

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 1 E. THE SACRAMENTS

## Pastoral practice in reference to holy baptism

*Adopted by the General Synod, 1984 (Part I and II) and by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, February 1986 (Part III).*

*Edited March 2001.*

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Troubling questions of a pastoral nature sometimes arise in connection with the administration of holy baptism. It is inadvisable and in fact impossible for the church to provide hard-and-fast rules which pastors must follow in every situation. Each pastor must be prepared to make his own conscientious decision before God, weighing the circumstances of each case in the light of the principles and the advice given here.

### I. PRINCIPLES

**Principle A** relates to **concern for the word and will of God** in reference to holy baptism: what baptism is, why we should baptise, and what baptism does as a means of grace.

**Principle B** relates to **concern for people**, particularly for

- a. the one for whom baptism is requested; and
- b. those who request it.

### A. CONCERN FOR THE WORD AND WILL OF GOD

1. Baptism is a sacrament of the church. It is commanded by Christ himself. A person is baptised when water is applied in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to Christ's command (Matt 28:19).
2. The sacrament of baptism unites the baptised person with Christ and incorporates that person into the body of Christ, the church. The meaning and effects of baptism continue in the believer's life, so the church does not rebaptise people.

3. God our Saviour wants 'everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4, NRSV). To enter the kingdom of God a person has to be reborn 'by water and the Spirit' (John 3:8; Titus 3:4–8; compare Mark 16:16). So both adults and infants have to be baptised if they are to be saved, that is, enter into the promises of God (Acts 2:38,39 & 10:47).
4. Baptism, however, is not a magical act. The mere performance of the rite is not a guarantee of one's salvation. Although wilful rejection or abuse of baptism must be condemned, we do not presume to judge what God will do with those who through no fault of their own are not baptised.
5. The church celebrates the sacrament of baptism trusting in God's promise of salvation. The church is convinced that baptism does what God promises. Baptism
  - gives new birth and life in Christ
  - grants forgiveness of sin, both original and actual
  - gives the gift of the Spirit
  - creates faith, or confirms and increases faith.
6. Through the gift of the Spirit those who are baptised are immersed in the saving acts of Christ, that is, in his sacrificial death, his resurrection, and ascension to sit at God's right hand (Eph 2:5,6; Rom 6:3–6; Col 2:12; 3:1–3). They are made children of God and inheritors of eternal salvation (1 Pet 3:21; Rom 8:14–17; 1 John 3:1–3). In summary: 'In baptism God forgives sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what He has promised' (*Small Catechism* IV,2).
7. Baptism destroys the old Adam and creates in the believer the new Adam, so that the one who is baptised is a new person (Col 3:15; Eph 4:22–24; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). Baptised people are being shaped to conform to the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29), and they are given a share in Christ's resurrection life. Baptism is 'the daily garment which the one baptised is to wear all the time' (*Large Catechism* IV.84). Baptism means that 'our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever' (*Small Catechism* IV.4).
8. Baptism creates faith and calls for faith in the Triune God (compare Mark 16:16, which says that whoever comes to faith, having also been baptised, will be saved). The saving faith which receives the blessings of baptism is given by the Spirit through the means of grace, that is, the word and the sacraments.
9. The sacrament of baptism, God's gift of grace, is in itself an effective action of God. Human faith does not create the sacrament and does not make it effective. Human faith merely receives the gift of divine grace. The validity of the sacrament does not depend on the faith, the moral perfection, or the correct doctrinal position of the person who performs the baptism, or of the people who bring an infant or child for baptism.
10. Baptism does not lose its validity if later on the baptised person, in an act of unbelief, rejects the grace and benefits of baptism. 'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29 NIV). The church confesses: 'Baptism will always continue to exist. Even if someone falls from it and sins, the door to baptism is always open to us, so that we can get the better of the old person once more' (*Large Catechism* IV.77).

## B. CONCERN FOR THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

1. Holy Scripture connects baptism with growth in grace and understanding of what God has done in baptism. Thus Matthew 28:19, 20 combines 'making disciples'...'baptising'... 'teaching', and Mark 16:16 indicates that faith is both the gift of the sacrament itself and the conscious appreciation or confirmation of God's grace in baptism. It is apparent, then, that baptism is an action which involves the one who is baptised and the church.
2. The local congregation, acting in obedience to the Lord of the church, baptises children and adults. By this very action, those who are baptised are made members of the church, the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12,13).
3. The local congregation is actively involved in the celebration of baptism. The members of the church show special care and concern for the person who has been joined to them in holy baptism. Likewise, those who have been baptised need to grow into an understanding of their privileges and the responsibility they have to encourage and comfort their fellow-Christians with the gospel of Jesus Christ.
4. Christian parents have a responsibility to bring up their baptised child 'in the training and instruction of the Lord' (Eph 6:4). This responsibility also devolves upon the sponsors (or godparents). Therefore parents should choose as sponsors for their child people who recognise and are willing to accept such responsibility.
5. Parents and sponsors will also recognise that the church has the obligation to teach those who have been baptised. They will look for help from the congregation in the Christian nurture of the child (Matt 28:19, 20).

## II. GUIDANCE IN PASTORAL PRACTICE

The Lutheran Church of Australia offers the following advice to its pastor and laypeople, based on the principles articulated in Part I above:

1. The local congregation should be directly involved in the celebration of baptism. Therefore the rite of baptism is most fittingly celebrated in the context of the Sunday liturgy. In this way the whole congregation witnesses the admission of the newly-baptised persons into Christ's church, and welcomes them into the body of Christ. At the same time, baptised members of the congregation are reminded of the gift of grace which **they** received, and the profession of faith they made at **their** baptism.
2. Pastors are advised to stress the corporate aspects of baptism, and so to discourage the administration of baptism in a private ceremony. The normal practice should be that the pastor of the local congregation conducts the baptismal rite, and does so within the context of Sunday worship.
3. Sponsors share certain responsibilities with parents in relation to the child, especially in regard to teaching the child the basics of the Christian faith. It is important, therefore, that sponsors are baptised, practising Christians who are mature in faith and piety. Normally, sponsors are Lutherans whose confession of Christian faith and life is that of the evangelical Lutheran church.
4. The pastor needs to be aware that the sacrament of baptism is in danger of being abused if parents or sponsors think that baptism is just a socio-religious act or a magical rite which at all costs must be performed for everyone. At the same time the pastor should also be aware that, if he refuses baptism because of unbelieving or irresponsible parents, he may unfairly prejudice the welfare of the child.

5. Lutherans normally do not refuse to baptise children whose parents request it [for the baptism of children of de facto relationships, see Part III below]. A pastor should not refuse a request to baptise a child simply because he suspects the motives of the parents. Such refusal may give the impression that the sacrament and its blessings are dependent upon persons and things outside of baptism itself.
6. A pastor should never baptise a child against the will and wishes of the parents.
7. When non-Christian or nominal-Christian parents request baptism for their child the pastor will inform (or remind) them of what baptism is and what it involves (as in Part I above). If the parents' lack of understanding of the significance of baptism leads to their refusal to allow Christian sponsors, elders, members of the congregation, or other Christians to minister to the child, the pastor will have to weigh carefully the situation. He should consult with others, especially with the elders of the congregation, before making a decision to refuse baptism.
8. In the case of parents who are not known to him, the pastor should find out whether another pastor has refused baptism, and if so, on what grounds the refusal was based.
9. Pastors are urged to use all available means to promote the proper understanding of the nature of baptism and a fuller appreciation of its blessings and responsibilities. Such means include sermons on baptism, baptismal addresses, and pre-baptismal counselling of parents and sponsors.

### III. THE BAPTISM OF CHILDREN OF DE FACTO RELATIONSHIPS

1. Children of de facto relationships are, like all children, born in sin. They are in need of forgiveness. The doctrine of baptism does not exclude them or **any** children from the blessings of baptism. Rather, it urges that children be brought to God through this sacrament (*Large Catechism* IV,47-51).
2. Pastoral practice with regard to baptising children of de facto relationships should follow lines similar to those followed when baptising children of other parents. The pastor should discuss with the parents the following:
  - the meaning of baptism
  - the responsibility of parents and sponsors to look after the spiritual nurture of their children
  - the responsibility which the congregation assumes toward the baptised child
  - other related matters (see Part I above)
3. The fact that the church baptises children of de facto relationships should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the cohabitation of unmarried parents. Some effort may be required on the part of the pastor to ensure that such an interpretation is not in fact given. Through unambiguous counselling the pastor can make clear the attitude of the church toward marriage. He should not miss the opportunity to direct the parents to Christ, and speak to them about the need for repentance and faith, and the blessings of forgiveness and the new life in Christ.
4. The pastor and the elders will have to decide how best to avoid giving offence to members of the congregation and to people in the community. A public position which expresses both the compassion of Christ for sinners and the rejection of whatever is evil and against the will of God, needs to be clearly expressed in both the words and life of members of the church.
5. The principles given above apply generally to other situations where children are born out of wedlock.