

PART I: BAPTISM

A LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SACRAMENTS

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*Baptism is not our work, but God's work. Baptism gives us great comfort and strength when we realize how we stand guilty before God. Then, Luther says, the Christian is to say, "But I am baptized!"*¹

St. Augustine writes, "When the Word is joined to the element or natural substance, it becomes a Sacrament". This is the definition used by Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions to identify the sacraments acknowledged within the church. Thus, a sacrament contains the Word and command of God as well as an external and visible sign. When these two come together, the sign is consecrated so that it is no longer simply that which is visible to the eyes, but also assumes something invisible and more exalted.² Another definition for "sacrament" appears in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, Article XIII. In the *Apology*, Melancthon writes that sacraments are "... rites that have the command of God, and to which the promise of grace has been added."³ Therefore, the sacraments are not only outward and visible signs that profess to the world who we are, that is, God's children, but also testimonies of God's will toward us. His grace is given not only in the Word, but also in the external, visible element of the sacrament.⁴ Martin Chemnitz writes, "As the Word enters the ear that it may reach the heart, so the external rite strikes the eyes that it may move the heart."⁵ Chemnitz grasped this thoroughly Lutheran understanding of a sacrament. Although faith is the only means of salvation for man, grace is given through both the Word and

¹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, Second Edition, Translated by William Hermann Theodore Dau and Gerhard Friedrich Bente, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 423.

² Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Third Edition, revised, Translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 521.

³ McCain, *Concordia*, 184.

⁴ I am not intending to separate Word and sacrament, since the sacrament also contains the Word.

⁵ Chemnitz, Ap. Conf. VII, 5

the sacrament. Therefore, the Word and the sacraments become the vehicle for the Holy Spirit.

The Lutheran Church acknowledges only two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Lutheran Confessions recognize that in the early years of the Reformation, there were continued disagreements over the number of sacraments.⁶ Melancthon writes in his *Apology*, that people do count the number of sacraments differently. However, the importance of the sacrament is that the people of God rightly keep the ceremonies instituted in Scripture – regardless of their number. Today, the Lutheran Church acknowledges two divinely instituted sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This paper will research the first of these sacraments, Baptism.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

As previously stated, Baptism is a sacrament. Therefore, 1) God commands us in His Word to perform this rite and 2) while performing this rite we join an earthly element, in this case, water, with God's Holy Word. Notice that the water is not alone, but joins with the Word of God. The command to baptize comes from the Gospel of Matthew, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them...and *teaching* them..." (Matt 28:19). Jesus Christ commanded His disciples to go out and make disciples. As ministers of the Word, disciples are made by baptizing and teaching. In the *Larger Catechism*, Luther writes that Baptism is "divine water".⁷ This does not mean that the water itself is better than any other kind of water. Instead, the "divine water" Luther

⁶ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 525.

⁷ McCain, *Concordia*, 424.

writes about is that water in which God's Word is added. This "divine water" cleanses and washes away sin when it is received by faith. Note that the water alone does not accomplish forgiveness, but forgiveness comes through the water and Word together when received by faith.⁸

Although it is important to understand what Baptism is, it is also important to understand what Baptism is not. In the *Smalcald Articles*, Melanchthon rejects two theologians and their views of Baptism. Against the Church in Rome, Melanchthon rejects Thomas Aquinas's teaching of Baptism. Aquinas believed that God imparted a special, spiritual power to the water.⁹ Melanchthon rebuts this teaching and declares that it is the water joined with God's Word that washes and cleanses sin. Melanchthon also rejected Scotus and the Barefooted Monks who believed that it was only God's will, which removed sin. These teachers believed that the Word and the water did nothing of benefit for the person. Melanchthon and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions were consistent in their teaching, the water joined with the Word washes away sin.

Baptism is also called the "sacrament of initiation".¹⁰ Through Baptism, we are properly received into the church. In order to comprehend the rite in this manner, it is best to begin with Abraham. In the book of Genesis, God's Holy Word tells us that a covenant, or promise, was made by God with Abraham. The outward and visible sign of this covenant was circumcision. All males were circumcised on the eighth day of their life. This external, divinely ordained, act signified that the male was brought into the

⁸ The effectiveness of Baptism occurs when received by faith. Therefore, even though a man may be baptized as a child, the benefits of the sacrament may not be experienced for many years to come. Because of this lasting effect, a person only needs to be baptized once in their lifetime.

⁹ McCain, *Concordia*, 279.

¹⁰ Gerhard IX, 67

covenant and, therefore, an heir to the promise. This divine command continued for hundreds of years. However, this was only a shadow of that which was to come.

Circumcision of the flesh pointed toward circumcision of the heart. In Baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised up in faith with a circumcision not made with hands (Col 2:11-12). When we understand circumcision as a prophetic type of Baptism, then we begin to see that Baptism initiates us into the covenant family of God. Through an outward sign, we testify to the world that we are Christ's and belong to His chosen people.

WHO IS TO ADMINISTER BAPTISM?

Great care must be taken to keep order in the church. The authors of the Lutheran Confessions regularly wrote of keeping such order. In the case of Baptism, only those rightly called should administer the Word and Sacraments (Ap XIV).¹¹ Occasionally, life-threatening emergencies arise in which a person strongly desires Baptism and a rightly called minister is not available. A Christian is authorized to administer a Baptism in these rare cases. However, it is important that 1) the proper form of Baptism is administered¹² and 2) the Baptism is reported to the appropriate minister.¹³

HOW IS ONE TO BE BAPTIZED?

Many questions arise on the proper mode of Baptism. Some ministers sprinkle water, while others pour. In some cases, the individual being baptized is completely

¹¹ McCain, *Concordia*, 187.

¹² The proper form of administration is discussed in the next section.

¹³ The appropriate minister is the minister of the person baptized. If the person does not belong to a Christian church, then the minister of the person baptizing must be notified.

submersed below the water. For centuries, Christians have debated over the many different modes of baptizing. However, when focus is on *how* the water washes, we then begin to lose sight of *who* washes. Baptism is a divinely instituted command by God, which joins the water with the Word. Within this Word, we are commanded to baptize, not in our own name, but in the name of the triune God. The Word is taken from Matt 28:19 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” When focus is made on *who* is baptizing, it becomes evident that God Himself is baptizing. Although human hands may perform the Baptism, it is truly God’s own work. (LC Part 4)¹⁴ Therefore, the answer to “Should the water be poured or sprinkled or the person immersed?” is a matter of preference. The water is merely water until the proper words of institution are pronounced. Once the person is ready to be baptized, the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” joins with the water and God baptizes.

In recent years, many theologians have debated whether the words “... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” must be used. In other words, are there other names of the triune God that may be substituted? Great care must be taken when straying from the Holy Words of Christ. It is not recommended to alter His mandate to us. In fact, without the presence of the proper name of the triune God, the validity of the baptism is in question. In this post-modern age, pastors may run into parishioners who were baptized in some other name.¹⁵ In these cases, it would be recommended to

¹⁴ McCain, *Concordia*, 424.

¹⁵ For instance, feminists have been using “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” during baptisms. Although these words certainly point out the functions of the three persons of the Godhead, they do

baptize the believer in the true name of God. This is not considered a re-baptism, since the first was not truly a proper baptism, but, instead, some human form or act.

WHO IS TO BE BAPTIZED?

The promise of salvation does not apply to those who are outside of Christ's Church, since there is neither Word nor Sacrament (Ap IX).¹⁶ Yet, in adults who desire to be baptized, faith must be demanded as a condition on which the ordinance affects this blessed end.¹⁷ Luther taught that faith alone saves. This doctrine is also present in the Lutheran Confessions. In addition, Paul writes that it was Abraham's faith that credited to him as righteousness (Rom 4:9). Therefore, the act of performing God's command does not bring salvation when it is not accompanied by faith in the one receiving the gift. This applies to Baptism as well. The promise of Baptism is useless unless it is received by faith (Ap XIII).¹⁸

How are we to know whether the Baptism was valid? Baptism is not valid or invalid because of the one administering or the one receiving the gift of God. This is important for believers to know since, at times, we read of ministers who fall from grace and reject the Lord's gift. We also read of wolves dressed in the clothes of ministers and act the part of the shepherd, but instead lead astray God's people. In these cases, the baptized believers are to remember that the minister does not baptize, but God Himself baptizes when the Word joins with the water. In addition, at times the person baptized may not

not represent the Name. Names such as "Mother, Child, and Womb" and "Rock, Redeemer, and Friend" are simply silly in nature and represent arrogance on the part of the "pastor".

¹⁶ McCain, *Concordia*, 153.

¹⁷ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 537.

¹⁸ McCain, *Concordia*, 186.

have a true faith in Christ. However, the Baptism is still a valid Baptism, even though faith is lacking.¹⁹ Faith does not make a Baptism valid, but receives it. This is important to understand since some infants will not come to faith until later in their life. When they do come to faith in Christ Jesus, their faith will look back on their Baptism. In both of the cases stated above, provided the Word and water are appropriately administered, there is never a need to re-baptize.

Just as salvation is offered to all, so Baptism is offered to all: to men, to women, children, and infants.²⁰ God's Word commands us to baptize and children should not be removed from this wondrous gift. Let us return again to circumcision. Since circumcision was merely a shadow and prophetic type of Baptism, we must look at the command of God as it concerned this ordinance. Abraham was commanded to bring, "...every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations." (Gen 17:12). Abraham was commanded to circumcise the male children so that they too would be brought into the promise and become an integral part of God's people. Baptism fulfills this prefiguring and extends the sacrament to all children, male or female. In this way, we are certain that the promise of salvation also applies to little children.²¹

CONCLUSION

The Lutheran Confessions clearly teach that 1) God commands us to be baptized, 2) God commands us to baptize in the name of the triune God, 3) God, ultimately, baptizes

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 428.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

the person and brings him into the His family, and 4) while Baptism is valid when the Word joins with the water, it is essential that faith be present in the person receiving the gift from God. Since it is impossible to determine the faith of an infant²², it is then essential that the child be a part of a Christian family.

²² It is also difficult to determine the faith of the mentally challenged. As with infants, it is important that the individual be a part of a Christian family.