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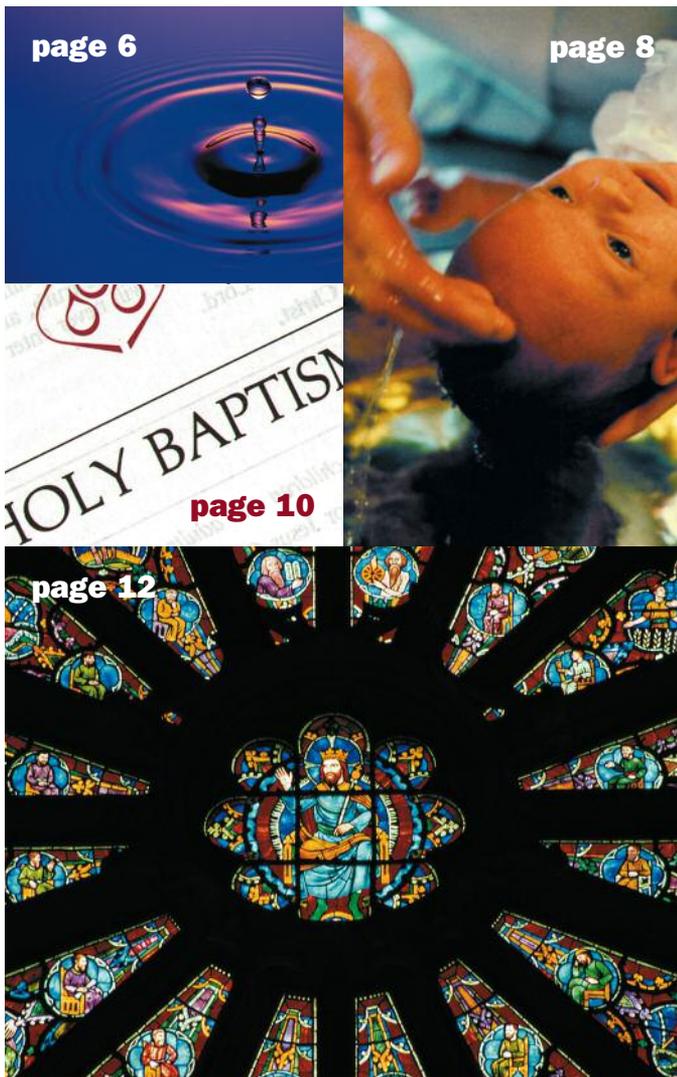
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“Indeed, if I had the matter under my control, I would not want God to speak to me from heaven or to appear to me; but this I would want—and my daily prayers are directed to this end—that I might have the proper respect and true appreciation for the gift of Baptism, that I have been baptized.”

(Luther’s Works, 3:165).

For Martin Luther, Baptism is inextricably linked to the chief doctrine of the Christian faith—justification by grace through faith. Baptism is the means through which the Holy Spirit applies the merits of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection to sinners. For Luther, Baptism is Christological, it is where the saving righteousness of Christ is applied to sinners. It is God’s act through water and the Word of God that works “forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe” (Small Catechism, Tappert edition, 348-9). Indeed, in considering Baptism, Luther is scarcely able to contain himself, “Ah, dear Christians, let us not value and administer this unspeakable gift so indolently and indifferently; for Baptism is our only comfort and admits to every blessing of God and to the communion of the saints” (Luther Works, 53:103).

And so it is appropriate to speak as follows, “I am baptized into Christ; I have the pure Word of God; I hear it; I receive the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper; I also believe and confess all the articles of the Christian faith: wherefore it cannot be, but that my life and actions must be pleasing to God; I am a Christian in truth, and in the right way to be saved.” This is the profound statement of the unshaken confidence that the Christian has in the objective means of grace. And such a perspective is especially welcome in our subjective times where therapeutic approaches to Christianity seem to carry the day.

The unfortunate thing, though, is that the previous statement was criticized in its original context. And what is more amazing is that this critic saw himself as an heir of Luther! He concludes that such a perspective can lead one into laziness and unbelief. Worst of all, this characterizes Lutheranism, “This, alas! is the general, but false reasoning of many in these days, who regard their outward performances as constituting true righteousness . . . Look, therefore, into this, and learn to judge of thyself by the inward frame of thy soul . . . Has thou received the unction from above, and art thou possessed of the fruits of the Spirit, that demonstrate a Christian?”

Johann Arndt (1521-1621) penned these words in his *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum—Four Books on True Christianity*, published from 1606-1609 (trans. Charles F. Schaeffer [Philadelphia: Lutheran Bookstore, 1868], 175). In these books Arndt provided a road map for the movement later known as Pietism in the latter part of the 1600s. Here Arndt made a critical departure from Luther, emphasizing the work of Christ in the heart of man over against the objective work of Christ. In other words, while it was important what Christ did, it was equally, perhaps more important how that work of Christ affected a person.

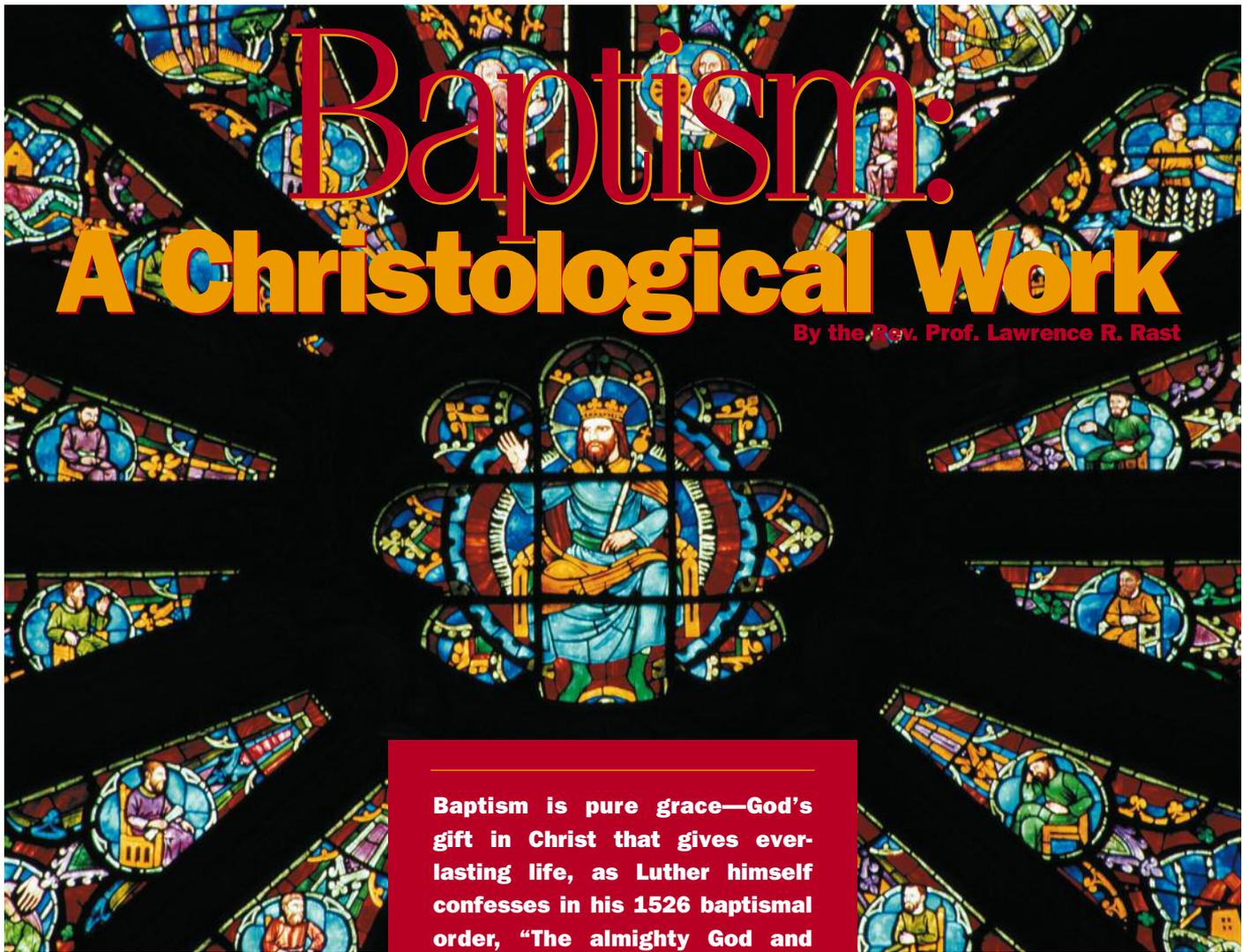
Half a century after Arndt’s death, Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705) sought to reintroduce Arndt to Lutheranism. After

attending the University of Strasbourg, Spener entered the Lutheran ministry in 1663. He later served as pastor at Frankfort am Main, and there authored a book that would help change the course of Lutheranism. Asked to write a preface to a book of Arndt’s sermons, Spener took advantage of the opportunity to provide advocacy for reform. Assuming Arndt’s emphasis on the inner man, Spener provided a program for reform that stressed Bible study, the priesthood of all believers, the application of doctrine to life, irenicism in inter-Christian relations, a reform of theological education, and a renewal of the preaching style of Apostolic times.

The work soon came to stand on its own, going under the title of *Pia Desideria*, or *Pious Desires*. While not a systematic treatise in the classic sense, *Pia Desideria* is an earnest call for Lutheran renewal—Spener is adamant that his program is simply reformatory, not revolutionary. And so he consistently provides an apologetic for his theology. For our purposes baptism will take the center. For example, “Nor do I know how to praise Baptism and its power highly enough. I believe that it is the real ‘washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit’ (Titus 3:5), or as Luther says in the Catechism, ‘it effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants (not merely promises) eternal salvation’ (*Pia Desideria*, 63). But does he adequately recapture Luther? Or are there points of divergence. A little deeper digging reveals the following, “One should therefore emphasize that the divine means of Word and Sacrament are concerned with the inner man. Hence, it is not enough that we hear the Word with our outward ear, but we must let it penetrate our heart, so that we may hear the Holy Spirit speak there, that is, with vibrant emotion and comfort feel the sealing of the Spirit and the power of the Word. Nor is it enough to be baptized, but the inner man, where we have put on Christ in Baptism, must also keep Christ on and bear witness to Him in our outward life . . . The real power of Christianity consists of this” (*Pia Desideria*, 117).

Thus, Spener, and later Pietism with him, begins to move away from seeing Baptism as the objective work of God. Rather, its effects are conditioned upon the willingness of the human participant to own his covenantal responsibility. Further, the ongoing efficaciousness of Baptism is predicated on the willful participation of the individual believer in keeping God’s commandments. Put another way, Spener sees the salvation as a process, begun at Baptism, which finds its fulfillment in the sanctified Christian life. This is the nature of the covenantal relationship for Spener. Again criticizing those who see Baptism as that which gives and guarantees salvation, Spener writes, “Thereby these blind people turn the holy intention of God upside down. Your God has indeed given you Baptism . . . but He has made a covenant with you—from His side a covenant of grace and from your side a covenant of faith and good conscience. This covenant must last through your whole life. It will be in vain that you comfort yourself in your Baptism and its promise of grace and salvation if for your part you do not also remain in the covenant of faith and a good conscience or, having departed therefrom, return to it with sincere repentance” (*Pia Desideria*, 66).

All of Spener’s claims aside, this is a theology that compromises Luther’s understanding of Baptism. Where for Luther Baptism is God’s work alone, and therefore its effects are sure and certain, for Spener and Pietism, Baptism’s ongoing efficaciousness is dependent upon the will of man. In other words, Baptism for Spener is simply the beginning of the



Baptism: A Christological Work

By the Rev. Prof. Lawrence R. Rast

Baptism is pure grace—God’s gift in Christ that gives everlasting life, as Luther himself confesses in his 1526 baptismal order, “The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath regenerated thee through water and the Holy Ghost and hath forgiven all thy sin, strengthen thee with His grace to life everlasting. Amen”

process of salvation, whereas for Luther it works salvation. Why? At the risk of being redundant, it is God’s doing. Commenting on Psalm 110:3, Luther notes, “Here Christ presents a parable or picture of the spiritual birth. The wind illustrates the same thing as the dew at dawn. Both pictures beautifully present the operation whereby Christians, or children of God are made—not by the power or intellectual capacity of men but only by the heavenly operation of the Holy Spirit, and yet through the Word, the preaching of the Gospel, and Baptism . . . You can see the water of Baptism as you can see the dew . . . but you cannot hear or understand the Spirit, or what He accomplishes thereby; that a human being is cleaned in Baptism and becomes a saint in the hands of the priest, so that from a child of hell he is changed into a child of God. Nevertheless, this is truly and actually accomplished. One has to say, in view of the power, which attends it that the Holy Spirit was present at the event and was making believers by means of water and the Word. No human power can possibly accomplish this” (Luther’s Works, 13:303).

In contrast to Pietism’s self-absorption and anthropocentrism, Luther clearly teaches the divine character of Baptism—it is

God’s work! Baptism is pure grace—God’s gift in Christ that gives everlasting life, as Luther himself confesses in his 1526 baptismal order, “The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath regenerated thee through water and the Holy Ghost and hath forgiven all thy sin, strengthen thee with His grace to life everlasting. Amen” (Luther’s Works, 53:109).

We cannot deny—on the contrary, daily experience convinces us—that there are not a few who think that all that Christianity requires of them (and that having done this, they have done quite enough in their service of God) is that they are baptized, hear the preaching of God’s Word, confess and receive absolution, and go to the Lord’s Supper, no matter how their hearts are disposed at the time, whether or not there are fruits which follow, provided they at least live in such a way that the civil authorities do not find them liable to punishment (Pia Desideria, 66).

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