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The Lutheran

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What's a godparent to do?

Exercise 1: 'No joke to the devil': Luther on baptism

Lutherans observe baptism as one of two sacraments (the other being the eucharist), which are understood as rites that have a visible sign, the command of Christ and the promise of God's grace. For Lutherans, baptism is *the key event* in a Christian's life.

Martin Luther underscored the importance of baptism and the work of godparents in *The Baptismal Booklet*, first published in 1523 and part of many editions of *The Small Catechism*. It's also included in *The Book of Concord* as one of the foundational documents of Lutheran identity and understanding. *The Baptismal Booklet's* strong language and rhetoric conveys Luther's passion, excitement and conviction that baptism be taken seriously and that godparents be chosen with care. It's brief and powerful—and worth studying in depth.

The following quotations from *The Baptismal Booklet* can be found in *The Book of Concord* edited by Timothy Wengert and Robert Kolb (Fortress Press, 2000). Make copies of these quotations, including copyright notice, for all to read (in advance, if possible) and discuss. If need be, you can separate this into two sessions—one on baptism and the other on godparents.

Out of a sense of Christian commitment, I appeal to all those who baptize or sponsor infants, or witness a baptism, to take heart to the tremendous work and great solemnity present here. For here in the words of these prayers you hear how plaintively and earnestly the Christian church brings the infant to God, confesses before him with such unchanging, undoubting words that the infant is possessed by the devil and a child of sin and wrath, and so diligently asks for help and grace through baptism, that the infant might become a child of God. ...

"[I]t is extremely necessary to stand by the poor child with all your heart and with a strong faith and to plead with great devotion that God, in accordance with these prayers, would not only free the child from the devil's power but also strengthen the child, so that the child might resist him valiantly in life and death. I fear that people turn out so badly after baptism because we have dealt with them in such a cold and casual way and have prayed for them at their baptism without any zeal at all. ...

"[T]he priest should speak these [baptismal] prayers very clearly and slowly, so that the sponsors can hear and understand them and can also pray with the priest with one mind in their hearts, carrying before God the need of the little child with all earnestness, on the child's behalf setting themselves against the devil with all their strength and demonstrating that they take seriously what is no joke to the devil. For this reason it is right and proper not to allow drunken and boorish priests to baptize, nor to select good-for-nothings as godparents. Instead, fine, moral, serious, upright priests and godparents ought to be chosen, who can be expected to treat the matter with seriousness and the true faith, lest this high sacrament be abandoned to the devil's mockery and dishonor God, who in his sacrament showers upon us the vast and boundless riches of his grace."



Join the discussion: *The Lutheran* offers discussion boards for the current and previous months' study guides. Use these boards to share your group's insights, ask questions and, if you're not part of a study group, participate with other individuals. www.thelutheran.org/study/.

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From *The Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2000; pages 373-373). Copyright © 2000, Augsburg Fortress. Quotations reprinted under Section 107 of U.S. Copyright Law permitting reproduction of brief quotations for nonprofit educational purposes.

Discuss:

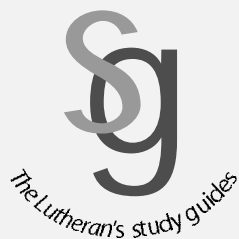
- What's at stake in baptism, according to Luther?
- How does Luther's belief of the work of the devil in human lives differ from modern-day understandings? What does it have in common?
- How does Luther's understanding of the devil energize his discussion of baptism?
- What does Luther see as the role of baptism in our fight against sin and the devil?
- If we have a different idea of the devil, does that make our baptism less necessary? Why or why not?
- What does Luther believe happens in baptism?
- Luther observed that "people turn out so badly after baptism because we have dealt with them in such a cold and casual way and have prayed for them at their baptism without any zeal at all." Do you agree or disagree with Luther?
- What elements fit today's situation in the Lutheran church? Which don't? What could be done?
- Why do parents and sponsors need to "stand by the poor child with all your heart and with a strong faith"?
- Based upon that entreaty, what would be a good job description for godparents or baptismal sponsors?
- Do non-Christians or Christians not active in their faith make good godparents?
- Do you agree with Luther that we avoid selecting "good-for-nothings" as godparents, rather than people "who can be expected to treat the matter with seriousness and the true faith"?
- For Luther, what's at stake when sponsors do a bad job?
- How does your congregation prepare parents and godparents for a child's baptism?
- Given Luther's imperative for baptism to be taken seriously, could—and should—your congregation (and others, generally) do a better job preparing parents and godparents? How could this be done?

Exercise 2: 'Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?'

The rite found in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* talks about the importance of baptism and outlines specific duties for parents and sponsors:

"[Presider addresses parents and sponsors] In Christian love you have presented these children for Holy Baptism. You should, therefore, faithfully bring them to the services of God's house, and teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments. As they grow in years, you should place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that living in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the church, they may lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ.

"Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?"



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“[Respondents] I do.”

From *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (page 121). Copyright © 1978 by the Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Quote reprinted under Section 107 of U.S. Copyright Law permitting reproduction of brief quotations for nonprofit educational purposes.

Discuss:

- What do each of the following obligations mean in real life? How might a sponsor best fulfill these obligations?
 1. Faithfully bring the baptized child to the services of God’s house.
 2. Teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed and Ten Commandments.
 3. Place in their hands the Scriptures.
 4. Provide for their instruction in the Christian faith.
- Is it important for sponsors and parents to understand and fulfill these obligations? Why or why not? What’s at stake?
- Do churches do a good job preparing parents and sponsors to understand and carry out these obligations? How could churches do better? Why is it important that we do so?
- Who are sponsors and parents addressing when they respond “I do” to the question, “Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?”
- Describe the kind of person who would be best suited to fulfill these obligations?
- Based on this discussion, what advice would you give to parents in selecting godparents?

Exercise 3: Discussion questions

- Many godparents are chosen because of their revered status in family or friendship circles. Is this a good way to choose godparents? If not, what would be better?
- Mentor in the faith, teacher, friend, leader—these are all aspects of the duties of a godparent or sponsor in baptism. List other aspects on a chalkboard or poster. Now, given your understanding of the nature of baptism, rank them by importance.
- Drawing on the baptism rite in the LBW (page 121), come up with your own statements of belief by completing the following:
 - “Baptism is important because ...”
 - “Baptism changes a person by ...”
 - “In baptism, God promises ...”
 - “Parents and sponsors provide an important role by ...”
- How is the godparent’s role in a child’s life different from that of aunt/uncle, brother/sister, grandparent, close family friend? What do they ideally have in common? How could someone fulfill both roles?