

Baptism Customs And How They Have Influenced Our Baptism Practices

[Ohio Conference; Trinity Lutheran Church; Jenera, Ohio; January 16, 1995]

by: Pastor Elton R. Bickel

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character, Tevye, describes how the lives of the people in his Jewish community are governed by the age-old laws of tradition: "Tradition! Here in Anatevka we have our traditions for everything... Tradition! How did this tradition get started? I don't know."

Many Lutherans have been critical of traditions, customs, and rites in other churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church, and yet we have inherited many of our rites, customs, and traditions from the Roman Catholic Church. This is especially true with our baptism customs. Why was there a traditional baptismal dress? Why did our baptism services include an exorcism? Why do some use a baptismal candle? Why do we have sponsors?

As leaders in our churches and schools we should know something of the origin of baptism customs, and we also have a responsibility to examine the customs that we have and make sure we do not follow traditions that may detract from the importance of baptism. In his *Christian Dogmatics*, Francis Pieper states under "Baptismal Customs":

In the course of time a number of customs have been introduced in connection with the baptismal rite for the purpose of explaining and portraying both the nature and the effect of Baptism.... Gerhard says that only the ceremonies enjoined by God (the application of water in the name of the Triune God) are binding on the Church, but that those freely observed by the Apostles rest as much on the Christian liberty of the Church as those added by the later Church. We include under baptismal customs all ceremonies and customs not prescribed by God and here make mention of such as were received into the Lutheran baptismal formularies, though perhaps not in all places. Walther (Pastorale, p. 130f.) enumerates the following: (1) the reminder of original sin; (2) the giving of the name; (3) the so-called "small exorcism"; (4) the sign of the cross; (5) a prayer and the *devotum Davidicum*; (6) the "great exorcism"; (7) the reading of Mark 10:13-16; (8) the laying on of hands; (9) the Lord's Prayer; (10) the *abrenuntiatio* and the *confessio* (the Apostles' Creed); (11) the use of sponsors; (12) the covering of the child with a chrisom; (13) the votum.¹

Pieper then goes on to tell how we should keep these customs in perspective: "Christians should, on the one hand, bear in mind that these customs are *adiaphora* (not prescribed by God), so that Baptism loses none of its validity if several or even all of these ceremonies are not used. Gerhard says: 'In the customs neither commanded nor forbidden by God (*in ritibus adiaphoris*) the liberty must be guarded which Christ has dearly purchased and conferred on His Church, namely, by observing them freely, without the notion that they are necessary. They may be abrogated or altered according to the regulation and with the consent of the Church, particularly if they cease to be of benefit, do not achieve their salutary purpose, are misused, or degenerate into a superstition.'"² In the course of this paper it will become evident how we have used such critical examination of baptismal customs and must continue to do so.

A comparison of recent baptismal orders shows a difference in how we Lutherans approach the matter of baptism customs. *Lutheran Worship* not only retained the exorcisms of *The Lutheran Agenda* but also added the following rubrics: "A white garment may now be put

upon the candidate” and “A baptismal candle may now be lighted.” on the other hand, *Christian Worship* incorporates none of these customs and even eliminates the address to the sponsors. This simplified order and its use at the very beginning of the service does put more emphasis on the sacrament itself.

But not everyone in our circles seems to agree. In a recent issue of *Parish Leadership* Bryan Gerlach suggests in his article on “Communicating Baptism’s Power” that the service include the use of a paschal candle, baptismal candle, banners, special music, framed certificate, baptismal garment, and even announcements. He states:

The lack of symbolism and ceremony surrounding our baptismal rite may be one hindrance to a greater appreciation of baptism. If this is true, we might consider recalling that appreciation with more symbolic reminders of baptism’s rich blessing.³

The Early Development of Baptism Customs.

In order to understand better some of the customs surrounding baptism, a survey of their historical development is certainly worthwhile. The original form for baptism in Matthew, Chapter 28, is very simple and so are Peter’s instructions in Acts 2. One reason for the simplicity is the fact that baptism was a common practice among Jews even before the time of John the Baptist.

Even at the time of Christ there was a proper procedure to become a member of Israel. Israel’s procedure was a little different, though, from what one might normally expect. To become a member of Israel one also had to become a Jew. One had to convert! The Jews required three things of their potential citizens. First, the males had to be circumcised. Second, they had to offer sacrifice. Finally, they were *all* to be baptized! When men converted to Judaism, baptism washed away the uncleanness of paganism.... While the Law and Prophets did not demand this custom, the practice of baptizing converts goes back well before Christ.⁴

The earliest order of baptism in the post-apostolic period is in the *Didache*, which dates from about A.D. 150. The *Didache* was intended to be used in the instructions preliminary to Baptism:

Concerning baptism, baptize in this way. Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in living water. But if you have not living water, baptize into other water, and, if thou canst not in cold, in warm. If you have neither, pour water thrice on the head in the name....”⁵

One of the earliest church fathers to mention baptism is Justin Martyr (ca.100-165), who in his defense of Christianity refers to the baptism of men, women, and children. It is Hippolytus (ca.170-253), however, who includes in his writings a lengthy description of the rituals used with baptisms.

Immediate preparations

...Let those to receive baptism fast on the eve of the Sabbath (Friday) and on the Sabbath (as well); and on the Sabbath let them be assembled in a place the bishop designates. Let him command them all to pray and kneel. And, imposing his hand over them, let him command every alien spirit to flee from them and not to return again to them. When he has finished exorcising them, let him exhale on their faces, and when he has signed their forehead, ears and noses (with the cross), let him raise them to a standing position. They will (then) pass the entire night in vigil, hearing (Scripture) reading and instruction (thereon)

Concerning the giving of Holy Baptism:

At cockcrow, first let prayer be offered over the water; let the water flow or be poured into the font. Let it be done this way, unless there be some necessity. If, however, the necessity is permanent and urgent, use such water as you find.

Renunciation of Satan

(Those about to be baptized) shall take off their clothes. First baptize the children. Let those who can, speak for themselves. But those unable to speak for themselves, let their parents or someone from their family speak for them. Then, baptize the men and finally the women, after they have let down their hair and put away (any) gold jewelry they are wearing. And let none take any alien object (amulet) down into the water (with him). At the appointed time for baptism, let the bishop give thanks over the oil, which he puts in a vial and calls the oil of thanksgiving. He then takes some other oil, which he exorcises and calls the oil of exorcism. A deacon then carries the oil of exorcism and stations himself at the left hand of the presbyter; another deacon takes the oil of thanksgiving and stands at the presbyter's right. Taking each candidate for baptism, let the presbyter command him to renounce saying, "I renounce you, Satan, and all your service and all your works." And when each one has renounced (Satan), let (the presbyter) anoint him with the oil of exorcism, saying to him: "May every spirit depart from you." And in this way let him (the anointing presbyter) hand the naked candidate to the bishop or to the presbyter who stands close to the water, in order to baptize him.

Immersion

Let the deacon descend with the candidate this way. When he who is to be baptized descends into the water, the one who baptizes imposes his hand on him and asks: "Do you believe in the Father Almighty?" And for his part, let him who is being baptized say: "I believe." And again he who is doing the baptizing, let him impose his hand on his head. Then, let him say: "Do you believe in Christ Jesus the Son of God, who was born from the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died, (was buried), rose on the third day from the dead, ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and who will come to judge the living and the dead?" When he has said, "I believe," let him (the one baptizing) say, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and in the holy church and in the resurrection of the flesh?" Let him who is being baptized say: "I believe"; so at this time let him be baptized.

Chrismation, Prayer, the Kiss of Peace

Afterwards, when (the newly baptized) has emerged (from the font) let him be anointed with oil which has been consecrated (i.e., the oil of thanksgiving) by a presbyter saying "I anoint you with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ." When each (newly baptized) has dried, let them dress and then enter the church. With his hand imposed (over) them, let the bishop say the following prayer, "Lord God, you who have made them worthy to receive the remission of sins through the bath of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, send into them your grace that they may serve you according to your will; for to you is glory, to the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages of the ages. Amen.

Then, as he pours consecrated oil from his hand and imposes his hand on (the newly baptized's) head, let (the bishop) say: "I anoint you with holy oil in the Lord Father almighty and Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit." And as he signs him on the forehead, let him offer the kiss and say: "The Lord be with you." Then let him who is signed say: "And with your spirit." The bishop will do thus to each. Then (the newly baptized) shall

pray together with the congregation, for they do not pray with the faithful unless all these (rites) have been completed. And when they have prayed, they shall offer the kiss of peace.⁶

It is interesting to note the number of customs already at this time. The practice of baptism in the nude took place in a baptistery in the presence of the presbyters and deacons. One explanation of this custom is that “total nudity in baptism was the universal rule of the ancient church; this was to be no partial cleansing, and neophytes were to leave behind all shows of the old life and begin again as naked as at the first birth or in the garden of the first creation.”⁷ It was after the baptism that a white robe was given to the newly baptized.⁸ It was also customary that the candidates for baptism first received the baptismal confession, the Apostles Creed, in the last days prior to their baptism.⁹

To trace the development of baptism customs from the beginning is difficult for various reasons. During the times of controversy with the Jews and persecution from pagans there were many clusters of Christians that developed various customs, and not many records have survived.

The next important writer was Tertullian (ca.160-ca.240). We know him best as the person who spoke out against infant baptism, but the very fact he does so shows that the practice of infant baptism was prevalent. He had the opinion that “baptism should be postponed to the period of fuller development.”¹⁰ A reason for his opinion on infant baptism was that he did not believe in original sin.¹¹

Cyprian (205-258), like Tertullian, worked mostly in Carthage but did not subscribe to Tertullian’s heterodox views. In fact, in regard to infant baptism “Cyprian insisted on baptism on the second or third day after birth, in opposition to those who held the view that baptism was analogous to circumcision and should take place on the eighth day.”¹²

The period from about A.D. 250 to 300 was the time of the most severe persecution of Christians. First, under Decius, then under Valerian, and finally Diocletian, the early Christians suffered their greatest tribulation. It was during this time that the use of sponsors became a necessity, and as a further caution the period of preliminary instructions was extended to anywhere from two to three years.

...The custom of having sponsors originated in the post-Apostolic Church during the time of the persecutions and was used primarily for adults. Historians record that some of the bitterest enemies of Christianity tried to get into the church as spies and ascertain the identity of the Christians that they might hale them before the authorities. These people acted as regular fifth columnists, even submitting to catechism instructions and baptism for their nefarious purposes. In order to prevent such spies from sneaking into the membership of the Church it became required that a known Christian speak for, or sponsor, the applicant, and vouch for his sincere intentions of becoming a Christian.¹³

It was afterward, in “The Church of the Empire” (324-549), that “infant baptism comes into prominence as adult conversions decline,” and it was then, too, that the “catechumenate becomes initiation into ritual and custom rather than doctrinal instruction.”¹⁴ What was once a period of two or three years of instructions now becomes a period of instructions only during Lent. Ambrose (339-397) lists these steps in preparation for baptism:

Baptismal Preparation

1. Enrollment. The candidates put their names in on the Epiphany. The rite involved smearing the eyes with mud to signify the eye-opening work to come in the Lenten catechumenate.
2. Daily instruction and frequent exorcism.

3. Delivery of the creed ... given orally.
4. Scrutiny. A solemn exorcism, including physical and psychological examination.
5. Recitation of the creed on the Sunday before Easter.

Baptism

6. The opening rite involved touching candidates, ears and nostrils.
7. First anointing rite involved rubbing entire body with olive oil.
8. Renunciation. Facing West, candidates renounced devil, world, and flesh.
9. Allegiance. Facing East, candidate announced allegiance to Christ.
10. Entry into baptistery. A procession.
11. Exorcism and consecration of baptismal water by the bishop.
12. Immersion. Candidates immersed three times in water, each time asked baptismal creed in form of question about Father, Son, Spirit. Answered: "I believe."
13. Anointing the head. Reminiscent of Israel's practice of anointing kings and priests.
14. Foot washing. The bishop washed feet of newly baptized.
15. White garment given to newly baptized.
16. Consignation. A special signing with oil to signify seven-fold gifts of the Spirit.
17. The kiss.
18. The gift of milk and honey.
19. Psalm 22 (23) sung in procession from baptistery into church.
20. Participation in the Eucharist.¹⁵

About the same time John Chrysostom (347-407), Patriarch of Constantinople, gave his instructional homilies to those about to be baptized. In this catechetical instruction he explains many of the prevalent baptism customs. On the purpose and symbolism of exorcisms he states:

Let me instruct you, then, as far as I can, in the reasons for each of the present rites, that you may know them well and depart from here with a more certain understanding of them. You must understand why, after this daily instruction, we send you along to hear the words of the exorcists. For this rite does not take place without aim or purpose; you are going to receive the king of heaven to dwell within you. This is why, after we have admonished you, those appointed to this task take you and, as if they were preparing a house for a royal visit, they cleanse your minds by those awesome words, putting to flight every device of the wicked one and making your hearts worthy of the royal presence. For even if the demon be fierce and cruel, he must withdraw from your hearts with all speed after this awesome formula and the invocation of the common Master of all things. Along with this, the rite itself impresses great piety on the soul and leads it to abundant compunction.¹⁶

About the anointing Chrysostom explains:

Therefore the priest anoints you on the forehead and puts on you the sign (of the cross), in order that the enemy may turn away his eyes. For he does not dare to look you in the face when he sees the lightning flash which leaps forth from it and blinds his eyes.

Henceforth from that day there is strife and counterstrife with him, and on this account the priest leads you into the spiritual arena as athletes of Christ by virtue of this anointing.¹⁷

The fact that adult catechumens had spent years in instructions before baptism may have contributed to the feeling that baptism could be held off for a later time. The idea was also

gaining ascendancy that baptism washed away the sins a person made up to that point, and thereafter he was responsible for his actions. Chrysostom, however, spoke out against those who put off baptism until the hour of death:

... I not only count you blessed but I praise your good will, because unlike men of laxity, you do not approach baptism at your final gasp.... They receive baptism amidst laments and tears, but you are baptized with rejoicing and gladness; they are groaning, while you are giving thanks; their high fever leaves them in a stupor, while you are filled with an abundance of spiritual pleasure.... 18

It was Augustine (354-430) who in his contentions with Pelagius used the fact the first Christians had practiced infant baptism to corroborate his teachings on original sin:

For whether it be a newborn infant or a decrepit old man—since no one should be barred from baptism—just so, there is no one who does not die to sin in baptism. Infants die to original sin only; adults to all those sins which they have added, through evil living, to the burden they brought with them at birth.¹⁹

With Leo I (440-461) begins the break-up of the “Empire Church.” First, there began a schism between Rome and Constantinople, and later came the loss of the Syrian and Egyptian Churches because of heterodox views. It is at this time that the Roman Church became the standard bearer of orthodoxy, but many customs connected with baptism of adults were carried over into the baptism of infants. Some of the actions of the adult candidates were taken over by sponsors, and some priests even gave the infants Holy Communion (generally only the wine and sometimes unconsecrated). This practice lasted until the withholding of the communion cup went into effect. “In course of time, the different acts of baptism were separated—the immersion in water from the anointing and laying on of hands.²⁰ Priests did the former, the bishop the latter; only the bishop’s part took place later and later, until it finally became the sacrament of confirmation.

In “The Letter of John the Deacon to Senarius” (about 500) some interesting innovations in the order of baptism appear—hissing at the devil (exsufflation) and the administration of salt: “(A catechumen), therefore is exorcised by exsufflation that with the devil put to flight, entry may be prepared for Christ our Lord.... (Next) the catechumen is signed with blessed salt, for just as all flesh is preserved healthy by salt, so the mind, drenched and driven by the waves of the world, is held on course by the salt of wisdom and of the preaching of God’s Word.”²¹ Who knows what went on during the Dark Ages (about 500 to 1000)?!

About the year 1000 the baptism ritual was shortened. “On the one hand, things which had originally been part of the main rite were pushed back into the preparation.... On the other, the process which had once taken weeks was now compressed into an hour, and thus such things as the recitation of the Creed, the giving of the name, the administration of salt, etc., became part of the baptismal ceremony.”²² By the Twelfth Century the rites were standardized by the “Roman Pontifical,” which encouraged baptism on Easter.²³ A Century later

the high rate of infant mortality... led to the conviction that baptism should be as soon after birth as possible, and no longer be kept for the great Paschal festivals By all theological right, infant baptism must be accompanied by infant communion and was until the thirteenth century, when infant communion was incidentally terminated by the withdrawal of the cup from lay communicants. Infants had been given the cup, which they could always share one way or another, but not the bread, which the youngest could not swallow.²⁴

The development of certain baptismal customs had made a very vivid impression on early Christians. For those coming from a pagan past the exorcisms contained some graphic words, but as we learned at seminary: “Exorcism is not to be reintroduced where it has died out.”²⁵ The practice of immersion and the putting on of white robes also made impressions on people acquainted with Bible symbolism.

Luther upheld baptism by immersion to the very end of his life, as his sermons of 1540 and 1546 show, and yet he always maintained Christian liberty in this matter, as he already taught in the “Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520).

Lutheran Baptismal Orders

In 1523 Luther issued a German translation of the order for baptism. It followed the traditional Roman rite quite closely and included the customary blowing on the eyes, exorcisms, sign of the cross, use of salt, use of spittle, anointings, baptismal candle.²⁶ But in 1526 he introduced many important changes in a new order:

The Order of Baptism Newly Revised

The officiant shall say:

Depart thou unclean spirit and make room for the Holy Spirit.

Then he shall sign him with a cross on his forehead and breast and shall say:

Receive the sign of the holy cross on both thy forehead and thy breast.

Let us pray.

Almighty eternal God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I cry to thee for this N., thy servant, who prays for the gift of thy baptism and desires thine eternal grace through spiritual regeneration: Receive him, Lord, and as thou hast said, “Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you,” so give now the good to him that asketh and open the door to him that knocketh: so that he may obtain the eternal blessing of this heavenly bath and receive the promised kingdom of thy grace; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray.

Almighty eternal God, who according to thy righteous judgment didst condemn the unbelieving world through the flood and in thy great mercy didst preserve believing Noah and his family, and who didst drown hardhearted Pharaoh with all this host in the Red Sea and didst lead thy people Israel through the same on dry ground, thereby prefiguring the bath of thy baptism, and who through the baptism of thy dear Child, our Lord Jesus Christ, hast consecrated and set apart the Jordan and all water as a salutary flood and a rich and full washing away of sins: We pray through the same the groundless mercy that thou wilt graciously behold this N. and bless him with true faith in the spirit so that by means of this saving flood all that has been born in him from Adam and which he himself has added thereto may be drowned in him and engulfed, and that he may be sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom, serve thy name at all times servant in spirit and joyful in hope, so that with all believers he may be made worthy to attain eternal life according to thy promise; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I adjure thee, thou unclean spirit, by the name of the Father + and of the Son + and of the Holy Ghost + that thou come out of and depart from this servant of Jesus Christ, N. Amen.

Let us hear the holy Gospel of St. Mark (10:13-16).

And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them,

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.

Then the priest shall lay his hands on the head of the child and pray the Our Father together with the sponsors kneeling.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Thereupon the little child shall be brought to the font, and the priest shall say:

The Lord preserve thy coming in and going out now and for evermore.

Then the priest shall have the child, through his sponsors, renounce the devil and say:

N., dost thou renounce the devil? *Response:* Yes. And all his works? *Response:* Yes. And all his ways? *Response:* Yes.

Then he shall ask:

Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?

Response: Yes.

Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was born and suffered?

Response: Yes.

Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost, one holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and after death an eternal life?

Response: Yes.

Dost thou desire to be baptized?

Response: Yes.

Then shall he take the child, dip it in the font, and say:

And I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Then the sponsors shall hold the little child in the font, and the priest shall say, while he puts the christening robe on the child:

The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath regenerated thee through water and the Holy Ghost and hath forgiven thee all thy sin, strengthen thee with his grace to life everlasting. Amen. Peace be with thee.

Answer: Amen.²⁷

These are “the recognized customs and ceremonies of Baptism” that Dr. C.F.W. Walther listed in his *Pastorale* (p. 130 ff.).²⁸ This has also been the prototype for many Lutheran baptism services since.

The order of service in *Christian Worship*, however, departs from the traditional format. In *Christian Worship: Manual* we read in Chapter 11, “Rationale and Explanation of Each of the Orders”:

Within the past fifty years, we have normally baptized both infants and adults in church as part of the Sunday worship. In earlier years, however, baptisms were often performed at the home of the parents or in a private service or in a separate building called the

baptistery.... The order of *Holy Baptism in Christian Worship* was designed to join the baptism with the regular order of service in a manner that would achieve a satisfactory integration of the baptism with the liturgies of corporate worship. Today's custom of including baptism in our services of public worship helps edify the people of God. It reminds Christians of the manner in which they too were rescued from the kingdom of Satan and enrolled into the kingdom of Christ. It also informs the assembled worshipers that the one baptized has become a member of the body of Christ and the congregation, and, therefore, a member to be prayed for, to be cherished, and to be encouraged.²⁹

This involvement of the-congregation in the baptism brings us to the next point, the custom of sponsorship.

Sponsors

Is the use of sponsors (godparents) still practical? Because of our fellowship principles this question is becoming more and more difficult to answer in the affirmative. Sponsorship (the use of godparents) has a long history, dating back to some time after the last persecutions. "The sponsor was obliged to represent the child, since the oldest baptismal formularies, drawn up for adults, were used without change for infants, who could not answer questions, make the renunciation, or recite the profession of faith. This is clearly brought out in the oldest Egyptian baptismal ritual, where the parents are regarded as the most natural sponsors. Augustine takes the same view."³⁰ Unfortunately the Roman Church later prohibited parents from being sponsors. Nevertheless, the custom of sponsors (godparents) did have a salutary effect. "Late medieval ritual had instructed godparents and parents to teach their baptized children the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, and Apostles Creed as a preliminary to confirmation, which by the sixteenth century was normally not administered to children under seven."³¹

Luther upheld the practice of sponsorship in a unique way. In a treatise *On Baptism, The Challenge of Anabaptist Baptism and The Lutheran Confession* the Rev. Prof. Arnold Koelpin writes on "Luther's Response and Confession":

But the more critical question still remains: if God creates and sustains faith in infants as well as in adults, how does God bring to faith infants who can neither reason nor speak? To this Luther simply replies that God uses other believers to sponsor the child (*fides aliena*). The entire argument on infant baptism, in his estimation, hinges on this firm assertion. ...He wrote: "...Infants are aided by faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when uttered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant. So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible (Mark 9:23), the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by in-poured faith...."

To maintain that an infant's faith comes through the faith of sponsors, however, is not to claim that one person can believe for another. Such a claim, Luther felt, would short-circuit the action of God for which the sponsor intercedes. The faith of the sponsor who prays on the infant's behalf is not to be confused with the child's own personal faith (*fides propria*). Luther clarifies: "This fact can not be shaken: It is impossible that that for which one prays will not happen. Otherwise the whole doctrine of faith would waver, and personal faith, which is based on Christ's promise, would be of no value. Indeed the faith in which my neighbor intercedes on my behalf belongs to me personally but is really also someone else's faith, so far as my neighbor is concerned." In this way God blesses what one person does for another in faith. Christ himself never turned away anyone who was

brought to him by the faith of another. Scripture gives many examples of persons brought to faith by another acting in faith a thought which Luther later carried out in his sermons.

Thus to affirm infants, faith and the use of sponsors at baptism preserves three divine truths: 1. God alone creates and preserves faith (*fides infusa*). 2. Faith is a personal matter, i.e. one person cannot believe for another (*fides propria*). 3. Christ wills that one person bring another to him in faith (*fides aliena*). “To present a child for baptism,” Luther says in resume, “is nothing else but to offer it to Christ, who is present on earth and opens his hands of grace toward the child.”

But the question of an infant’s faith, in Luther’s estimation, must also be addressed to the Christian church as the sponsoring body. Historically the church had not only followed the practice of infant baptism, but by its testimony had demonstrated that it believed this article. Despite the absence of explicit Scripture passages, the church by a special miracle of God had continued to make this confession: by baptism “children also participate in the benefits and promises of Christ.” The confession of this article was the mark of the true church.³²

In America our Lutheran forefathers struggled with the problem of sponsors or witnesses as godparents and established the principle that because of the questions asked them it was necessary sponsors be of our faith (Walther, Pieper, Hoenecke, Meyer) and more specifically of our fellowship (G.A.Schaefer, E.G. Zell). The use of witnesses, however, is becoming more objectionable in the light of the Reformed influence in America. “...Most sectarian churches have witnesses, but not sponsors, though they call them godfathers and godmothers ... Since the sectarian churches call Baptism ‘an outward means of an inward grace, they have no real need of sponsors, but rather only of witnesses.’³³ This kind of opposition to sponsors was prevalent at the time of Luther already.

The second question regarding the use of sponsors for the child followed naturally. For if a child did not possess its own faith, there was no reason to believe that parents or sponsors could assist by speaking on the child’s behalf. The radicals rejected this practice as equally unacceptable because, in their eyes, the faith of another person has no value for the child.³⁴

Presently our seminary library has on file only two conference papers on sponsors. Both were written over thirty years ago, but both question the use of sponsors in modern times, and both come to the same conclusion, that it would be better to have the parents and congregation act as sponsors. “Then we can come back to the ancient custom of the parents bringing their children to the baptismal font.” The essayist has been following this procedure for many years.

Also, about 30 years ago, the Minnesota District produced the booklet “Whom Shall I Choose As Sponsor For My Child” (revised and produced by Northwestern Publishing House in 1976). The original made this final suggestion, “the elimination of sponsors in the usual sense of the term.”

In this arrangement the parents themselves must come with their child to the baptismal font and dedicate it to the Lord. This arrangement is not as radical as it may seem to us at first. It was the accepted practice in the Church for a long time many centuries ago.

Furthermore, we find several examples of something of a somewhat similar nature in both the Old and the New Testaments. Hannah personally brought her young child, Samuel, to the Lord at Shiloh to 'lend him to the Lord.' I Samuel 1,28. Mary and Joseph, according to the Law brought the young child, Jesus, to the Temple to 'present Him to the Lord.' Luke 2,22. It was the parents who brought the 'young children to Jesus that He should touch them.' Mark 10,13.

Thus, when parents present themselves with their children before God, they give expression to their true desire to dedicate their child to God and His service.

By this arrangement the parents' solemn obligation to train their child to God's true fear and love is emphasized. And how impressive it is when Christian parents at the baptism of their child promise before God in His sanctuary to carry out their foremost obligation.

Two officers of the church might appear with the parents to show that the church also is an intensely interested participant in the baptism of the child. Their presence at the baptism assures the parents that the church, on its part, pledges itself to provide the facilities, teachers, and tools needed for the spiritual growth and well-being of her baptized children.³⁶

This point of the congregation's involvement also Pastor Schaefer emphasized: "However, according to God's Word, the child has more real sponsors than it knows. By that I mean the Christian congregation.... That the church is far more concerned about its children than godparents or sponsors often are seems to be clear enough to us all. The congregation prays for the child and its mother soon after the birth of the child. The church is made responsible by God, not only to baptize the child, but also to teach the child all things that Christ has commanded onto the Church."³⁷

Pastor Schaefer continues: "To bring home to the congregation its duties toward the children of the congregation, I would suggest that the whole assembled congregation would speak for the infant at Baptism and so become the true godparents or sponsors of the baptized child. What a help that would be to the parents! What a help to the congregation at large to bring home the responsibility and at the baptism of each child, remind them of the God-given duty they have accepted! Eventually, it would stir up a deep and lasting interest in the whole question of Christian education."³⁸ These views seem to be represented in the new hymnal as the congregation participates in the entire baptism service and is included in the "Exhortation":

M: Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Our Lord commands that we teach his precious truth to all who are baptized. Christian love therefore urges all of us, especially parents and sponsors, to assist in whatever manner possible so that _____ may remain a child of God until death. If you are willing to carry out this responsibility, then answer: Yes, as God gives me strength.

C: *Yes, as God gives me strength.*

M: Let us pray:

Merciful Father in heaven, we thank you for the blessing of baptism by which you offer and grant the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Help us to regard our baptism as the robe of righteousness we are to wear all the days of our life. Look with special favor on _____ and grant *him* a rich measure of your Spirit that *he* may grow in faith and godly living. Make us willing to carry out our responsibilities to those who have been baptized, so that all of us may finally come to the blessed joys of heaven, through Jesus our Lord.

C: Amen.39

From my experience and in my estimation the use of sponsors (godparents) is not so much a custom now as it is a tradition. What can they do that the congregation and especially parents, elders, and pastor cannot do better? In our mobile society it often turns out that either the sponsors or the child move to a different city.

When parents do engage sponsors (godparents), a pastor will have to make sure that they all understand the responsibilities. There is a form, "My Privilege As Sponsor," which is available from Northwestern Publishing House. Just recently I became the sponsor of a newborn niece, and I received a personal certificate, "You are a GodParent," which outlines the duties of the godparent.

Private Baptism

A short time ago my wife and I received a birth announcement from an area pastor and his wife. I noticed right away that after the usual statistics, including the birth date, "Born: November 6, 1994," came this notice: "Reborn: November 7, 1994 (through water and God's Word)." In the conveying of congratulations I found out that the parents had the baptism at the hospital in the presence of representatives of the church council, because the parents did not want to wait an entire week to have the baptism at church. What they did do then was have the ratification at church the next Sunday. They have my commendation.

Pastors have a very good opportunity here to practice what they preach and set an example for the congregation. Rather than wait for the most "convenient time," when all the relatives, friends, sponsors and acquaintances can get together we should demonstrate the greater importance of the baptism itself. There is a growing negligence among our people in this regard, again, I believe, as a result of the Reformed and especially Baptist influence in America. Then, when the plans go awry, we hear the defense there had been "good intentions."

Many people in our country have the feeling that children born of Christian parents have a unique status. But what do our Lutheran Confessions say? Article XII of the Formula of Concord speaks out against such erroneous thinking:

(We reject) that the children of Christians, because they are born of Christian and believing parents, are holy and children of God even without and prior to Baptism. Therefore they do not esteem infant Baptism very highly and do not advocate it, contrary to the express words of the promise which extends only to those who keep the covenant and do not despise it (Gen. 17:4-8,19-21).40

In his book *Baptized into God's Family* the author discusses in great detail the issue of infant baptism, and he makes some very good points why baptism should take place as soon as possible:

Some Christians think that infants are *already* in a state of grace. But none of the Gospel accounts of Christ and the little children support such an idea. These infants are examples of how to receive God's kingdom. But *not all infants have received the kingdom*.

Hoffman writes:

Jesus emphasizes such and thereby refers to those children who are brought to him. He does not express as a general rule that "the kingdom of God belongs to children," but that it belongs to such children as are brought to Him.

In other words, if infants are to receive the kingdom, adults must *bring them* to Jesus. This is done in baptism, where God works faith in the infant and saves the child. We can now see why Jesus warned the disciples sternly with regard to the children. Jesus has entrusted the spiritual welfare of the little ones to adults.⁴¹

In conclusion, then, let us hold up baptism for the wonderful, gracious blessing it is. Let us also show that baptism is our source of comfort. What greater comfort can parents of children have? This is the message expressed in *Baptized into God's Family*:

What a sweet comfort for parents to be able to bring their infant to baptism! They can have the absolute certainty of their child's being made a disciple of the Lord Jesus. When Jesus says, "Let the children come to me," they can rejoice as the Lord takes *their* little ones into his loving arms, as he embraces them in the waters of Holy Baptism. And as the small child is baptized, our Lord reminds the parents of the grace *they* received in their baptism, his love for them, his love for the whole world in his death on the cross.⁴²

+ + +

We are baptized, in Father, Son and Spirit,
Praise Him for this Holy Sacrament.
His promise gives sure hope to all who hear it,
since through this act, God's Spirit has been sent.

It matters not, the age or place or hour,
Or how this simple water is applied.
The Triune God gives to this act the power,
In all baptized, God's Spirit will reside.
Amen.

Notes

1. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 282.
2. *loc. cit.*
3. Gerlach, *Parish Leadership*, Vol. I. No. 2, p. 15f.
4. Das, *Baptized into God's Family*, p. 72ff.
5. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 10.
6. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate*, p. 48ff.
7. Jenson "The History of Baptism," *Visible Words.*, p. 155.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
9. *Church History*, Junior Class Notes, p. 9.
10. Fox, "Baptism," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, p. 436.
11. Finn, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
12. Grant, "Development of the Catechumenate," *Made, Not Born*, p. 36.
13. Zell, *The Appropriateness and Value of Customs*, p. 5.
14. *Church History*, p. 21f.
15. Finn, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
16. Harkins, "St. John Chrysostom," *Ancient Christian Writers*, p. 47f.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 51f.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 132f.
19. Finn, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
20. Fox, *loc.cit.*
21. Finn, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
22. Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 441.
23. Mitchell, N., "Dissolution of the Rite," *Made, Not Born*, p. 62.
24. Jenson, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
25. *Pastoral Theology*, Junior Class Notes, p. 12.
26. Luther., *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 96-101.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 107-109.
28. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 501.
29. Baumler (Ed.), *Christian Worship: Manual*, p. 165.
30. Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 446.
31. Mitchell, L., "Christian Initiation," *Made, Not Born*, p. 85.
32. Koelpin, "On Baptism," *No Other Gospel*, p. 270ff.
33. Schaefer, *The Origin of the Custom of Sponsors*, p. 4.
34. Koelpin, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
35. Schaefer, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
36. Zell, *op. cit.*, p. 10f.
37. Schaefer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 10f.
39. *Christian Worship*, p. 14.
40. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 634, no. 4.
41. Das, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Bibliography

- Baumler, Gary.(ed.) *Christian Worship: Manual*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993.
- Bettenson, Henry. *Documents of the Christian Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993.
- Church History, Junior Class Notes*, Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1960.
- Das, A. Andrew. *Baptized into God's Family*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991.
- Finn, Thomas M. *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Fox, Norman. "Baptism." *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Vol. I. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908.
- Gerlach, Bryan. "Communicating Baptism's Power." *Parish Leadership*. Vol. I, No. 2. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993.
- Grant, Robert M. "Development of the Catechumenate." *Made, Not Born*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.
- Harkins, Paul W. "St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions." *Ancient Christian Writers*, New York: Paulist Press, 1963.
- Jenson, Robert W. "The History of Baptism." *Visible Words*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.
- Koelpin, Arnold J. "On Baptism, the Challenge of Anabaptism Baptism and the Lutheran Confession." *No Other Gospel*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. Vol. 53. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965.
- The Lutheran Agenda*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941.
- Lutheran Worship*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982.
- Mitchell, Leonel L. "Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period." *Made, Not Born*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.
- Mitchell, Nathan D. "Dissolution of the Rite of Christian Initiation" *Made, Not Born*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.
- Mueller, John T. *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955.
- Pastoral Theology, Junior Class Notes*, Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1960.
- Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. Vol. III. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953.
- Schaefer, Gerhard A. *The Origin of the Custom of Sponsors at the Baptism of Infants and Its Value Today*. Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1963.
- Tappert, Theodore G.(ed.) *The Book of Concord*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.
- Zell, Edward G. *The Appropriateness and Value of Customs Associated with the Sacraments and Church Rites*. Saginaw: Michigan District Convention, 1964.