

# Luther on Baptism

[Presented to the Arizona-California Pastoral Conference, Arizona-California District, WELS, held at St. Paul's, North Hollywood, California, October 26-28, 1982.]

*By Donald Stuppy*

One of the most meaningful gifts we can give or receive is a "going away gift." When a good friend or neighbor makes a move to another locale, we often want to let them know, in a special way, that we hate to see them go. One way we can do this is by giving them a present. It is our hope that, when they use it, they will think of us and the experience we shared with them. Anyone who has moved and received such a gift will know what I am talking about.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave such a gift to His disciples. How overjoyed they must have been the first time they saw the risen Savior. But, how sad they must have become when they found out that Jesus would soon be leaving them, at least in the sense that they would no longer be able to see Him. Before Christ left He gave his followers two "going away gifts," if you will. He gave them and us the Sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. These two Sacraments are certainly the most important and meaningful gifts we could have ever received. Not only do they bring to remembrance our Lord and Savior, they also bring us the blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation.

In his writings Luther spoke a great deal about both of these gifts. One cannot read far in Luther's works before he will find a reference to one or the other. This paper will concern itself with the way in which Luther treated the second of these Sacraments, Holy Baptism. The time allotted this paper hardly permits me to cover the many areas of this doctrine to which Luther addresses himself. I would, however, like to cover an area that seemed to be especially important and meaningful to Luther. The main emphasis of this paper will deal with Luther's use of Baptism as a daily source of strength and comfort for the Christian. But, before we can treat this subject, we must first look briefly at the basis for these remarks. We shall do this through the words of Luther. We proceed, then, by first noting that –

## **I. Luther Rightly Viewed Baptism As A Source Of God's Grace And Blessing**

"Suppose there were somewhere a physician who understood art of saving men from dying, or, even though they died, of restoring them speedily to life, so that they would thereafter live forever, how the world would pour in money like snow and rain, so that because of the throng of the rich no one could find access! But here in Baptism there is brought free to every one's door such a treasure and medicine as utterly destroys death and preserves all men alive."<sup>1</sup>

It is always with glowing terms like these that Luther speaks of Baptism. There are many reasons for this. First of all, Luther recognized that Baptism was of divine origin. After quoting the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Luther remarks,

"... these words contain God's commandment and ordinance.

You should not doubt, then, that Baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by men....It is of greatest importance that we regard Baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 1. Luther, *The Large Catechism*, p. 86

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81

Luther felt that even if Baptism conferred no blessings, it should be valued most highly simply because God has instructed us to use it. But, divine origin is not the only reason Luther valued Baptism. With God's promise attached to Baptism, it carries with it many blessings, blessings which make it a most precious gift. This is what led Luther to remark, "No greater jewel can adorn our body and soul than Baptism." The reason for this becomes clear as Luther continues, "for through it we obtain perfect holiness and salvation..."<sup>3</sup> Luther elaborates on this in his *Small Catechism* (Q. 341), "Which blessings does Baptism offer and give us? Baptism as a means of grace offers and gives us: A. Forgiveness of sins, B. Deliverance from death and the devil, and C. Eternal Salvation."

Of the three, Luther placed the greatest importance on the first of these blessings, for it is from the forgiveness of sins that all other blessings flow. The Scriptures clearly teach that we receive forgiveness in Baptism. "Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), and also: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins" (Acts 22:16). The forgiveness of sins which Christ won for us on the cross becomes ours through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The result is that;

"When someone comes forth out of Baptism, he is truly pure, without sin, and wholly guiltless."<sup>4</sup>

In his treatise, "*Holy sacrament of Baptism*", Luther speaks further of this blessing:

"For just as a child is drawn out of his mother's womb, and is born, and through this fleshly birth is a sinful person and a child of wrath, (Eph. 2:3), so one is drawn out of Baptism and is born spiritually. Through this spiritual birth he is a child of grace and a justified person. Therefore sins are drowned in Baptism, and in place of sin, righteousness comes forth."<sup>5</sup>

But this is not the only blessing Baptism gives. Baptism also gives "deliverance from death and the devil." Along with this statement, Luther quotes Romans 6.3, "Know ye not that so many of us were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?" Paul here makes a connection between Christ's death and Baptism. When Christ died on the cross, He took our sin and sins of the whole world into the grave. He then came forth from the grave with life and immortality. All that Christ has done for you was conferred upon you at the time of your baptism. From that moment on God looks upon you as if you had died and risen again, as if you yourself had borne the punishment for your sins, and had obtained victory over death and the devil.

"Christ puts salvation into Baptism. Therefore it is impossible that this should be simple water when through it salvation, forgiveness of sins, and redemption from death and the devil is given."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Luther states, as a Means of Grace, Baptism offers and gives "eternal salvation." One of Luther's favorite illustrations is used in connection with this particular blessing of Baptism. He borrows it from I Peter 3:20-21:

"Baptism was foreshown of old in Noah's flood, when the whole world was drowned, except for Noah with his three sons and their wives, eight souls, who were saved in the ark. That the people of the world were drowned signifies that in Baptism sins are drowned. But the eight in the ark, with animals of every sort,

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 86

<sup>4</sup> Luther Works 35, p. 32

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 35, p. 30

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 51, p. 184

were preserved, signifies, as St. Peter explains in his second epistle that through Baptism man is saved.<sup>7</sup>

Luther says that the benefits, blessings, gifts and effects of Baptism are no better understood than from this passage from the Epistle of St. Peter and from the words of Mark 16:16, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.”

“No one is baptized in order to become a prince, but as the words say, to ‘be saved.’ To be saved, we know is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death and the devil, and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with Him forever. Here you see again how precious and important a thing Baptism should be regarded as being, for in it we obtain such an inexpressible treasure.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus we see that Luther valued Baptism as a most precious gift from God. He did not view Baptism as a magical act or deed of man, but as a most gracious work of God. Luther recognized that the benefits and blessings of Baptism are a gift of God’s grace, “which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” With this in mind we shall see how Luther looked upon this precious gift as a daily source of strength and comfort for himself and all Christians.

## **II. Luther Viewed Baptism As A Daily Source Of Strength And Comfort For The Christian**

Baptism is a very simple act. All we do is apply water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. From the standpoint of human reason, it would be foolish to think that such an act could be of any real value. How could such a simple deed be of benefit for the soul, wash away sin, or give eternal life? It does so by virtue of the Word of God connected with the water! And, even though our Baptism may have taken place years ago, and even though we, personally, have no recollection of the blessed event, it does indeed have in finite value for all who have been baptized.

While we may recognize the blessings of Baptism, we may not be fully aware of its value for our daily life. How often do we think about or make mention of our Baptism? Are we making proper use of our Baptism in our fight against sin? Does it bring us comfort in time of trouble? For Luther, a truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued, “Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time.”<sup>9</sup>

Luther was not one to say, “I was baptized,” but rather, “I am baptized!” Our Baptism may indeed be an act performed in the past, but its benefits and blessings are not confined to the past or reserved only for the future; they are present here and now.

One such blessing Luther found in Baptism was that it served as an aid to our sanctification. It is, probably, in reference to the Christian’s sanctification that Luther referred to Baptism most frequently. We have already heard Luther say: “When someone comes forth out of Baptism, he is truly pure, without sin, and wholly guiltless.”<sup>10</sup> This refers to Baptism and its work of justification. But Luther says that “both the forgiveness of sins, and the driving out of sins is the work of Baptism.”<sup>11</sup> “When we are baptized, our sins are washed away, as Paul says in Acts 2:38 and 22:16. This does not mean that sin is no longer with us, only that it is forgiven.”

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 35, p. 31

<sup>8</sup> Luther, The Large Catechism, p. 83

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>10</sup> Luther Works 35, p. 32

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 38

Luther makes this point clear when he makes the words of St. Augustine his own, “Sin is altogether forgiven in Baptism, not in such a manner that it is no longer present, but in such a manner that it is not imputed.”<sup>12</sup>

Because our sinful flesh remains with us after Baptism, Luther says that the significance of our Baptism is not complete until the Christian enters the grave.

“With respect to the Sacrament, it is true that He is without sin and guilt, yet because all is not yet completed and He still lives in sinful flesh. He is not without sin.”<sup>13</sup>

“This sign of Baptism, the dying or drowning of sin is not fulfilled completely in this life. Indeed this does not happen until man passes through bodily death and completely decays to dust.”<sup>14</sup>

To summarize, we can say with Luther,

“so far as the sign of the Sacrament and its significance are concerned sin and the man are both already dead, and he has risen again; and so the Sacrament has taken a place. But the work of the Sacrament has not yet been fully done, which is to say that death and resurrection at the last day are still before us.”<sup>15</sup>

Until Baptism reaches its God-intended goal, Baptism serves as a constant reminder that we should live a life in keeping with our Baptism. In a sense, our Baptism serves as a source of constant admonition. When we consider the work of Baptism and its goal, we are moved to flee sin, for sin is not in keeping with our Baptism. Paul uses Baptism in this way in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans. He tells them how their Baptism has connected them to Christ’s death and resurrection. It is on this basis that Paul says that they should no longer live in sin. “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:11 NIV).

Luther used Baptism in much the same way in a sermon he preached on the sins of drunkenness and gluttony, He said, “Every body should know that such a sin is contrary to his Baptism and hinders his faith and salvation.”<sup>16</sup> Here we see how our Baptism benefits us daily. It is a constant reminder to us that we are God’s children and that we should no longer willingly live in sin. In this way our Baptism serves as a constant source of admonition and an aid to our sanctification. But this is not the only use to be made of Baptism in our daily life. Luther also viewed Baptism as a daily source of comfort for the Christian.

The greatest of these comforts must certainly be that, once we have been baptized, we never lose the promise given to us at the time of our Baptism.

“As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in Baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, that is, as long as we carry the Old Adam about our necks.”<sup>17</sup>

The promises that God made to us at the time of our Baptism are always good. God will not go back on His Word. What comfort we can find in this! It is of particular comfort to us when we fall into sin.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 34-35

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 32-33

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 30

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 32

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 51, p. 294

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., The Large Catechism, p. 90

“If we wish to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians. But, if anybody falls away from his Baptism, let him return to it. As Christ, the mercy-seat, does not recede from us or forbid us to return to Him even though we sin, so all His treasures and gifts remain.”<sup>18</sup>

Luther says that you can always return to the power of your Baptism, and do again that which you were baptized to do.

“Baptism never becomes useless, unless you despair and refuse to return to its salvation. You may indeed wander away from the sign for a time, but the sign is not therefore useless.”<sup>19</sup>

The way we return to our Baptism is through contrition and repentance. Contrition is, as Luther says, sincere sorrow over our sin; and repentance, the “contrite sinner’s faith in the forgiveness of sins.”

“Therefore, when we rise from our sin or repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of Baptism from which we fell, and finding our way back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.”<sup>20</sup>

Baptism could well be compared to the open arms of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. When the penitent and humble son returned to his father, he found his father anxiously looking and waiting for him to return. When he did, his father embraced him, kissed him, and forgave him. Such is the love of God for the penitent sinner. When we stray from God or fall into sin, God stands there in our Baptism beckoning us to return. He is always ready to embrace us with His gracious arms. Even though we may have been unfaithful to God, God is faithful to the promise made in Baptism “he that believes and is baptized shall be saved.” There is no need to rebaptize for God’s promise made in Baptism still stands. He does this in a personal way in Baptism, for the promise made at the time of your Baptism applies to YOU, PERSONALLY. That promise is found in Mark 16:16, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.”

This is much the same picture Peter uses in his second epistle (2 Peter 1:9). As long as we are in that “ship”(referring to Baptism) or return to it by the end of our life, we shall be saved.

“...how pernicious an error it is to believe that the power of Baptism is broken, and the ship dashed to pieces, because of sin. The ship remains one, solid, and invincible. In it are carried all those who are brought to the harbor of salvation, for it is the truth of God giving us its promise in the Sacraments. Of course, it often happens that man rashly leap overboard into the sea and perish; these are those who abandon faith in the promise and plunge into sin.”<sup>21</sup>

“If however, I do fall from the ship, I simply climb into it again. If I do turn away from Baptism, I simply turn back to it. If I do stray from the Kingdom of Grace, I simply enter it again. Baptism, ship, and grace remain forever and neither fall nor

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>19</sup> Luther, Selected Writings of Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, p. 421

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 411

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 413

waver because of my falling and wavering; otherwise God Himself, who promises to keep this grace forever, would also have to fall.”<sup>22</sup>

What comfort, what assurance, what hope, what joy, we can find in our Baptism! No matter what circumstances we face in life, our Baptism is there to comfort us.

“No one should be terrified if he feels evil lust or love, nor should he despair even if he falls. Rather he should remember his Baptism and comfort himself joyfully with the fact that God has there pledged Himself to slay his sin for him, and not to count it a cause for condemnation, if only he does not say yes to sin and remain in it.”<sup>23</sup>

“Therefore there is no greater comfort on earth than Baptism. For it is through Baptism that we come under the judgment of grace and mercy...”<sup>24</sup>

There is no greater weapon for the troubled conscience than one’s Baptism.

“We must boldly and without fear hold fast to our Baptism, and set it high against all sins and terrors of conscience. We must humbly admit, ‘I know full well I cannot do a single thing that is pure, But I am baptized and through my Baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound Himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will blot it out’”<sup>25</sup>

This is the same comfort that is derived from the Gospel. The promise contained in Baptism is the same as that found in God’s Word. But there is a personal comfort to be taken from our Baptism, because in Baptism, God makes His promise to us personally.

“Tell me, with whom does God speak and deal when you are baptized? Is it not true that this Baptism is intended for you alone and for no other person? You derive the benefit of your Baptism, not others, . . . But what does God tell you and each person who permits himself to be baptized? This is the promise God gives in Baptism: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16).

....How, then, could God speak in a friendlier way with you and more surely and specifically include your person in the Word than He does in Baptism?”<sup>26</sup>

By its very nature Baptism can be a blessing and comfort to us no matter what situation we might face. In fact, the rougher things get, the harder Satan works, the more our conscience condemns us, the more our Baptism is of value to us. This is especially true when we are face to face with death. What greater comfort can a parent who has lost a child in death have than to know that their child entered God’s kingdom of glory, because it had first entered God’s kingdom through Holy Baptism. When we are on our deathbed, what greater comfort could there be than to know that we are baptized? This is when Satan will work the hardest to draw us away from Christ. He will try to lead us into despair because of past sins. He will tell us that there is no hope for us for we have sinned too greatly to be forgiven. What, then, can we do? Luther says to tell him:

“Devil, rage as much as you please, I do not boast of my good works ... before the Lord at all, nor shall I despair on account of my sins, but I comfort myself with the fact that Jesus Christ died and rose again.... Therefore, be gone ... If I have committed some sin, go eat dung; it’s yours. I’m not worrying about it ... This is

---

<sup>22</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, Vol. I, p. 59

<sup>23</sup> *Luther Works* 35, p. 35

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>26</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, Vol. I, p.47

not the time for arguing, but for comforting myself with the words that Jesus Christ died and rose for me...And for a sign of all this I have his dear Baptism, his gospel, his Word and Sacraments...”<sup>27</sup>

In regard to his own death Luther said, “I will remember my Baptism and remind God of His covenant, and then fulfill the work and purpose of my Baptism.”<sup>28</sup>

Throughout Luther’s writings one can find numerous references to Baptism. He defended it from the attacks of the errorists. He looked upon Baptism as the most precious possession a man could have. He found great personal comfort in it for himself, and he used it to give comfort to others. It is said that a man named Jerome Weller, a contemporary of Luther, once felt despondent and doubtful about his salvation. He confided this to Luther, who boomed, “Don’t you know that you are baptized?” Jerome admitted that that one short sentence helped and comforted him more than if the good Doctor had preached an entire sermon to him. It is said of Luther, himself, that when he became despondent he would write on his desk with chalk: *BAPTIZATUS SUM*. Luther was comforted by his Baptism all through the enlightened part of his life and so should we. Luther saw Baptism as,

“a shield against all assaults of the scornful enemy, and answer to the sins that disturb the conscience, an antidote for the dread of death and judgment, and a comfort in every temptation.”<sup>29</sup>

All these blessings and more are there for us in Baptism. But just as certain as they are there, Satan will try to take them from us. We have already pointed out how Satan tries to take these blessings away by leading us into impenitence or despair. He will try with all his might to separate us from Christ and thus rob us of the blessings which God has given to us. Another way that the devil will try to do this is by undermining Baptism with false doctrine.

The Reformed bodies, for example, have lost much of the comfort of Baptism by looking upon it as just a ceremony. They teach that Baptism is merely a “picture” or “symbol” of regeneration. Calvin taught that Baptism is merely a sign that the Holy Ghost has already wrought faith prior to the use of the Sacrament. It is not the establishment of a gracious covenant with God, but rather a public profession of faith. Such a position on the Sacrament of Baptism robs those baptized of many of the blessings and comforts of Baptism.

The Roman Catholic Church has also robbed its people of such comfort. According to Rome, Baptism takes away original sin and those sins committed prior to Baptism. Those who sin after Baptism cannot return to Baptism for comfort, strength or forgiveness. These sins must be removed by the Roman Sacrament of Penance. The promise and comfort of full and complete forgiveness God wants us to have in Baptism is lost. The comfort of being able to return to God’s gracious covenant is taken away. The blessed joy which Baptism can bring to the heart of the penitent is never experienced.

Satan has, indeed, robbed many of the benefits, comforts and blessings of Baptism. The question is, ‘Has he robbed us?’ He has if we fail to make full use of our Baptism. How often do we, as pastors, remind the people of our congregation of their Baptism? When is the last time that we preached a sermon centered on this precious doctrine? Have we, unknowingly, neglected ongoing instruction in regard to Baptism? When a couple comes to us to have their baby baptized, we are often quite ready to instruct them in regard to who may serve as a sponsor or witness. But, do we also take this opportunity to instruct them in regard to the blessings of

---

<sup>27</sup> Luther Works 51, p. 241-242

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 35, p. 43

<sup>29</sup> Luther, Selected Writings of Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” p. 411

Baptism, of its ongoing application to our daily life? Let us be sure to stress not only the importance of Baptism, but also *why* it is important.

We should not overlook opportunities to use Baptism as a source of strength and comfort as we minister to the needs of our people. We can ease the troubled conscience of a member by reminding him of the promise God made to him at the time of his Baptism. We can reassure him that God washed away all his sins in Baptism and that God's promise of forgiveness is still in effect.

Let us comfort the dying Christian with the reminder that their salvation was sealed at the time of their Baptism by the gracious promise of God. Nothing can separate us from the blessings of God promised to us in Baptism, not sin, not Satan, not even death!

God comes to us personally in Baptism, in much the same way He gives us special comfort and strength in the Lord's Supper. The physical act of Baptism, whether it be by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling, is an aid to our faith. When troubled over sin, we can not only turn to God's promise of forgiveness found in His Gospel, but, also, have the personal assurance that it is ours by virtue of our Baptism.

While it is true that our Baptism may have taken place years ago, while many of us have only a certificate to assure us of this, yet, it is, in fact, the greatest thing that has ever happened to us, It was our birthday into God's Kingdom of Grace. Perhaps it would be well for us to hang our Baptismal certificate on the wall next to our diplomas or to write, as Luther did, on our desk - "I AM BAPTIZED!" What better thought could we have to begin our work each day and as we close our eyes in sleep than to recall our Baptism.

Let us not cease of recall our own Baptism and to call it to mind for our members. Luther put it well and it is only fitting that we close with his words:

"Their Baptism should have been called to their minds again and again and their faith constantly awakened and nourished. For just as the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but to be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us in Baptism.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 411



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Large Catechism, The Translated by Robert H. Fisher, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959
- Luther's Works - Vols. 29, 35, 51 Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. 1968
- Selected Writings of Martin Luther. Ed. by Theodore C. Tappert "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520", Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1967
- What Luther Says - Vol. I. Compiled by Ewald M. Plass, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. 1959