

Frequently Asked Questions from info@elca.org



**What do Lutherans believe about Baptism?
Why do Lutherans baptize infants?**

Baptism

In Holy Baptism, God liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Born children of a fallen humanity, in the baptismal waters we become God's reborn children and inherit eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church, which is Christ's body. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love and obedience to God's will.

ELCA Service of Holy Baptism (paraphrased), Lutheran Book of Worship pg 121.

God's act, Jesus' command

In this beginning of the ELCA baptismal service, we acknowledge first that Baptism is God's act, God's initiative and God's gift. It connects us to Jesus, the Church and eternal life. That is fundamental to ELCA Lutherans' baptismal theology.

Lutherans baptize in response to Jesus directing his disciples to, "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" (Matthew 28:19). We believe that this Great Commission is the motivator for Christian Baptism, as distinct from the baptism of John the Baptist.

The Church and infant baptism

ELCA Lutherans believe that Baptism is the Church's entry rite. Baptism brings us into the Church, Christ's living body on earth. As the First Century church baptized whole families, including infants, so do Lutherans. In fact, usually ELCA Lutherans bring their infants to the baptismal font within the first months – even weeks – of a child's life. "The fact that circumcision (which occurred on an infant's eighth day) was replaced by Baptism in Jewish-Christian circles may indicate that infant baptism was assumed from the first" ("Baptism" by Martin Marty).



*I baptize you in the name
of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit*

ELCA theologian Martin E. Marty says that our view of Baptism "... is not only compatible with but actually draws strength from the practice of infant baptism. If baptism is part of what God does, not of what we do....If in Baptism it is Christ who brings the child, holds it in his arms, and receives it as a member of his body. Upholding the ancient church's practice of baptizing infants, Luther argued that if, "... Baptism is made dependent on faith, we (would) scarcely ever arrive at the assurance of having sufficient faith and thus at the validity of our Baptism. ... Baptism ... points to the fact that salvation comes only from God."

Sacramental baptism – Word and water

Baptism is one of the two sacraments that mark Lutheran theology and practice, the other being The Eucharist (or Holy Communion). We believe both to have been instituted by Jesus.

Martin Luther defined sacraments as actions whose outward signs point to God's command and promise. They contain two things:

- the Word of God that makes the action or elements a sacrament
- an outward sign - which in Baptism is the ancient element, the 'stuff' of life, water

Luther said, "... when the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism, but receives it."

Joseph Sittler has said this, "A person is drawn to water - to an ocean, a river or a stream - because there is something in him that knows that this is from whence he came. One thinks of the percentage of water in our bodies, the need for water to sustain earthly life, water's cleansing properties, and the Genesis account that at creation "a wind from God swept over the face of the water. Then God said, 'let there be light; ...'" (Personal notes from a conversation with Joseph Sittler.)

"Word meant the activity and voice of God in the Old Testament. ... The Word, says Luther, is everything. Without it - and no Christian would deny this - the water is nothing and Baptism does not exist. ... Connection with the Word thus means that Baptism relates a person to the whole plan of God. ... This is why the ancient baptismal commands are of considerable importance to moderns who stand in the same need. ... 'In the name of the Father' relates Baptism to the whole of creation - and its water; 'in the name of the Son' calls to mind the whole personal relation of the baptized community to God in Christ; and 'in the name of the Holy Spirit' means that God takes the initiative, turning the (Word) into Spirit and creating the church."

Forgiveness of sin and salvation

Luther's Large Catechism (IV, 83) instructs that Baptism "overcomes and takes away sin." Marty suggests that the water of the old creation and the Word of the new achieve the new creation in human beings. Sin is washed away, the sinner is 'drowned,' the old self is shattered, "helpless as a crying infant with empty hands and uninformed head and no report card at all." This time, newness comes not by the breath of God, as at creation, but by the death of Christ.

ELCA Lutherans believe that baptism addresses itself to the question of salvation. In God's gift of Baptism we are assured the forgiveness of sins to live a free, responsible and joyful life - in order that we might be saved everlastingly. With Luther we can say that, "No greater jewel ... can adorn our body and soul than Baptism, for through it we obtain perfect holiness and salvation, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire." Baptism is truly God's gift, drawing us into Christ's church and bestowing upon us forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. In it, we are marked by the cross of Christ forever. The ELCA Service of Holy Baptism, Lutheran Book of Worship, pg 124, includes these words spoken at your child's baptism:

*"... Child of God,
you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit
and marked with the cross of Christ
forever."*

