



## Leader Guide for *No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther* By Kirsi Stjerna

### About this Guide

This Leader Guide and companion **Participant Handout** offer the tools needed for a one-hour discussion on the theme of a Lutheran understanding of baptism—the focus of *No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther*, by Kirsi Stjerna.

The guide also provides suggestions for expanding the one-hour general discussion of baptism to a series of sessions based on each chapter of Stjerna's book. For a more in-depth study of *No Greater Jewel*, see "Digging Deeper" at the end of this guide.

To get out the word about an upcoming study of *No Greater Jewel*, download the **Publicity Flyer** and customize it to fit your needs.

### Pre-Session Preparation

Before the session, read *No Greater Jewel* and reflect on the "Key Points" presented in the box at right. Read through the Leader Guide and the Participant Handout, and choose options from the materials presented to use with your group. Gather the materials you will need for the study:

- Bibles
- Copies of the Participant Handout (a companion piece available on this website)
- A white board, large pad of paper, or other writing surface (helpful but not essential)
- Name tags, if desired
- Copies of *No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther* (Participants will get the most out of the conversation if they have read the book, but the one-hour session is designed so that you can welcome and include guests who haven't done the reading.)

*This book and other Lutheran Voices titles may be purchased by calling (800) 328-4648, in Canada: (800) 265-6397, ext. 215. Discounts are available for bulk purchases of as few as five books of a single title.*

### Key Points

- Christians baptize because Jesus set this example, commanded us to baptize, and is present in our lives through baptism. However, neither Jesus nor writers of the Bible specified the details of a baptism ceremony, so rituals have varied.
- Luther's teachings about baptism were invigorated by debate with the Anabaptists. Luther emphasized baptism's role in making justification personal.
- Lutherans count baptism as one of two sacraments—modeled and commanded by Christ, fulfilling a promise of God. Acting through plain water, in the presence of God's commandment and God's Word, God brings us grace.
- Justification—being put right with God—is a gift received through baptism. Being made like Christ is God's doing, not ours, but it is evident in how we act.
- Lutherans teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. We need God, and in baptism, God comes to us, removing barriers between us and God.
- Lutherans baptize infants because we see God at work in spite of our limitations; God's grace is not limited by our faith.
- Viewing Christians as simultaneously saints and sinners, Luther invites us to be renewed by baptism each day, recognizing our dependence on God.
- In today's world, we can continue to treasure and share the gifts of baptism while respecting other faith traditions.

*"The Lutheran Voices series is tapping into the rich resources of the church and bringing us together to talk about issues and ideas that shape our present and future."*

*Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA*

## Single-Session Plan

The following ideas suggest how to use the [Participant Handout](#) in leading a one-hour discussion of *No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther*.

### Before You Begin (Optional)

Gather pictures of baptisms. These could be photos of baptisms in your congregation and images of baptisms from a variety of Christian traditions, past and present. Try to find pictures in which the people being baptized include babies, children, and adults. Display these on the walls where you are meeting, or use a computer to project the images on a television, screen, or blank wall at the beginning of your meeting. Refer to these images for ideas and examples when answering the “Getting Started” question and identifying practices that help us appreciate the meaning of baptism, especially at question 9.

### Opening (2 minutes)

Introduce yourself and welcome the participants. Pray the opening prayer together, or invite one person to lead the prayer.

### Getting Started (10 minutes)

Invite the participants to briefly introduce themselves and to answer this question: *What do you remember about your baptism, if you were baptized?* If the group is large, have participants introduce themselves and respond to the question within smaller groups of 4–5 people rather than to the entire group. Either way, the focus is simply on inviting everyone to speak and to begin thinking of baptism as a significant event in the Christian life. If any group members have not been baptized, you might shift the question to ask about baptisms these people have witnessed. Knowing that some group members are not baptized can help you adjust further questions as necessary.

### Points to Ponder (45 minutes)

Use questions from the Participant Handout as a framework for discussion.

- *Question 1 (5 minutes):* Before asking the question, invite someone to read aloud the first paragraph from the introduction in *No Greater Jewel* (p. 13). At this point, focus on gauging participants’ existing ideas and questions about baptism, so you can address particular concerns later. If participants have difficult questions, you may find that you or a volunteer need to research some answers for a later session. Don’t worry if you can’t evaluate every idea and answer every question immediately; some answers will come as you explore specific ideas in the later questions and “Digging Deeper” sessions.
- *Questions 2–4 (15 minutes):* It will be helpful to fill in the blanks in question 2, because you will need to recall these points in answering questions 3 and 4. For questions 2 and 3, take your time to explore the texts, so the group begins to sense the scope and depth of God’s work. For example, in the Mark 1 passage, consider the significance of being called “beloved” by the Father. Also in that passage, receiving the Holy Spirit is not just an abstract vision, but the Spirit is a powerful force that will be “driving” Jesus, beginning “immediately” in verse 12.
  - After completing question 2 or along with the discussion of question 4, consider how (if at all) the elements of these biblical baptisms play out in our own baptisms.
  - Be careful, especially in discussing question 3, not to gloss over common religious phrases like “saved from sins”; ask what the particular phrase means to the group. For example, ask: How does being saved affect you? How has it changed you or your life or the way you approach your life?
- *Question 5 (5 minutes):* Luther emphasized God as the one who is at work in salvation and even in our own faith. However, especially because Christian traditions other than Lutheran sometimes emphasize human faith as a requirement for salvation and/or baptism, participants may offer a variety of answers. First listen to gauge the perspectives group members bring to your discussion. Then you may want to offer ideas from *No Greater Jewel* on Luther’s perspective that salvation is God’s doing, merely received through faith. For biblical support, see, for example, 1 Corinthians 12:4-13. Participants may bring up the question of how these ideas apply to infant baptism; Chapters 1 and 6 address baptism of children and infants.
- *Questions 6 (5 minutes):* Before moving on to the parts of the question, your group may want to spend time considering the meaning of the quotation. Review what is received in baptism, including the Holy Spirit and unity with Christ. Ask: How do these gifts amount to “full God”? Ask: If we are led by the Spirit and united with Christ, how does that affect our attitudes and

actions? (Presumably, we are doing what the Holy Spirit wants and acting the way Jesus acts—and participants are likely to acknowledge that this requires some degree of transformation.)

- *Questions 7–9 (15 minutes)*: Modern baptisms typically bring together family members, sponsors, and a worshipping congregation. If some participants were baptized in a private situation, consider whether this arrangement was unusual. Reasons for others to be present include a desire to support the baptized person and his or her sponsors in living as followers of Christ. We also are glad to welcome the newly baptized into the community to support us as we serve Christ together. The church is made up of people freed by Christ and led by the Spirit, both gifts received in baptism, so baptism is essential to the church's very nature. Encourage creative thinking in generating ideas for supporting one another.

**Closing (3 minutes)**

Pray the closing prayer aloud together. If you plan to continue the discussion of *No Greater Jewel* after this session, announce the place and time for the next meeting. Ask participants to prepare by reading the chapters of *No Greater Jewel* you plan to cover at the next meeting. Suggestions for subsequent discussions begin on the following page, “Digging Deeper.”

## Digging Deeper

After working your way through the single-session plan, use the following suggestions along with the chapter questions in *No Greater Jewel* to dig deeper into what it means for a ministry to be grounded in a sense of place. These suggestions provide a framework for a chapter-by-chapter discussion of *No Greater Jewel*, though it's your decision as to how many chapters to address each time the group meets.

### Additional Materials

- Besides the materials listed under “Pre-Session Preparation,” for these sessions, you will also need copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or else copies of the order for your congregation's baptismal service and *Luther's Small Catechism* (the discussion of baptism).

### Celebrating Your Baptism

- At some point in this series, perhaps before you begin, encourage participants to learn the date of their own baptism. They may need to contact the congregation where they were baptized to obtain this information.
- Consider ending your final meeting with a celebration of your baptisms. Before that final meeting, invite the group to share in the planning and preparation. You might include prayers for and blessings of one another, a time of thanksgiving, and special refreshments and decorations. Perhaps the group's thankfulness for the “jewel” of baptism will spill over into a desire to bless others, for example, by taking up a collection for a charity or baking cookies for a homeless shelter.

### Chapter 1: Why and How Have Christians Baptized?

- Note: Over the years, Christians have emphasized a variety of reasons for being baptized. Ask: Why did you choose to be baptized or have your children baptized? (Adjust the question as appropriate for the experiences of your group members.) Note any themes that emerge, including a consistent reason or variety of reasons. **Option:** You could present this question as a multiple-choice question, listing answers such as to follow Jesus' example; to follow Jesus' command; to be part of a Christian community; to be freed or cleansed from sin; to receive eternal life; to repent; to receive the Holy Spirit; to do what is expected by my family or friends.
- Look up the following Bible passages, and discuss what each passage reveals about *how* baptism was practiced by the early Christians: Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:37-41; Acts 8:12; Acts 8:35-38; Acts 10:44-48; Acts 16:14-15. Note that the verses provide few details about the ritual itself. However, your group should be able to identify some practices, such as baptizing individuals or whole households, belief leading to a desire for baptism, the involvement of the Holy Spirit, and baptism “in the name of Jesus.”
- Note: After the early days in which Christians were often persecuted, as Christians became part of the mainstream, their rituals became more public and more formal. Stjerna (p. 20) says Christians in the institutional church have been flexible in how they carry out this ritual as the emphasis on various benefits of baptism has shifted. Also, rituals are not as elaborate today as they once were. Read the example on p. 20, and invite the group to compare it with modern practices. Ask: Which practices do you especially value?
- If you collected pictures for the Single-Session Plan, look at them again, noting all the different rituals and practices you can identify. Reflect on which ones participants find most meaningful.
- Read your congregation's ritual for Holy Baptism. (In *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, this service begins on p. 227.) Pause after each section (e.g., the Presentation, Profession of Faith, Thanksgiving, Prayer, and Welcome), and ask the group what this portion of the service tells them about what is happening during baptism. Ask: Why do you think these words are included in the service? Are they important or meaningful to you? Why or why not?

### Chapter 2: Luther and Luther's Writings on Baptism

- If your group is not familiar with the life and teachings of Martin Luther, prepare to offer a brief summary of the material on pp. 29–30, or have the group read these pages (if not everyone has read them ahead of time), or invite questions (if the group is familiar with this summary). Note that Luther's writing on baptism was partly a response to another Reformation group, the Anabaptists. Invite someone to read the paragraph on pp. 27–28, which describes the Anabaptists (and notes that their views were against the law at the time). Ask the group to evaluate the idea of baptism being “a demonstration and an oath of one's faith.” Ask: How, if at all, does that view conflict with the idea of baptism being an act of God's grace?
- Read each of the four pairs of questions and answers about baptism in Luther's *Small Catechism* (pp. 1164–65 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*). Note that each point has a biblical basis: Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Titus 3:5-8; Romans 6:4. After reading each of Luther's answers, invite questions and comments. Ask: In Luther's discussion, what is God's role? What is the baptized person's role? For example, is God responding to our accomplishments, or are we responding to God's gifts?

- Read and react to this quote from Stjerna (p. 34): “When seeking a gracious God who finds human beings pleasing, when imagining ways through which human beings become filled with God’s grace and are spiritually transformed, when envisioning the direction and possibilities for the resulting Christian life for those justified—that is, restored in a personal, forgiven relationship with God, and renewed in Christ—Luther cast his eyes on baptism as the touch point.”
- Note that Luther urged baptismal sponsors to take baptism seriously (see pp. 34–35). Ask: Given what we are learning about the meaning of baptism, why is it important for sponsors and the congregation to take it seriously? How relevant is this advice to us today? How can we ensure that we are serious about baptism?

### **Chapter 3: Baptism as a Sacrament, a Means of Grace**

- Note that baptism is called a “sacrament.” Invite participants to discuss what they mean by “sacraments.” Also come prepared with definitions from a dictionary and/or Bible dictionary.
- Note: The Lutheran Reformers saw sacraments, including baptism, as meeting basic requirements: a sacrament must be “found in Scripture, with an explicit command from Jesus and with a specific promise attached” (p. 41). Read Matthew 28:19-20, and find the command and the promise. Ask: How have you experienced this command and promise in your own life? If the response is simply, “I was baptized,” follow up, encouraging participants to describe how that act has affected them personally.
- Note: Baptism is both a practice of an institution (the church) and a practice that affects individuals. Through baptism, how is the church blessed? How are the baptized individuals blessed? How does the church bless others? How do the baptized individuals bless others? Note: Christians are usually baptized in a church building in the presence of church members. Ask: How does that practice help us understand the church’s role in baptism?
- Note: Another quality of a sacrament is that God’s Word interacts with something ordinary (water, in this case; see p. 45) to bring God’s grace to us. For other examples of the power of God’s Word, read Genesis 1:3; John 1:14; and Luke 1:35. For Luther, Word is not only the Scriptures, but also Jesus and preaching that points us to Jesus. Ask: Where or how do you experience the Word active in baptisms? This question may be difficult; in contrast to water, the Word is spiritual and thus may be harder to discern. But the power of God’s Word is essential, and contemplating it may be inspirational. More broadly, God’s graciousness in joining the spiritual to the tangible—as in the human nature of Jesus—is marvelous to consider.

### **Chapter 4: Baptism as Justification**

- Prepare to talk about the meaning of “justification” by bringing a dictionary and Bible dictionary to this session, or look up the word ahead of time and bring the definitions with you. To start the discussion, ask: What does it mean to be “just”? When have you tried to justify yourself or your views to someone? How did you do that, and how well did it work? Finally, look up and read definitions of justification.
- Read Luther’s description of justification from the second paragraph on p. 49. Invite reactions to this quotation. Ask: How does this idea of justification fit with your own understanding of what it means to be justified by grace through faith? How does it fit with your understanding and experience of being baptized?
- Read Job 9:2-3. Ask: How would you answer Job today, in light of the resurrection of Jesus? Read Romans 3:21-26. Ask: How can this passage help us understand what God does for us in baptism? Invite the group to figure out how to put this message into their own words to explain baptism to a non-Christian who is curious about it. A role-play, if two or more group members are willing to act out the roles of a seeker and a believer, could bring these ideas to life.
- Share this quotation from p. 50: “In the act of baptism, by the power of the Word and the water, Christ in God’s fullness enters our very being. Luther called this a ‘happy exchange’—when Christ receives our humanness and sins and when we receive Christ’s love and goodness.” Ask: In this exchange, what do we lose? What do we gain? How do we change? Is this an easy change or a difficult one? Why? If we are still sinners, how can we permit this change to unfold in us? (For ideas, see pp. 52–53.)
- Read Philippians 2:5. Ask: Is this a standard you can meet by your own willpower? How does baptism provide a means for meeting this standard? (For ideas, see pp. 54–55.) Ask: How is God’s gift of the “mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus” through baptism like being “born again”? When you were born the first time, was that birth your own personal achievement? How much credit do you take for being “born again” in baptism?

### **Chapter 5: Baptism as the Greatest Comfort**

- Open the session by reading Psalm 51 responsively. (Have half the group read the odd-numbered verses and the other half read the even-numbered verses.) Ask: When did the Psalmist become a sinner? (See v. 5.) Who has the power to remove the sin? (See vv. 1-2, 7, 10.) Who enables the Psalmist to worship God? (See v. 15.)
- Note: Stjerna explains that Christians have for centuries taught that baptism is “necessary for salvation” (see pp. 59–60). Ask: For you, is this idea a challenge or a help in relating to people of other faiths? Invite participants to describe times when they tried to express their faith in a pluralistic society. Some groups may want to explore ways of understanding “necessary” that are more inclusive of other faiths; other groups may not see a difficulty here but may be glad to consider the possibility of sharing their faith without putting others on the defensive (which would defeat the purpose).

- Note: One reason Luther saw baptism as necessary was that he saw all humans as enslaved by sin, meaning we can't free ourselves to love God. Read Romans 12:12-14. Ask: According to this passage, who is affected by sin? Read Luther's words from the *Smalcald Articles* in the paragraph on pp. 60–61. Ask: How are our community and our country affected by sin? How are you personally affected by sin? Encourage the group to be specific, to develop an appreciation of the seriousness of the problem, which affects all our relationships with ourselves, others, and God. Ask: Has anyone figured out how to stop sinning or to make sin go out of our society? (Presumably not!)
- Find and list on a board the three benefits of baptism identified on pp. 62–64: salvation and union with God; forgiveness; and new life. Invite the group to describe these in their own words, based on discussion of the previous chapters. Ask: Which of these benefits have affected your life experiences the most? When have you rejoiced in these benefits of baptism?
- Ask: In light of the seriousness of the problem (enslavement to sin) and the greatness of the benefits, why is it “necessary” to offer baptism to others? Who benefits when we make baptism available? Who *shouldn't* get the offer?

### Chapter 6: Baptism and Infants

- Ask: Has baptizing babies been part of your and your family's religious practice? What reasons are given? Responses may shape how you approach this topic. While Stjerna's book presents a Lutheran understanding, it would be appropriate to allow time to hear other viewpoints as well.
- Note: One reason Luther gave for continuing to baptize infants was that he saw that many people who had been baptized as babies had gone on to become inspired to lives of great faith and service in the Christian church. Invite reactions to this argument. Ask: Was what Luther saw a convincing sign of the work of the Holy Spirit? Why or why not? Read Acts 10:44-48. How, if at all, was Luther's reasoning consistent with Peter's?
- Note: Another reason Luther gave for baptizing infants was that this type of baptism emphasizes our human frailty and need for grace. Invite reactions to this argument. Recall the discussion (at Chapter 5) of being slaves to sin. Ask: Are babies, children, and adults equally enslaved by sin? Why or why not? Are people at any age able to free themselves? If so, how? If baptizing infants emphasizes our human frailty, how might the baptism of infants affect the *community*—that is, the believers who are assembled and witnessing the baptism?
- Ask: If faith is needed to *receive* this gift of grace, how important is the amount of time that passes between when the gift is given and when it is received through faith, so that the Holy Spirit is bearing fruit? Is there an amount of time after which the gift of God's grace expires for lack of faith? If faith is needed to receive the gift of grace, how can we as the community of believers be inspired to create an environment for building and nurturing that faith in baptized children (and adults)?
- Read Matthew 19:13-14 and Matthew 28:19-20. What do these words of Jesus suggest about baptizing children? Does “all nations” suggest any age limits or levels of wisdom or other signs of worthiness?

### Chapter 7: Baptism as the Basis for Spiritual Living

- Read 1 Peter 1:15-16. Ask: Do you think of yourself more as a “saint” or a “sinner”? Why? What does it mean to be both at the same time? (This was Luther's understanding of our nature as baptized Christians. For ideas, see pp. 79–80.)
- Read Stjerna's words on p. 80: “Baptism does not make us immune to falls or errors or hurt or death, nor does it make us better than others. Instead, baptism reminds us that in this life, where sin clings so closely, we live in God's presence even as we await a new life where there is no hurt or sorrow, where there is no sin and we sinner-saints are finally transformed into saints of God. We believe that this holiness and this hope of eternity are given to us in baptism.” Invite reactions. Ask: What does it mean to you to “live in God's presence”? To “await a new life”? Do these feel like gifts or challenges or both?
- Ask: In what other ways besides baptism does the Holy Spirit work in our lives to bring us closer to God and make us more like Jesus? If this question is difficult, ask: When have you felt close to God? When have you felt inspired or encouraged to love others? How do you think God was at work in those situations? How could you find yourself in situations like those again? What role was played by the church, other believers, the Bible, and prayer or other spiritual practices?
- Note: Baptism is offered to all and given to each of us as a personal gift. Ask participants to reflect on what it means to them that they have been (or could be) receivers of God's gifts of grace, uniting them with God. What does this say about their place or status in God's kingdom? What does it say about God's love for them? What does it say about the status of every other member of the community? In light of God's regard for those community members, how do *you* want to treat these fellow Christians?

### Chapter 8: Considerations for Today

- Note: When the church became associated with government institutions, baptism became a legal requirement. Later, it was often a matter of what a particular denomination required. Today, in our society, it has become a matter of personal choice, along with other religious and spiritual practices. Ask: What are some advantages and drawbacks of the current situation?
- Read John 3:16. Ask: In a world where baptism is seen as a personal choice, how can we encourage people to desire baptism? Note: Stjerna suggests emphasizing that baptism *includes* people in the Christian community, where we receive God's grace, rather than emphasizing that failure to be baptized *excludes* people from salvation. Invite reactions.

- Note: Christians are often called upon to be good “stewards” or caregivers of our time, talents, and treasure. How can we be responsible stewards of the gift of the sacrament of baptism?
- Discuss how you would like to remember and appreciate your baptism in the future. One idea would be for group members to send one another cards on each other’s baptismal anniversaries. Participants may want to enter the dates of their own and others’ baptismal anniversaries on their personal calendars or in prayer journals. End with a time of thanksgiving for and celebration of your baptisms. (See “Celebrating Your Baptism,” before the ideas for Chapter 1.)



## Deeper Still: Further Resources to Explore

We hope you enjoyed your study of *No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther*. The Lutheran Voices series includes over 40 books focused on faithful living, global issues, healing and wholeness, Martin Luther’s teachings, and church revitalization and leadership. Free, downloadable study materials are available for select books. For a complete list of titles, go to [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org) or call (800) 328-4648, in Canada: (800) 265-6397, ext. 215.