient, apostolic, and universal in the church until the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century.

### 3. Living in Your Baptism: Daily Significance

One of the most practical and pastorally rich aspects of the Lutheran doctrine of Baptism is its daily significance. Baptism is not merely something that happened to you in the past; it is a present reality that shapes the entire Christian life.

Luther famously advised troubled Christians to say, “*I am baptized*”—not “I was baptized” (past tense) but “I am baptized” (present, ongoing reality). Your Baptism is not a memory; it is a status. It is God’s declaration over your life that you belong to Him, that your sins are forgiven, that you are clothed in Christ’s righteousness, and that nothing—not your failures, not your doubts, not your worst day—can undo what God has done.

This has profound implications for how you teach—whether your students are adults who have been in the church for decades or children just beginning to learn the faith:

- **For those struggling with guilt or shame:** Point them to their Baptism. Adults who carry years of accumulated guilt need to hear this just as much as children do: “God washed away your sins in Baptism. That promise still stands today. You are His child.”
- **For those wondering about assurance:** Baptism provides an objective anchor for faith. This is especially critical for adults who have been taught in other traditions that assurance rests on the quality of their commitment or the intensity of their feelings. Your assurance does not rest on your feelings, your sincerity, or the strength of your faith. It rests on what God did to you in the water: He claimed you, named you, and made you His own.
- **For those asking about repentance:** Teach them that repentance is a return to Baptism. When we sin and confess, we are not starting a new relationship with God; we are returning to the one He established when He baptized us. Adults who have drifted from the faith and returned need to know that their Baptism did not expire during their absence. The Fourth Part of the Catechism’s teaching on Baptism is the key here.
- **For understanding the connection to the Lord’s Supper:** Baptism is the entry point into the sacramental life of the church. The baptized are the ones who gather at the Lord’s Table. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not unrelated events; they are connected as the beginning and ongoing sustenance of the Christian life. Adult students who came from non-sacramental traditions may never have understood this connection.

### 4. Common Errors to Watch For

#### “Baptism Is Just a Symbol”

This is the most pervasive error your students will encounter. It comes from the Zwinglian and Baptist traditions, which reduce the sacraments to human acts of obedience or public testimony. The confessional Lutheran response is direct: Scripture never calls Baptism a symbol. It calls Baptism a “washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5), says it “now saves you” (1 Peter 3:21), and declares that in Baptism we

are “buried with Christ” and “raised with Him” (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12). If Baptism is merely a symbol, then the apostles chose extraordinarily misleading language to describe it.

**In your teaching:** Never use language like “Baptism is an outward sign of an inward change” or “Baptism represents what God has done.” Teach instead that Baptism is what God is doing—it is the means through which He delivers His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

### “Only Believers Should Be Baptized”

This objection assumes that faith is exclusively a conscious, cognitive, adult decision. But Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit can and does work faith even in infants. John the Baptist leaped in his mother’s womb at the presence of Christ (Luke 1:41-44). Jesus said the kingdom belongs to little children (Mark 10:14). And Psalm 22:9-10 speaks of trusting God from the mother’s breast. The insistence on “believer’s baptism only” is not a biblical doctrine; it is a rationalistic assumption about the limits of God’s work.

**In your teaching:** When this objection arises—and it will—gently point out that none of us fully understand how faith works. Adults who are baptized don’t fully understand either. The question is not whether the baptized person understands perfectly but whether God’s promise is true and powerful. Baptism rests on God’s faithfulness, not ours.

### “Baptism Is Something We Do for God”

This error reverses the direction of Baptism entirely. It makes Baptism a human act of obedience or dedication directed toward God, rather than God’s act of grace directed toward us. This is the fundamental confusion that underlies both the “just a symbol” view and the insistence on adult-only baptism. Once you see that Baptism is God’s work—not ours—the other errors begin to dissolve.

**In your teaching:** Use active-voice language for God and passive-voice language for the baptized person. Not “We get baptized to show our faith” but “God baptizes us to give us faith.” Not “We dedicate our children to God” but “God claims our children as His own.” The grammar of your sentences teaches theology.

### “If Baptism Saves, Then Everyone Who Is Baptized Is Automatically Saved”

This is a misunderstanding that sometimes comes from within Lutheran circles as well as from outside critics. Lutherans do not teach that Baptism works automatically (*ex opere operato*) apart from faith. The Small Catechism is clear: Baptism gives eternal salvation “to all who *believe* this.” Baptism without faith does not save, but this does not diminish Baptism—it underscores the importance of ongoing instruction and nurture so that the faith the Spirit creates in Baptism is sustained and strengthened through the Word. This is precisely why your role as a Sunday school teacher matters: you are helping to nurture baptismal faith.

**In your teaching:** Teach that Baptism and faith go together. Baptism without ongoing instruction and faith becomes like a seed planted in soil that receives no water or sunlight. The seed is real, but it needs nurture. That nurture comes through the Word of God—which is exactly what you are providing every time you teach.

### “Re-Baptism Is Appropriate When Someone Comes to Genuine Faith”

Some evangelical churches encourage people who were baptized as infants to be “re-baptized” as adults when they make a personal profession of faith. This practice fundamentally misunderstands what Baptism is. If Baptism is God’s work—His promise attached to water—then it does not need to be repeated any more than God’s promise needs to be re-made. To “re-baptize” is to declare, whether intentionally or not, that God’s first act was invalid or insufficient. Ephesians 4:5 states plainly: there is “one baptism.”

**In your teaching:** If someone in your class mentions that they or a family member was “re-baptized,” handle it gently but clearly. In adult classes especially, you may be speaking to someone who was re-baptized themselves and feels strongly about it. Avoid being confrontational, but do not compromise the teaching. You might say: “We believe that because Baptism is God’s work, it doesn’t need to be done again. God got it right the first time. What we do is return to our Baptism every day through repentance and faith.”

## 5. Practical Guidance for Teaching

- **Teach the Fourth Part of the Catechism thoroughly.** Don’t rush past Baptism. Take time to work through all four questions. Use the Catechism’s own language—it is precise and pastoral.
- **Use the right verbs.** God washes, God saves, God gives, God claims. In Baptism, God is always the subject of the active verb. The baptized person receives, is claimed, is washed, is made a child of God.
- **Connect Baptism to daily life.** Help your students understand that their Baptism is not just a past event but a present identity. Encourage them to remember their Baptism when they wake up, when they confess their sins, and when they feel distant from God.
- **Know the key Scripture passages.** Matthew 28:19–20, Acts 2:38–39, Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:27, Titus 3:5–8, 1 Peter 3:21, and Mark 10:13–16 are the essential texts. Be prepared to turn to them.
- **Don’t be defensive; be confessional.** When questions arise about infant Baptism or the efficacy of Baptism, don’t treat them as attacks. Treat them as opportunities to confess what Scripture teaches. Many sincere Christians hold different views on Baptism because they have never heard the Lutheran confession explained clearly. You may be the first person to show them what the Bible actually says.

- **Consult your pastor.** If a difficult question about Baptism arises that you are not confident addressing, tell the person asking that you will find out and follow up. Then ask your pastor. This is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of faithfulness and humility—and adults in your class will respect your honesty far more than a poorly improvised answer.

## Conclusion

Holy Baptism is one of the most precious gifts God gives to His church. In Baptism, the God of the universe reaches down through water and His Word and claims a sinner as His own. He washes away sin, defeats death and the devil, and opens the door to eternal life. He does this for infants and adults alike, not because of anything they bring to the font but because of everything He brings: His promise, His power, and His relentless love.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher, you have the privilege of helping those you teach understand this gift—not as a quaint religious ceremony from the past but as the living foundation of their identity in Christ. For many adults in your class, this may be the first time they have heard Baptism taught as anything more than a symbol. Teach them to say with Luther: “I am baptized.” And teach them that in those three words, they have everything they need.

*“Baptism...now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*

— 1 Peter 3:21 (ESV)

## For Further Reading

- *Luther’s Small Catechism, Part IV: Holy Baptism* — The foundational text. Read it repeatedly.
- *Luther’s Large Catechism, Part IV: Holy Baptism* — Luther’s extended treatment, rich in pastoral application.
- *Augsburg Confession, Article IX* — The confessional statement on Baptism.
- Scaer, David P., *Baptism* (Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series, Luther Academy, 1999).
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2000).

## QUICK-REFERENCE SUMMARY

### *Holy Baptism*

*For Sunday School Teachers — Keep This at Your Desk*

#### THE FOUR QUESTIONS FROM THE CATECHISM

Question	Answer (Summary)
<b>What is Baptism?</b>	Not just plain water, but water combined with God's Word and command.
<b>What does it give?</b>	Forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation to all who believe.
<b>How can water do this?</b>	The water alone cannot — but God's Word joined to the water does these things, along with faith.
<b>What does it mean daily?</b>	The old sinful nature should daily be drowned through repentance, and a new person should daily arise to live before God.

#### WHY WE BAPTIZE INFANTS

Reason	Scriptural Basis
<b>Christ's command is universal</b>	"All nations" includes infants (Matthew 28:19).
<b>Peter's Pentecost sermon</b>	"The promise is for you and for your children" (Acts 2:39).
<b>Household baptisms</b>	Entire households were baptized in Acts (16:15, 16:33; 1 Cor 1:16).
<b>Jesus welcomed children</b>	"To such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14).
<b>Infants are sinners</b>	Original sin applies from conception; infants need grace (Psalm 51:5).

#### THE QUICK TEST

✓ TEACH THIS	✗ NOT THIS
Baptism is God's work toward us.	Baptism is our work toward God.
Baptism delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation.	Baptism is just a symbol or outward sign.
The Holy Spirit creates faith through Baptism.	You must believe first, then get baptized.

✓ TEACH THIS	✗ NOT THIS
We baptize infants because they need God's grace.	Infants can't be baptized because they can't decide.
"I am baptized" — present, ongoing identity.	"I was baptized" — past event, done and forgotten.
There is one Baptism; it does not need to be repeated.	You should get re-baptized when you "really" believe.
Repentance is a daily return to our Baptism.	Repentance means starting over with God from scratch.

### KEY SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Matthew 28:19-20 • Acts 2:38-39 • Romans 6:3-4 • Galatians 3:27 • Titus 3:5-8 • 1 Peter 3:21 • Mark 10:13-16

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***Teach your students to say: "I am baptized." Not "I was." "I am."***

## More from Larry Herzog Jr.

If this guide was helpful, here's where to find more like it.

### The Newsletter

*Ordinary Means* — a weekly confessional Lutheran newsletter for lay teachers, weary evangelicals, and serious laypeople. Free to subscribe at [newsletter.larryherzogjr.com](http://newsletter.larryherzogjr.com).

### Books for the Reader Who Wants to Go Deeper

- ***The Hollow Altar: A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals*** — for the reader who has loved Christ inside evangelicalism but kept running into things their tradition couldn't quite explain.
- ***Judeo-Christian Values?: A Confessional Lutheran Reckoning with Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism, and the Gospel They Replaced*** — a timely volume on where modern evangelical eschatology actually came from.
- ***Ad Fontes: Textual Criticism for Lutheran Laity*** — why we can trust the text of Scripture in the first place.
- ***What Horse?: Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says*** — for the reader who has heard things “the Bible says” their whole life and started to wonder.

### Bible Study Series for Adult Sunday School and Small Groups

- ***Pauline Captivity Letters*** — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.
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All available on Amazon. Each volume includes discussion questions, doctrinal notes, and clear Law/Gospel handling of the text — built for the person who has to teach the lesson on Sunday morning.

### About the Author

Larry Herzog Jr. is a confessional Lutheran layman in Valley City, North Dakota — but he got there the long way. He came to Christ as a college-age atheist through an online debate on the reliability of Scripture, then spent over two decades working through North American Baptist, Evangelical Free, Nazarene (where he served as an associate pastor), a Calvinist Baptist church, and Reformed Baptist seminary before finally landing in confessional Lutheranism (AFLC). He teaches adult Sunday school and leads Bible studies at Grace Free Lutheran Church. His weekday job is cybersecurity.