

Why Do We Do That?

This is the fourth in a series of articles on Lutheran customs and practices. Do you have an idea for a church practice you would like explained? Suggest it to Pastor Becker.

Baptism

Baptism is taught in the Bible and accepted by all Christians. Lutherans accept the Bible teaching that Baptism gives saving faith through the Holy Spirit's work with the word. Various customs have become associated with Baptism which are not in the Bible but grow out of what the Bible teaches.

"Baptism" is a Greek word which simply means "washing" with water. Some Christians insist that Baptism, to be valid, must be done by immersion. This is not in the Bible and there is evidence that early Christians baptized in places too shallow for immersion. However, immersion can symbolize the Biblical statement that we are "buried" with Christ in baptism. Lutherans may immerse but ordinarily do not, so as not to give the impression that we agree it is necessary.

Lutherans generally baptize using running water, which is the literal meaning of the Bible expression "living water". Often this is done by pouring water on the head using a seashell. The water may be poured three times, when each of the names of God are spoken, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From this comes a common

symbol of baptism, a shell with three drops of water beneath it.

The practice usually used by Pastor Becker is pouring larger amounts of running water from the pitcher. A pouring pitcher is another symbol of Baptism. The water may be applied in other ways, such as sprinkling. Premature babies in incubators can be baptized with drips from eyedroppers!

A custom that has become associated with Baptism is wearing white, to symbolize the purity and righteousness of Christ which covers a person when baptized. Babies are often brought dressed in white. Some have a custom of putting on a white robe at the time of baptism. (See pg. 203, #15 in the hymnal, Lutheran Worship.)

Another custom associated with Baptism is lighting a candle, to symbolize that the light of faith is now kindled in the heart of the baptized. (See pg. 203, #16 in LW.) Some keep a baptismal candle, which is lit each year on the Baptism anniversary.

Baptismal sponsors are another custom, not found in the Bible, but based on Bible teaching. Jesus says in Matt. 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 and teaching always go together. Baptism gives genuine faith, but without teaching that faith can die and do no good. It is as when a mother gives birth and so her child is given life, but if

that child is not then fed it will die and its birth was in vain.

Adults are usually taught first and then baptized. It does no good to baptize someone who is already consciously rejecting the true faith.

Children are baptized first, then taught. Because the Bible says we are all born sinful and need salvation, parents are eager to be sure of salvation for their children. Often children are baptized within a month after they are born.

To assist with teaching, the custom of baptismal sponsors developed at a time when life expectancies were uncertain. Sponsors assist the parents in teaching the child "the true knowledge and worship of God" (LW pg. 200) especially until they confirm their faith.

Since parents will want their child to be taught the faith they themselves believe is true and since baptism makes one a member of the congregation in which he or she is baptized, "only those of the same confession of faith should be sponsors" (Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation).

Sponsors and others may also be witnesses. They speak for children who cannot yet speak for themselves, witnessing that God gives faith in Baptism. They remind the child, who is too young to remember it personally, that he or she is God's baptized child. They also pray for the child to grow and remain in the faith.

Ordinarily, Baptism is part of a service of worship, with the whole family of God gathered to celebrate and receive the child as part of their church.