

## Water, water everywhere and not a thought to think

*“As you enter the sanctuary dip your fingers in the baptismal font and make the sign of the cross on your forehead.”*

*“During the processional the pastor will dip a pine branch in water and sprinkle the parishioners to remind them of their baptism.”*

Ritual sprinklings, like those above, have become a thing-to-do in many congregations. It's said to be “a powerful sign and symbol for the affirmation and renewal of baptism.”

What a quandary for Lutherans! With Luther we affirm that “the Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and ever continued.”<sup>1</sup> So why not use water rituals, which are a kind of “sacramental,”<sup>2</sup> to make baptism more meaningful? What's the harm? Here are two reasons to say “No” to these rituals:

**First, God's Word alone makes the sacrament.** As Luther says: “[Baptism] is water comprehended in God's Word and commandment and sanctified by them.”<sup>3</sup>

Supplemental water rituals, however well-intended, are mere human works which lack God's command and promise. Yet water rituals, so outwardly similar to baptism itself, come with no warning that they lack God's command and promise.

**Second, we are by nature superstitious.** What begins as a reminder of our baptism becomes a kind of religious magic. The water comes to be regarded as “holy water” – as in fact happened in church history! Even today some Christians believe that water, blessed by the clergy with solemn prayer, has the power to bestow special grace and protection.

Water rituals, once grace is expected from them, lead to spiritual pride and despair: The spiritually proud imagine the water gives them something extra. The weak fear that if they don't use the water, they are not doing what they should to make salvation work. However well-intended, “the sacramental” undermines the sacrament itself by leading believers to expect benefits from their own ritual doing. In contrast, baptism itself gives certainty and freedom because God alone is the giver, the doer.

**An alternative:** To make baptism meaningful, memorize Romans 6:5: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Consider writing this verse over the sanctuary door, or on the back of the Sunday bulletin, or use it regularly in worship, or make cards with this verse on it for congregational use, or the like.

God's Word is our great heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> *Large Catechism*, Baptism; Tappert 445:65.

<sup>2</sup> An action or sacred sign that bears a resemblance to the sacraments.

<sup>3</sup> *Large Catechism*, Baptism; Tappert 438:14.