

Dear Saints,

Alleluia, Christ is risen! I pray our Lord fill you with joy of the resurrection this Easter season.

I have been thinking a lot lately about dogmatics. What is dogmatics? It can be summarized best in the statement that it is what we believe and why. Why is this important? And is it important for the average layman? Let's look at an example.

Does Holy Baptism save?

This is really a yes and no question. And I hope that it is obvious that you will live quite differently depending on how you answer that question. How do we answer this question?

Dogmatics uses the Scriptures and reason, and sometimes tradition, to form theological statements of what we believe. The Scriptures are the source of all knowledge and wisdom concerning the Christian life. They must be the primary tool we use to understand the Christian life. But God communicated to us in human language, so we must use reason to understand them. Reason must serve our understanding of the Bible but never be placed over the Bible. Sometimes, tradition is helpful to know how our forefathers in the faith understood the Bible. Tradition is always tested against the Bible, and we keep what is good and beautiful. It is foolish to disregard tradition. Innovation and Christianity never mix well. So, let's look at Holy Baptism, and I will keep it simple.

Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) Jesus combines belief and Baptism together as required for salvation. And note that it is not the absence of Baptism that condemns, but the rejection of Baptism that condemns. The thief on the cross had no time to get baptized if, indeed, he was not already baptized. Consider also Matthew 28:19-20, Baptism and preaching are how new Christians are made.

Peter says, "Baptism, which corresponds to this (Noah and the flood), now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3:21) Peter says quite simple that Baptism does something. What does it do? It saves you! Lutherans have always understood that God uses means to save His people. Romans 6:4 and Titus 3:5-8 also describe the saving work of Baptism.

If you understand that God works on you in Baptism, you quit trying to impress Him with your works. You understand that salvation is truly a gift given to you and you know it's true because you are baptized. You treasure your Baptism as something special, even though it looks so weak to outsiders. You depend on your Baptism when Satan and the world accuse you of sin, which they will again and again. You live your Christian life in confidence because you have peace with God through your Baptism.

Alternatively, if you understand that Baptism is merely something you do in obedience to God according to Matthew 28:19, then you depend on your own efforts as reassurance that you are saved. This effort may be a decision date which focuses on your contribution to your salvation, no matter how small. Or it can be an external confirmation of works, which you find out brings no comfort. Or it can be an ephemeral feeling you have inside yourself, which is fleeting at best. Consequently, you live your Christian life with either pride or despair. Pride that you think you can keep the Law, or despair when you rightly realize God's demands can never be met this side of glory. You have either a false peace which never soothes your conscience or no peace.

What you believe about Baptism is important!

So, how do you get started with dogmatics, which is for every Christian?

First, know your Bible. It sounds simplistic, but if you want to know what the Bible says, you must know your Bible! That is, you must read it, memorize it, and meditated upon it.

Second, know the Small Catechism. Not the "Small Catechism with Explanation" book, but the actual catechism. You can find it in pamphlet size in our narthex. It is an incredible summary of the entire Bible and also should be memorized. If we expect it of our catechumens, we can expect it of ourselves. In other words, you never stop being a catechumen!

Third, read the Augsburg Confession. It was written by a layman for laymen. I subscribe to it as a Lutheran pastor as a right explanation of Scripture. Our church also subscribes to it. You should know it. And there are copies available in the narthex. I read an article from it at every voter's meeting. Is it hard to read? At times, but you have your pastors and other resources to help you understand it.

If you want even more, I can provide extra resources. But time spent in the Bible, Small Catechism, and Augsburg Confession will always enrich your faith and reveal more to you about Jesus. And that is a good thing.

In Christ,
Pastor Maggard