

Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care

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"Ah, dear Christians, let us not value or treat this unspeakable gift so half-heartedly. For baptism is our only comfort and the doorway to all of God's possessions and to the communion of all the saints. To this end may God help us." So wrote Luther in his baptismal booklet appended to the second edition of the Small Catechism in 1529.¹ By including his *Taufbuechlein* of 1526 in the catechism, Luther accented not only the liturgical significance of baptism, but also the value of this sacrament for the Christian life. Luther identifies baptism as the believer's "only comfort." This paper examines this theme in representative pastoral pieces in Luther's writings following the publication of the catechisms.² The language of the catechisms on baptism shaped Luther's use of baptism for the consolation of Christians.³

While baptism was featured quite prominently in the early church, its place was diminished in the Middle Ages. There was little catechetical literature to tutor the faithful on the significance of baptism. In fact, the chief feature of baptism seemed to be that of initiation. Baptism was the beginning point on the sacramental continuum, but it had little significance for the ongoing spiritual life, as the eucharist and especially penance overshadowed baptism. By way of contrast, Luther did not limit baptism to the moment of the rite, but asserted the enduring benefits of baptism both for daily life and, finally, for the approach of death itself.⁴

¹Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, translators, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 373. Hereafter abbreviated as Kolb and Wengert.

²This paper was a seminar presentation at the Tenth International Congress for Luther Research, Copenhagen, Denmark, in August 2002.

³See Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen Band 4: Die Taufe. Das Abenmahl* (Goettingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 71-126 for a treatment of Luther's theology of baptism in the catechisms. See also Klaus Schwarzwaeller, *Fuelle Des Lebens Luthers Kleiner Katechismus* (Muenster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 1998), 219-243.

⁴See Mark Tranvik, "Luther on Baptism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1999): 75-90 for an overview of Luther's baptismal teaching. Other helpful studies include Lorenz

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For Luther, baptism was no mere rite of initiation on the spectrum of sacramental acts, but the basis and content of the Christian's life that is brought to completion only in the resurrection of the body.

In May of 1531, Luther received word that his mother was seriously ill in Mansfeld. The sickness would prove fatal as Margaret would die the next month, June 30, just a little over a year after the death of her husband. On May 20, Luther wrote a tender letter to his mother alluding especially to John 16:33 ("I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"). In this letter, Luther rejoiced that his mother was well-instructed in God's fatherly goodness and grace and urged her to accept this suffering as a slight affliction in comparison with the sufferings of Christ. He wrote, "You know the real basis and foundation of your salvation, on which you must rest your confidence in this and all troubles, namely Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, who will never waver or fail us, nor allow us to sink and perish, for he is the Saviour and he is called the Saviour of all poor sinners, of all who face tribulation and death, of all who rely on him and call on his name."⁵ Throughout the letter, Luther pointed to Christ's passion and resurrection as the source of confidence in the face of death. Luther's imagery for the threat of death is vivid: "You can show your teeth, but you cannot bite. For God has given us the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be praise and thanks. Amen."⁶ Christ is not the accuser and judge, but Savior and Comforter.

But where is such a Christ to be found? Luther directed his mother to word and sacrament. Near the end of the letter Luther wrote:

Groenvik, *Der Taufe in der Theologie Martin Luther* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1968); Robert Kolb, "What Benefit Does the Soul Receive from a Handful of Water?: Luther's Preaching on Baptism, 1528-1539," *Concordia Journal* 25 (October 1999): 346-363; David W. Lotz, "The Sacrament of Salvation: Luther on Baptism and Justification," *Trinity Seminary Review* 6 (Spring 1984): 3-13; and Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994).

⁵Theodore Tappert, editor, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1995), 34. For a very thorough treatment of Luther's use of letters as tools for pastoral care, see Gerhard Ebeling, *Luthers Seelsorge an seinen Briefen dargestellt* (Tuebingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997), although Ebeling overlooks the significance of baptism in these letters.

⁶Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 35.

To such knowledge, I say, God has graciously called you. In the gospel, in baptism, and in the Sacrament (of the Altar) you possess his sign and seal of this vocation, and as long as you hear him addressing you in these, you will have no trouble or danger. Be of good cheer, then, and thank him joyfully for such great grace, for he who has begun a good work in you will perform until the day of Jesus Christ. We cannot help ourselves in such matters. We can accomplish nothing against sin, death, and the devil by our own works.⁷

While Luther only mentioned baptism in this letter, it is significant that Luther directed his mother to baptism, along with the gospel and the Lord's Supper, as the place where God speaks. For Luther, pastoral care does not direct the dying Christian to her own thoughts or deeds, but to the promises of God given in the *externum verbum* of gospel, baptism, and supper.⁸ Earlier in this letter, Luther reminded his mother that God had brought her to the knowledge of salvation and "not allowed her to remain in papal error, by which we were taught to rely on our own works and the holiness of monks and to consider this only comfort of ours, our Saviour, not as a comforter but as a severe judge and tyrant, so that we could only flee from him to Mary and the saints and not expect of him any grace or comfort."⁹ Luther set this approach in contrast to Christ, who reconciles sinners to the Father rather than visiting them with wrath and condemnation.

In his 1519 treatise, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, Luther complained that the papists ignored baptism in favor of self-made satisfactions:

They go so far as to disregard their baptism, as if they had no more need of it beyond the fact of having once been baptized. They do not know that baptism is in force all through life, even until death, yes—as said above—even to the Last Day. For this reason they

⁷Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 35-36.

⁸On this *extra nos* accent, note Luther's defense in his 1527 lectures on Titus: "If we were able to enter heaven without outward things, there would be no necessity to send Christ." *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 29:83. Hereafter abbreviated as *LW*.

⁹Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 35.

presume to find some other way of blotting out sin, namely by works. So for themselves and all others, they create evil, terrified, and uncertain consciences, and despair at the hour of death. They do not know how they stand with God, thinking that by sin they have lost their baptism and that it profits them no more.¹⁰

Now in this letter to his dying mother, Luther made use of a baptism that is efficacious throughout this life until it is brought to consummation in the resurrection of the flesh.

On June 29, 1534, Luther wrote to John Ruehl, chancellor to Count Albert of Mansfeld and a relative of Luther by marriage. Luther had learned of Ruehl's illness and his impatience in suffering. After comforting Ruehl with the words of 2 Corinthians 12:9 ("My strength is made perfect in weakness"), Luther wrote:

The realization that you have been called by this Man, that you have been blessed by a knowledge, desire, and love for his Word, and that you have been sealed therein by his Baptism and Sacrament should surely make you more cheerful. What more do you expect of him who has inwardly given you such love toward him and outwardly given you such seals and such a testimony of his grace? Dear doctor, behold the good things you possess at his hands rather than what you suffer. The balance is tipped immeasurably in favor of the former.¹¹

Luther drew Ruehl's thoughts away from what he suffered to the fact that he had been called to faith by Christ. The gifts of Christ outweigh all pain and grief.

After reminding Ruehl that God is able to restore him to health, Luther quoted Paul, "whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Luther commented, "Yes, indeed, *Domini* in the genitive and in the nominative—in the genitive (we are the Lord's) because we are his dwelling place, his members, and in the nominative (we are lords) because we rule over all things through faith, which is our victory, and because, thanks be to God, we trample the lion and the dragon underfoot."¹² While Luther did not explicitly connect Romans 14 to

¹⁰LW 35:37.

¹¹Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 37-38.

¹²Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 38.

baptism, baptism seems to be implicit in the comfort that he gives to Ruehl, for it is in baptism that God claims sinners as His own children. Hence, this letter of comfort echoes Luther words from *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament*: "This blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort."¹³ Through faith, which alone can apprehend the blessings of baptism, the believer is a lord over death and the devil. Recall the words of the Large Catechism: "In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to firmly believe what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, the forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts."¹⁴

In a table talk from autumn of 1532 recorded by Conrad Cordatus, Luther addressed predestination from the perspective of baptism. Cordatus reports that Luther warned against speculation regarding election saying that "when a man begins to dispute about it, it is like a fire that cannot be extinguished, and the more he disputes the more he despairs."¹⁵ God shows Himself to be opposed to these troublesome and terrifying thoughts. It is for this reason, said Luther, that God "instituted Baptism, the Word, and the Sacrament as signs to counteract it."¹⁶

Luther sees baptism, along with the preaching of the gospel and the Sacrament of the Altar, as the only sure defense and shield against the despair incited by predestination. Luther says:

¹³LW35:33.

¹⁴Large Catechism IV:41-42; Kolb and Wengert, 461.

¹⁵Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 122; Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 volumes (Weimar, 1883-), TR Number 263 (hereafter abbreviated as *WA*). Also see the "table talk" recorded by Caspar Heydenreich on February 18, 1542 where Luther addressed predestination (Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 131-138; *WA*, TR Number 5658a). Here Luther counseled those who are troubled by questions of divine election not to attempt to "climb into heaven" but to "begin at the bottom with the incarnate Son and with your terrible original sin" (Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 133). Luther said "God did not come down from heaven to make you uncertain about predestination or cause you to despise the Sacraments. He instituted them to make you more certain and to drive such speculations out of your mind" (Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 133). Luther continued ". . . these speculations about predestination are of the devil. If they assault you, say: 'I am a son of God. I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for me. Let me alone, devil'" (Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 134).

¹⁶Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 122.

We should rely on these and say: "I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus Christ. I have received the Sacrament. What do I care if I have been predestined or not?" In Christ, God has furnished us with a foundation on which to stand and from which we can go up to heaven. He is the only way and the only gate that leads to the Father. If we despise this foundation and in the devil's name start building at the roof, we shall surely fall. If only we are able to believe that the promises have been spoken by God and see behind them the one who has spoken them, we shall magnify that Word. But because we hear it as it comes to us through the lips of a man, we are apt to pay as little attention to it as to the mooing of a cow.¹⁷

From this we may observe several aspects of Luther's understanding of baptism. First, baptism is a sign of God's favor in Christ and is based on His promises. Luther wrote "Now the first thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise. . . . This promise must be set far above all the glitter of works, vows, religious orders and whatever else man has introduced, for on it all our salvation depends."¹⁸ In 1519 Luther spoke of baptism as a sign and token that separates Christians from the unbaptized, baptism is not merely an identifying mark or badge. The sign is fulfilled in that which it signifies, namely dying and rising in Christ. Therefore, Luther wrote:

The significance 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. As we can plainly see, the sacrament or sign of baptism is quickly over. But the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, which it signifies, lasts as long as we live and is completed only in death. Then it is that a person is completely sunk in baptism, and that which baptism signifies comes to pass.¹⁹

A similar point is made the following year in *The Babylonian Captivity*:

Baptism, then, signifies two things – death and resurrection, that is full and complete justification. When the minister immerses the child in the water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth

¹⁷Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 122 (WA, TR, Number 2631b).

¹⁸*Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:58-59.

¹⁹*Holy and Blessed*, LW 35:30.

again, it signifies life. Thus Paul expounds it in Rom. 6 (:4): "We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life." This death and resurrection we call the new creation, regeneration, and spiritual birth. This should not be understood only allegorically as the death of sin and the life of grace, as many understand it, but as actual death and resurrection. For baptism is not a false sign.²⁰

Baptism is an efficacious sign because of God's word of promise. "Now, the first thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise," says Luther. Faith clings to the promise: "For just as the truth of the divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us in baptism."²¹

Second, baptism can be trusted because it is the work of the Triune God. Also in *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther asserts "For man baptizes, and yet he does not baptize. He baptizes in that he performs the work of immersing the person to be baptized; he does not baptize, because in doing so he acts not on his own authority but in God's stead. Hence, we ought to receive baptism at human hands just as if Christ himself, indeed God, himself, were baptizing us with his own hands."²² This same point is made again in the Large Catechism: "To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act. From this fact everyone can easily conclude that it is of much greater value than the work of any human being or saint. For what human work can possibly be greater than God's work?"²³

Therefore, Luther urges those who are troubled by satanic assaults on faith to rely on baptism. Baptism is to be used as weaponry against Satan as he attacks the conscience: "Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: 'But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have

²⁰LW 36:67-68.

²¹*Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:58-59.

²²LW 36:62.

²³*Large Catechism* IV:10; Kolb and Wengert, 457-458.

eternal life, both in body and soul."²⁴ And again "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory."²⁵

Baptism also gives consolation to those who mourn. Caspar Heyenreich, a frequent guest in Luther's home and court chaplain to the Duchess Catherine of Saxony, was away from home when his wife gave birth to a son who died soon after birth. On April 24, 1545, Luther wrote Heyenreich a brief note of sympathy. In it Luther recognized the distress that his friend was experiencing on account of his absence at the birth and death of his son. Yet, Luther urged Heyenreich to take comfort in the knowledge that his son was baptized: "Lay aside your sorrowing. Rejoice, rather, because he was reborn in Christ and because you will see him in glory whom you have not seen in this wretched world."²⁶

Luther treasured baptism as a means of comfort because baptism delivers the benefits of Jesus' cross. A sermon that Luther preached on the occasion of the baptism of Bernhard, son of Prince John of Anhalt on April 2, 1540 illustrates this well. Using the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:13-17 as his text, Luther sees baptism as the location of a "beautiful,

²⁴*Large Catechism* IV:44-45; Kolb and Wengert, 462.

²⁵*Large Catechism* IV:83; Kolb and Wengert, 466.

²⁶Tappert, *Luther: Letters*, 80 (WA, Br XI 76). As this newborn infant was baptized, Luther directs the grieving father to the certainty of the sacrament. However, Luther is sensitive to those who mourn the death of a child who died before the sacrament could be administered. He takes up this topic in a tract of 1542, *Comfort for Women who Have Had a Miscarriage* (LW 43:247-250; *Ein Trost den Weibern, welchen es ungerade gegangen ist mit Kindergebaeren*, WA 53, 205-208). Here Luther urges the mothers of these unbaptized infants to trust in the mercy and faithfulness of God. Using the example of Monica who prayed for the conversion of Augustine, Luther reminds mourning parents that God has heard their prayers. He writes ". . . because the mother is a believing Christian it is to be hoped that her heartfelt cry and deep longing to bring her child to be baptized will be accepted by God as an effective prayer" (LW 42:248-249). Luther also uses the Old Testament to comfort these women: "Who can doubt that those Israelite children who died before they could be circumcised on the eighth day were yet saved by the prayers of their parents in view of the promise that God will be their God. God (they say) has not limited his power to the sacraments, but has made a covenant with us through his word. Therefore we ought to speak differently and in a more consoling way with Christians than with pagans or wicked people" (LW 42:249).

glorious exchange" where Christ takes upon Himself the sin and guilt of the sinner and bestows on the sinner His righteousness and holiness:

Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who is nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? And then besides dies the shameful death of the Cross for the sake of my sins, through which I have deserved death and condemnation, and grants me his righteousness, in order that I may live with him eternally in glorious and unspeakable joy. Through this blessed exchange, in which Christ changes places with us (something the heart can only grasp in faith), and through nothing else, are we freed from sin and death and given his righteousness and life as our own.²⁷

Faith receives all that Christ has done on the cross in baptism. In the Large Catechism Luther comments that both cross and baptism are a gift to be received, not a work to be done: "Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the Lord Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith."²⁸ In language reminiscent of the Large Catechism, Luther preached:

²⁷LW51:316. Tranvik observes, "Following Paul in Romans 6:4, Luther sees baptism as the way the cross and resurrection become contemporaneous with the believer. Baptism effects the 'joyous exchange' (*froehliche Wechsel*), a term Luther used frequently to express his understanding of the atonement" ("Luther on Baptism," 79). Also see Robert Kolb: "... one of the Pauline themes regarding baptism which Luther employed from his earliest treatments of the sacrament, that of dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3-11; Col. 2:11-15), is used in this commentary (Galatians 1535) in connection with his presentation of the justification of the sinner before God. It occurs particularly in the context of Luther's image of the 'joyous exchange' of the sinner's unrighteousness for Christ's righteousness. Thus, even in the absence of many explicit references to baptism, in this most important work of Luther's appears one more confirmation of the thesis that Luther's doctrine of justification through faith was shaped, at least in part, by the baptismal theology of the apostle, as expressed above all in Romans 6:3-11 and Colossians 2:11-15" ("God Kills to Make Alive: Romans 6 and Luther's Understanding of Justification (1535)," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 [Spring 1998]: 34).

²⁸*Large Catechism* IV:37; Kolb and Wengert, 461.

Such knowledge and faith produces a joyful heart, which is certain and can say: I know of no more sins, for they are all lying on Christ's back. Now, they can never lie both upon him and upon us. Therefore no one can say that he makes satisfaction for sin through his own righteousness or discipline; for atonement and redemption of sin belongs to Christ alone. But Christ is neither my work nor yours nor any man's work. Nor are they his body and blood, which he sacrificed for our sins; he is true God, true man, who bears the sins of the whole world. But he takes them and drowns and smothers them in baptism and the Cross, and lets you proclaim that he has given his body for you and poured out his blood for the forgiveness of your sins.²⁹

Baptism, therefore, gives the stricken conscience the consolation of God's favor because it is God's work. Again in words that echo the Large Catechism, Luther draws on the baptism of Jesus as the template for the Christian's baptism as he proclaims that "baptism is not a useless, empty thing, as the sectarians blasphemously say, but in it all righteousness is fulfilled."³⁰ In baptism, sins are forgiven and faith is fortified. Luther continues:

Hence, not only are sins forgiven in baptism, but we are also made sure and certain that God is well pleased with it that he together with Christ and his Holy Spirit, propose to be present when it is administered and he himself will be the baptizer; although this glorious revelation of the divine majesty does not now occur visibly, as it did that time on the Jordan, since it is sufficient that it occurred once as a witness and a sign.³¹

Luther sees the baptism of Jesus as a manifestation of the gospel. We are to look on the Lord's baptism in the Jordan with eyes of faith and so, Luther says, "Interpret this glorious revelation and divine radiance and splendor which shone forth above the baptism of Christ as happening for us."³²

²⁹LW 51:317.

³⁰LW 51:318.

³¹LW 51:318-319.

³²LW 51:319. The year after Luther preached this sermon, he wrote his catechism hymn, "To Jordan Came, the Christ our Lord" (*Lutheran Worship*, hymn 223). Using the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan as a basis for this hymn, Luther sets in hymnic form

Engaging in a catechetical polemic against those who would make baptism only a sign, like a brand that marks a sheep, Luther argues that because God's word has been added to the water, the word creates and effects what it proclaims: "For where the Word of God, by which he created heaven and earth and all things, is present, there God himself is present with his power and might."³³ The Holy Trinity is the actor in baptism: "For when it is done in his name it is done indeed by the Holy Trinity."³⁴ Luther exhorts the congregation to look not at the hand of the minister who administers baptism, but to the word of God that establishes baptism as a bath of regeneration.

Luther then makes a decisive move in the sermon to link cross and baptism more firmly. This he does by using John 19:34 and 1 John 5:16 to establish the point that to be baptized is to be washed in the blood of Christ. Luther sees an image of baptism in the mingled blood and water flowing from the side of the crucified Christ. Likewise, Luther maintains that when the Apostle refers to Christ as coming not only by water but with water and blood (1 John 5:6), "he is always wanting to mingle the blood in the baptism in order that we may see in it the innocent, rosy-red blood of Christ. For human eyes, it is true, there appears to be nothing there but pure white water, but Saint John wants us to open the inward and spiritual eyes of faith in order to see, not only water, but also the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁵ So, to be baptized is to be washed and

many of the themes set forth in the 1540 sermon, especially the linkage between Christ's atonement and baptism. See Robin Leaver, "Luther's Catechism Hymns 5. Baptism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1998): 161-169. Leaver notes the parallelism between the Small Catechism's treatment of baptism and the stanzas of this hymn. Note also how the hymn accents the comfort that faith is given through the Word and promise of the Triune God in baptism as baptism is a bath that washes away transgression and quenches the bitterness of death (stanza 1), bestows the Spirit in the water (stanza 2), causes the Trinity to dwell with us (stanza 4), gives the blessing of salvation and makes one a joyful heir of heaven (stanza 5), and brings healing and pardon, freeing us from sins inherited from Adam and committed by ourselves (stanza 7).

³³LW 51:320.

³⁴LW 51:321.

³⁵LW 51:325. Compare with stanza 7 of Luther's baptismal hymn: All that the mortal eye beholds / Is water as we pour it. / Before the eye of faith unfolds / The pow'r of Jesus' merit. / For here it sees the crimson flood / To all our ills bring healing; / The wonders of his precious blood / The love of God revealing, / Assuring his own pardon (*Lutheran Worship*, hymn 223).

renewed by the blood of Christ's atoning death. Baptism is now the place where God has located the blood that brings forgiveness. Luther continued:

This blood and its merit and power he put into baptism, in order that in baptism we might receive it. For whenever a person receives baptism in faith this is the same as if he were visibly washed and cleansed of sin with the blood of Christ. For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. But he takes this forgiveness and tucks it into baptism.³⁶

Luther concludes the sermon by urging his hearers to "magnify and value our precious holy baptism" as a "true image and sign, erected by God himself, in which we surely find and meet with his grace."³⁷ The conclusion of the 1540 sermon recalls Luther's praise of baptism in the Large Catechism: "No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no work on earth can acquire."³⁸

In summary, Luther sees baptism as an evangelical means of consolation in times of *Anfechtung*, as well as physical suffering, because it draws the believer outside of himself into Christ's saving death. The fact that baptism is external provides faith with a reliable anchorage outside of wavering emotions. The certainty of baptism is to be found in the trustworthiness of God's promise and work. Mark Tranvik aptly describes Luther's position:

Luther also underscored the importance of the external sign because of faith's fragility. He likens faith to "butter in the sunshine." While Luther will always maintain that trust in the promise makes baptism

Quitmeyer's translation fails fully to convey Luther's thought as Luther does not speak generically of baptism as an assurance or even revelation of God's love, but of baptism as the agency of liberation from the sin of Adam, as well as our own, through the blood of Christ. Note the original German text: Das Aug allein das Wasser sieht, / Wie Menschen Wasser giessen; / Der Glaub im Geist die Kraft versteht / Des Bluttes Jesu Christi, / Und ist vor ihm ein rote Flut, / Von Christi Blut gefaerbet, / Die allen Schaden heilen tut, / Von Adam her geerbet, / Auch von uns selbst begangen (WA 35:468-470).

³⁶LW 51:325.

³⁷LW 51:327-328.

³⁸Large Catechism IV:46; Kolb and Wengert, 462.

efficacious, he is wary of focusing on faith: "One must believe, but we neither should nor can know it for certain." Therefore, one dare not base his baptism on his faith. For who can be sure if he really believes? The enthusiasts' stress on subjectivity, like the late medieval view of penance and monasticism, troubles Luther because it puts the question of salvation back into the hands of a frail and doubting humanity. God, however, is merciful. He comes to us via outward means – water, bread, and wine. He pledges himself to us in these visible and tangible signs, for "faith must have something to believe – something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand."³⁹

Baptism is a place of refuge for the troubled and distressed soul because it encompasses the whole of the Christian's life. Already in *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther condemned Jerome's notion of penance as "the second plank after the shipwreck of baptism as a pernicious error."⁴⁰ He repeats this condemnation in the Large Catechism, concluding that Jerome's view "takes away the value of baptism, making of it no further use to us."⁴¹ Baptism has value precisely because it embraces the entire life of the believer from font to grave and entails "daily contrition and repentance" to use the words of the Small Catechism.⁴² Luther is explicit on this point in the Large Catechism: "Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth."⁴³

³⁹Tranvik, "Luther on Baptism," 83-84.

⁴⁰LW 36:61.

⁴¹Large Catechism IV:82.

⁴²Small Catechism IV:12; Kolb and Wengert, 360.

⁴³Large Catechism IV:65; Kolb and Wengert, 465. Also note Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Luther*, 170: "The circularity of the Christian life for Luther is reflected in several aspects of his theology. Conversion itself becomes, not an event, but a state to be persevered in by the Christian who must be *semper penitens*. The indivisibility of grace is another expression of the same principle; for Luther the Christian is no longer a pilgrim travelling from one degree, mode, or means of grace to another. But perhaps it is in the *simul* doctrine that the circularity of the Christian life comes to its clearest expression. A Christian never progresses beyond the need for justification because of the nature of justification itself—he remains a sinner although righteousness is imputed to him as he lives by faith. But living in faith is a continuous necessity, not a once-for-all event. Sin remains, the need for repentance and faith remains. The person who is *simul justus peccator*, who is living at once in two kingdoms, who is both

For Luther, the medieval penitential practices are replaced by a renewed emphasis on the baptismal life as the life of repentance and faith. Confession and absolution remain, but are envisioned in connection to baptism and a return to the forgiveness of sins bestowed in baptism.

flesh and spirit, is, in Oberman's phrase, 'man between God and the devil.' The life of faith is no complacent reflection on past victories but an armed struggle."



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