

Baptism and Justification in the Theology of Johann Gerhard

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Introduction

Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) is often viewed as the greatest theologian of what Robert Preus referred to as the “golden age” of Lutheran scholastic orthodoxy.¹ After serving as superintendent at Heldburg as a young man, Gerhard spent most of his career at the University of Jena as a professor of theology. Among Gerhard’s chief works are his multivolume *Loci Communes Theologici*,² as well as a series of biblical commentaries.³ Another significant contribution is his works on Reformation apologetics, in which he sought to answer Robert Bellarmine and other Catholic apologists of the Counter-Reformation.⁴ Gerhard’s most famous work in this genre is his two-volume *Confessio Catholica*.⁵ Beyond these mainly academic works, Gerhard also produced a wide range of devotional literature aimed at helping ordinary Christians live out a life bearing the fruits of their salvation in Christ.⁶

In this essay, we will examine Gerhard’s understanding of the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and its relationship to justification. To achieve this, we will focus on two main works by Gerhard, namely his lengthy work *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper* (1610)⁷ and his posthumous and incomplete

¹ Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970–1972), 1:52–53.

² See Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 18 vols., trans. Richard Dinda and Joshua Hayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006–2024), and Johann Gerhard, *Loci Communes Theologici*, 9 vols., ed. Eduard Preuss (Berlin: Schlawitz, 1863–1885).

³ See Johann Gerhard, *Annotations on the Revelation of St. John the Theologian*, trans. Paul Rydecki (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2016), and Johann Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, trans. Joshua Hayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

⁴ See Robert Bellarmine, *Controversies of the Christian Faith*, 3 vols., trans. Kenneth Baker (Saddle River, NJ: Keep the Faith, 2022–2025).

⁵ Johann Gerhard, *Confessio Catholica*, 2 vols. (Jena: Steinmann, 1634–1637).

⁶ See Johann Gerhard, *Meditations on Divine Mercy*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003); Johann Gerhard, *The Daily Exercise of Piety*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2015); Johann Gerhard, *Sacred Meditations*, trans. Wade Johnston (Saginaw, MI: Magdeburg Press, 2008); and Johann Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, 3 vols., trans. Elmer Hohle (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2013–2015).

⁷ Johann Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper* (1610), trans. Elmer Hohle (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000).

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commentary on Romans, published in 1644 and entitled *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*.⁸ In selecting these two texts, we have intentionally skipped over the locus on Baptism in Gerhard's *Loci Communes Theologici*, since it covers (and, indeed, recycles) much of the same material found in the aforementioned work of 1610.

As we shall observe, Gerhard makes the notion of the promise of justification and its effective outworking in the life of the Christian through sanctification central to his treatment of the sacrament of Baptism. For Gerhard, God is faithful to his promises of justification and redemption through the whole course of salvation history. Baptism is simply the covenantal promise of grace and justification as it has been manifested throughout the history of salvation. Working from the premise that God is faithful to his promises of forgiveness and grace, Gerhard is able to see the promise of justification present in Baptism as running through various types of the Old Testament, as well as the ritual life of Old Testament Israel. Indeed, as we shall see, Gerhard has no difficulty characterizing circumcision as not merely a type of baptism but, at times, as simply the means by which the same grace of justification given in Baptism was administered in the Old Testament. Gerhard also enters into the debate regarding whether the baptism of John the Baptizer was Christian Baptism, and whether John's baptism effected salvation, and affirms both. Ultimately, for Gerhard, the sacrament of Baptism manifests God's faithfulness and willingness to forgive sinners for the sake of the blood of Jesus.

The Comprehensive Explanation (1610): Baptism's Meaning and Types of Baptism

Gerhard's early work on the two sacraments of the New Testament era seems to grow out of his aforementioned postdoctoral career as the superintendent of Heldburg after 1606. During this period, Gerhard sought to improve the education of local parish pastors by holding weekly disputations on various doctrinal topics.⁹ Gerhard begins his work by grounding his expositions in the literal word of the Bible, by engaging in a brief examination of how the term "baptism" is used in the Scriptures.

Gerhard notes that the term "baptism" (βάπτισμα) possesses a wide range of meaning in the New Testament documents. "Baptism" in many contexts refers merely to washing, for example, the washing of hands or earthen vessels as associated with food preparation. This meaning is employed by the Synoptic evangelists

⁸ Johann Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Paul Rydecki (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2014).

⁹ Erdmann Fischer, *The Life of John Gerhard*, trans. Richard Dinda and Elmer Hohle (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000), 51–60.

when describing the ritual washing controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees.¹⁰ The term “baptism” can also be used in several metaphorical senses. 1 Corinthians 10 speaks of the children of Israel passing through the Red Sea and the divine Glory Cloud as an act of being “baptized” into Moses.¹¹ The term is also associated with the bearing of the cross, as in the case of the Synoptic passion predictions in which Jesus speaks of his future suffering on the cross as a “baptism” (Matt 20:20–22).¹²

Nevertheless, as Gerhard shows, the term is often associated with the giving of the Spirit and his work of justification and sanctification. Baptism’s association with the work of the Spirit is by no means in conflict with the term’s association with various forms of literal and figurative washings. Obviously, Baptism for the forgiveness of sins is associated with water and with the cross as a source of the forgiveness that the sacrament offers. Hence, John the Baptizer, as forerunner, will baptize with water, but Jesus, the predicted messianic purifier, will baptize with the Spirit and fire (i.e., will justify and sanctify) before the great and terrible day of the Lord.¹³

Note that Gerhard is careful to point out that saying that the contrast between John baptizing with water and Christ with fire and the Spirit is not the contrast between two different events, that is, one physical and the other interior and spiritual (as contemporary Pentecostals claim). Rather, Gerhard asserts that as John baptizes with water, Christ simultaneously invisibly works through water Baptism to baptize with the Spirit. Another reference point in the passages about the baptism of fire and the Spirit is Pentecost (Acts 1:5, 11:16). Pentecost is associated with this gift of the Spirit, but also with the Holy Spirit coming on believers after the Apostle Paul has laid his hands upon them (Acts 19:4).¹⁴

Gerhard moves on to the various terms used for the sacrament of Baptism in Scripture as well as the types within the Old Testament.¹⁵ When discussing the terms for the sacrament, the terminology consistently associates Baptism with a literal washing with water and the word of promise. The Old Testament types also feed into and become a background for the terminology associated with Baptism in the New Testament. Hence, for example, the New Testament associates Baptism with the flood of Genesis (1 Pet 3:20–21), because like the biblical flood, Baptism cleanses from sin and purifies the human subject into a new creation (Gen 6).¹⁶

¹⁰ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 7.

¹¹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 10.

¹² Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 8.

¹³ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 9.

¹⁴ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 9.

¹⁵ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 15–20.

¹⁶ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 12, 18.

Likewise, Baptism is a “circumcision made without hands” (Col 2:11).¹⁷ Later, Gerhard will argue that circumcision had the same effect in the old dispensation as Baptism does in the era of the New Testament. Considered in itself, circumcision was certainly a typological prefiguration of Baptism, but it was also an effective means of the reception of the covenant of grace.¹⁸ In certain passages Gerhard seems to be saying that circumcision not only anticipated Baptism but also, in a sense, applied the promise of Christ and therefore worked the same justifying and sanctifying power of Baptism before the coming of Jesus. Gerhard writes:

God the Lord indeed graciously promises that He wants to be our children’s God, but that they nevertheless have to be presented to Him and received unto His grace-covenant through the ordinary means of Baptism. In the same manner, as in earlier times of the Old Testament, it was necessary that the children of the Israelites had to be received into God’s covenant through circumcision, so also, from our perspective, there must always be a means through which we become recipients of God’s grace and His promised blessings.¹⁹

Gerhard now moves on to other types of Baptism in the Old Testament. Those who are familiar with the works of Gerhard recognize that like others in the period of Lutheran orthodoxy, he is extremely fond of the New Testament and the ancient church’s practice of typological readings of Scripture.²⁰ To clarify for those less familiar: Typological readings of Scripture are ones in which one event in the history of salvation prefigures a later one. A quintessential example of this might be found in the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, when in a hillock in the vicinity of Jerusalem (close to the later Golgotha) a father (Abraham) offers up as a sacrifice his miraculously born son (Isaac) and receives him back in a metaphorical resurrection. From the perspective of the interpretive tradition of the earliest church fathers, the binding of Isaac is very clearly a prefiguration of the crucifixion.²¹

Although at times extremely creative, Gerhard’s Old Testament potential prophecies and types of Baptism may appear to many twenty-first-century confessional Lutherans as being somewhat strained. For example, the prophecy mentioned by Gerhard is Psalm 29:10: “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood” (ESV). Our author translates this verse as “The LORD sits enthroned to initiate the flood.” Gerhard notes that he has previously shown that Baptism is called a “flood.” The idea seems to be that God in his sovereignty (i.e., “enthronement”) uses his power to

¹⁷ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 13–14. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

¹⁸ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 156.

¹⁹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 155–156.

²⁰ See Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

²¹ See Thomas Oden and Mark Sheridan, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament Vol. 2: Genesis 12–50* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 104–105.

initiate the baptismal flood that cleanses the world from sin and death.²² Gerhard notes other verses that predict Baptism. “Yet the city of God shall remain exquisitely cheerful with its fountain; there are the holy dwellings of the most High” (Ps 46:4 as cited in Gerhard)—here the “city of God” is viewed as the Christian church and the fountains are the baptismal font.²³ Another passage is Psalm 103:5, which reads (as cited in Gerhard), “who makes your mouth happy, and you become young like an eagle.”²⁴ Here the idea is that since Baptism is often called a “rebirth” and to be reborn is to become young again, then the reference to becoming “young like an eagle” is a reference to the justifying and sanctifying work of Baptism.²⁵

Gerhard finds more plausible prefigurations of the justifying and sanctifying properties of Baptism in the texts of the major Old Testament prophets. One rectilinear prophecy of Baptism is God’s promise to Isaiah to give water to the thirsty and pour out his life-giving Spirit (Isa 44:3–4). Also, the promised resurrected Suffering Servant would “sprinkle many nations” (Isa 52:15).²⁶ Gerhard also sees a prophetic prefiguration of Baptism in the promises of God in Ezekiel to wash the Israelites from their evil deeds (Ezek 16:9, 36:25–26), as well as the promise of waters flowing from the eschatological temple (Ezek 47:1, 47:5, 47:8–9).²⁷ Gerhard’s interpretation here is particularly compelling, because of the New Testament documents’ emphasis on Baptism working both justification and sanctification characterized as a cleansing of sin (Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5). With regard to the imagery of cleansing waters coming forth from the eschatological temple, there is a clear connection between this type and the insistence of the New Testament documents that the church itself is the eschatological temple (1 Cor 3:16–17, 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:5). Since it is the church from which the “waters” of the Spirit’s justifying and sanctifying work flow out, it makes sense to read these Old Testament passages as typological prefigurations, or even rectilinear prophecies, of Baptism. The same interpretive principle applies to other passages that Gerhard mentions that deal with the flow of cleansing springs coming forth from the temple or the city of God (Joel 3:18; Mic 7:19; Zech 13:1).²⁸

Finally, Gerhard sees the flood, circumcision, and various ritual washings of the Old Testament as being types of Baptism.²⁹ Again, it is the cleansing from sin and the working of redemption in these acts that make them prefigurations of Baptism. For the flood and God’s act of redemption through Noah’s ark, Gerhard has an

²² Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 15.

²³ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 15.

²⁴ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 15.

²⁵ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 15.

²⁶ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 16.

²⁷ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 16.

²⁸ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 17.

²⁹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 17–18.

explicit New Testament text in the form of 1 Peter 3:20–21. As he did in a previous chapter, Gerhard also leans very heavily on Colossians 2:11–12.³⁰

The most interesting section of the chapter deals with water and redemption in the Levitical cult and the exodus. In Exodus 14, the salvation of the children of Israel and the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea were a prefiguration of the forgiveness of sins and the killing of our old nature through the sacramental act of Baptism.³¹ In Exodus 15, the sinking of the tree into the bitter waters to make the waters sweet is like the placement of Christ, the Tree of Life (Rev 22:2) in the waters of Baptism.³² The water flowing from the rock in the wilderness is a prefiguration of Baptism and its justifying and sanctifying properties. After all, when Christ died, water and blood flowed out of his side, signs of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (John 19:34). Paul tells us that Christ was the rock in the wilderness, and so a direct connection is made (1 Cor 10:4).³³ Other types of Baptism may be found in the ritual washings of the Old Testament, particularly those of the ritual washings connected with the cleansing of healed lepers (sin being spiritual leprosy).³⁴ The type of the ritual cleansing from leprosy is further connected with the literal miraculous cleansing of Naaman from leprosy through water in 2 Kings 5.³⁵

Of particular interest is the cleansing ritual of Numbers 19, wherein a red heifer is slaughtered and burned. Afterward, its ashes are to be mixed with water, and the sprinkling of this mixture is said to ritually cleanse the Israelites. Gerhard sees the burning of the heifer as being like the "burning" love of Christ, roasted on the cross, and then placed in water to cleanse believers from sin.³⁶

Ultimately, the importance of these early chapters lies in Gerhard's connection of Baptism to numerous Old Testament types that inculcate God's desire to remain faithful to his people through his work of cleansing them from sin. Like the Old Testament types, Baptism is a visible word of promise of salvation. As a visible word of promise, Baptism is an effective word, which both justifies and sanctifies sinners, thereby saving them from judgment and beginning the process of their renovation as new creations.

The Promise, Institution, and Administration of Baptism in the *Comprehensive Explanation* (1610)

In chapter 4 of his treatment of Baptism, Gerhard tackles the question of the institution of the sacrament of Baptism. Gerhard takes a somewhat controversial

³⁰ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 18.

³¹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 18.

³² Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 18.

³³ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 18–19.

³⁴ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 19.

³⁵ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 20.

³⁶ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 19–20.

position by arguing that the baptism of John the Baptizer was identical to later Christian Baptism.³⁷ His reasoning is as follows: Christ implicitly affirms in Matthew 21:25 that John's baptism was in fact from God. Although we are never directly told the story of God's revelation to John of the command and promise of Baptism, since Christ affirms that John's baptism is "From heaven" (Matt 21:25), we must infer that John received such a direct commission from the Lord and was divinely inspired.³⁸ Also, since it was for "the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4), it had the same meaning and purpose as Christian Baptism, namely, it was an efficacious sign of forgiveness. Although we are not told of John baptizing in the "name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" as in Christ's dominical command of Matthew 28, we must nevertheless surmise that he at least performed it in the name of God, who had commissioned him, and in view of the redemption that was offered by the coming purifier and redeemer whom he was announcing.³⁹ Hence, in Gerhard's treatment of John's baptism, the emphasis remains on the center of Baptism lying in God's effective and redeeming justificatory word.

It should be noted that although the question of whether John's baptism was Christian Baptism is highly speculative, it has been a contested matter in the history of Christian thought. In the history of Protestantism, probably the most famous debate on the subject was the conflict between Ulrich Zwingli and Balthasar Hubmaier. For those unfamiliar, Hubmaier was a Roman Catholic theologian who eventually settled down into parish ministry in the German town of Waldshut near Zürich, Switzerland. During this period, he joined the Reformation struggle as an Anabaptist. Although Hubmaier was initially a supporter of Zwingli, the two began to disagree about infant Baptism and entered into a protracted debate. When seeking refuge from the invading armies of the Holy Roman Empire in Zürich, Zwingli had Hubmaier arrested and tortured until he affirmed infant Baptism. After his release, Hubmaier reaffirmed his earlier position, and prior to his martyrdom in Vienna, he founded a number of Anabaptist churches.⁴⁰

Hubmaier and Zwingli's debate over the baptism of John was a sub-debate between the two Reformers regarding the question of the validity of infant Baptism.⁴¹ Hubmaier believed John's baptism was only for repentance and was administered only to adults. It was not Christian Baptism, because Christian Baptism is a sign of

³⁷ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 21–23.

³⁸ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 21.

³⁹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 22–23.

⁴⁰ See G. R. Potter, "Anabaptist Extraordinary: Balthasar Hubmaier, 1480–1528," *History Today* 26, no. 6 (June 1976): 377–384.

⁴¹ See Kurt Thompson, *The Proper Candidate: An Examination of the 1525 Debate Between Ulrich Zwingli and Balthasar Hubmaier Concerning Baptism* (dissertation, Liberty Univ., 2009).

faith that receives the remission of sins. Zwingli believed that the two baptisms were the same and were administered indiscriminately to adults and infants.⁴²

It should be noted that Lutherans have formed different opinions on the same subject. In “Loci Communes Theologici 1521,” Philipp Melancthon held that John’s baptism was identical to Christian Baptism.⁴³ A contemporary Lutheran theologian, David Scaer, argues that baptisms performed by John were only retroactively made Christian Baptism by means of the laying on of hands in events like the one described in Acts 19. The mention of the seeming rebaptism in verse 5 of the same chapter is really a metaphorical way of speaking of Paul’s laying on of hands.⁴⁴

Whatever opinion one takes on the subject of the relationship of John’s baptism to Christian Baptism, the most important thing to notice is how Gerhard’s treatment of the subject is tightly focused on the question of the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Whereas the debate between Hubmaier and Zwingli centered around the question of when it was appropriate for Christians to fulfill a legal and ritual requirement to show church membership (Hubmaier, adulthood; Zwingli, infancy and, for converts, at any age), Gerhard’s question is about what Baptism does, namely, forgive sins by God’s command and promise. Since John’s baptism performs this justifying task, it is in essence the same as Christian Baptism.

Gerhard next turns to the issue of the administration of Baptism. Again, Baptism is a mighty visible word of God that accomplishes what it speaks, namely, justification and sanctification. In accordance with the primacy of the word of God and its power in Baptism, Gerhard is dramatically less concerned with who administers Baptism than ancient North African Christianity and heretical sects like the Donatists were.⁴⁵ With Augustine⁴⁶ and the Augsburg Confession,⁴⁷ Gerhard affirms that although corruption of the clergy is a serious matter, it in no way invalidates or impedes the word of promise operating in such a way as to justify and sanctify sinners.⁴⁸ Again, it should be noted that this is because God’s promise to justify and sanctify sinners through the word and the water is always valid, even if humans are

⁴² Thompson, *Proper Candidate*, 49–50.

⁴³ Philipp Melancthon, “Loci Communes Theologici 1521,” in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 138–139.

⁴⁴ David Scaer, *Baptism*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, vol. 11 (Fort Wayne, IN: Luther Academy, 1999), 38.

⁴⁵ See W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952).

⁴⁶ See Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, first series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 4:411–514 (hereafter cited as *NPNF*¹), and Theodore T. Shimmyo, “St Augustine’s Treatment of the Donatist Heresy: An Interpretation,” *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 10, no. 3 (1991): 173–182.

⁴⁷ AC VIII. See Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 43.

⁴⁸ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 34–39.

wicked. Unlike Augustine and then later Roman Catholicism, Gerhard relies not on the concept of the *character indelebilis*, but simply on the promise of justification for the sake of the blood of Jesus.⁴⁹

In the same manner, Gerhard has little difficulty with women performing Baptisms, although such a task should normally be performed by pastors for the sake of good order.⁵⁰ The question of whether it was legitimate for women to perform Baptism was not one of merely academic speculation in Gerhard's context. In the early modern period, with a high infant mortality rate, it was not uncommon for midwives to perform emergency Baptisms in cases of difficult deliveries to protect the salvation of infants.⁵¹

The Reformed tradition was generally against the practice of emergency Baptisms. Calvin rejected not only the practice of emergency Baptisms by midwives, but also the practice of emergency Baptisms by clergy.⁵² In the 1559 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin argues that women baptizing violates right order within the church. Also, since God has already elected the child, Baptism is only a seal of what God has already done. Consequently, if the outward sign of election is omitted due to circumstances beyond the control of the parents or local church, it takes nothing away from the child's salvation.⁵³

Following Luther's assertion that all members of the royal priesthood can baptize (including women),⁵⁴ in Gerhard's treatment, the emphasis is on the promise of Baptism and not on the gender of who performs Baptism.⁵⁵ Since, as he previously established, the same promise (i.e., the promise of Christ) was present in

⁴⁹ Council of Trent, session 7 (March 3, 1547), "Decree on the Sacraments," can. 9, in Heinrich Denzinger et al., eds., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 390, no. 1609.

⁵⁰ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 29–32.

⁵¹ Merry Wiesner, "The midwives of south Germany and the public/private dichotomy," in *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*, ed. Hilary Marland (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 84–85.

⁵² Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 503–504, and Karen Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community, 1536–1564* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 67–78.

⁵³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 4.15.21–22. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 2:1321–1323 (hereafter cited as McNeill and Lewis).

⁵⁴ Luther writes, "So when women baptize, they exercise the function of the priesthood legitimately and do not as a private act but part of the public ministry of the Church to which belongs only the universal priesthood." Martin Luther, *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976), vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986), vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 40:23 (hereafter cited as AE). Luther also writes, "A woman can baptize and administer the word of life, by which sin is taken away, eternal death is abolished, the prince of the world is cast out, heaven bestowed; in short by which the divine majesty pours itself forth through all the soul." Luther, *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), AE 40:25.

⁵⁵ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 29–30.

circumcision, it follows that texts like Exodus 4 can be parlayed into an argument in favor of emergency Baptism by women. If we may recall, in Exodus 4, God tries to kill Moses as Moses returns to Egypt. Zipporah circumcises Moses' son and the attack by God ends. In a word, God's wrath is stilled by the word of promise being applied to Moses' son. Such a situation was indeed an emergency (i.e., God's wrath would have consumed the family), and the same promise as is present in Baptism applied (i.e., circumcision pointed ahead to the coming seed). Therefore, the passage provides a justification for women baptizing in emergency situations.⁵⁶ Beyond Gerhard's argument from the Old Testament precedent, it might be added that since Baptism is nothing more than the sharing of the gospel with those who are aliens to the Christian faith, it is legitimate for any Christian to perform Baptism as a member of the royal priesthood.

Baptism as Once and Future Justifying/Sanctifying Word

After a brief affirmation that water is a necessity in Baptism, Gerhard moves on to an explication of the true salvific power of Baptism found in the word of promise. Baptism is not a magical water, but as Luther affirms in his Small Catechism, it is ordinary water that becomes salvific and life-giving when it is combined with the word of promise. Such a word is the giving of the divine name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (SC IV 10).

Following Luther,⁵⁷ Gerhard sees God as the primary agent of word-and-sacrament ministry, and the pastor and the elements as instrumental causes of Baptism's justifying power. Citing St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:20 ("So we are proclaimers in Christ's stead, for God admonishes through us"), Gerhard emphasizes that although it is an ordained pastor (or layperson in the case of an emergency) who administers Baptism, it is truly God in Christ who performs the Baptism.⁵⁸ Working through the pastor, God establishes a lifelong covenant of grace through the sacramental act. Summarizing this salvific work, Gerhard writes:

[W]hen the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is invoked over this water, the same One desires to be effective and fulfill His promise in this child who is being baptized. . . . [T]his water is no longer simply lowly water. Rather, it is such a water through which the entire Holy Trinity would be effective and also is effectual. For when the servant says, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, it means so very much: I testify

⁵⁶ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 29, 35.

⁵⁷ Martin Luther, *Erste Predigt über die Taufe gehalten 2. Sonntag nach Epiphaniä* (1538), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Schriften), 73 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009), 46:148 (hereafter cited as WA), and Luther, *Predigt 2. Sonntag nach Epiphaniä* (1539), WA 47:648.

⁵⁸ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 57.

herewith that through this Sacrament you [the person being baptized] are being received into God's covenant of grace that God the Father takes you as His child; that the Son washes you from sins with His blood and clothes you with His righteousness; that the Holy Spirit regenerates and renews you to everlasting life.⁵⁹

Statements like the one above raise the question as to why one would believe that Baptism in the Trinity would be an effective act of blessing and salvation. Gerhard cites a significant number of examples from both Testaments of the divine name being used to bless the faithful or perform a deed of divine power (Deut 18:7, 18:20; 1 Sam 17:45; 2 Sam 6:18; Matt 18:20; Mark 9:39; Luke 9:48; John 16:23).⁶⁰ Beyond the fact that people are blessed through the power of the divine name, Gerhard notes that the divine name is not merely a label for God, that is, a written or sound symbol signifying God. Rather, as a divine word, the name of God is identical to God's presence and reality.⁶¹ In support of Gerhard's point, it should be remembered that the temple is the dwelling place of God's presence because it is a "house for my name" (2 Sam 7:13). Therefore, the triune God is active and present in his word connected with the water to communicate justifying and sanctifying grace.

Gerhard asserts that the word and the water mediate not merely the presence of the triune God alone, but the presence of the risen man Jesus who possesses a hypostatic unity with the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is present not only according to his divinity, but also according to his deified and therefore omnipresent humanity.⁶² It is literally the blood of the risen Jesus present in the waters of Baptism whereby we are cleansed of our sins. Gerhard writes:

[T]he Son of God in the fullness of time took upon Himself a true human nature and united Himself with it in an indissoluble link. Thus it further follows that He is present at Baptism not only according to His divinity, but also according to His assumed human nature. And especially the blood of Christ is not to be excluded from holy Baptism: 1. because the Son of God's true human nature also assumed flesh and blood, in which, with which, and through which His human nature now performs all His works; 2. because the power of holy Baptism arises and springs forth from the merits of Christ and from the shedding of His blood as it occurred on the timber trunk of the cross; 3. because in holy Baptism we were washed from sins through the blood of Christ; 4. because we were baptized into Christ's death. Now, however Christ's death also includes His shedding of blood.⁶³

⁵⁹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 57.

⁶⁰ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 58.

⁶¹ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 59–61.

⁶² Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 60–61.

⁶³ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 60.

In this fascinating formulation, Gerhard connects the forensic and effective power of Baptism to the risen Jesus himself. In the giving of the divine salvific promise through the word and the water, there is at the same time the coming of the self-donating presence of the risen and glorified Jesus.

Since the word and medium of Baptism are not just labels (what Luther would term *Heissel Wort*, or “call-words”) but rather effective words (what Luther would term *Thettel Wort* or “deed words”),⁶⁴ the perennial challenge posed by various forms of Protestantism regards the role of faith in Baptism. Many Protestants have accused Luther along with the Lutheran church of inconsistency by claiming that the means of grace are appropriated salvifically only through faith, while at the same time claiming that children without faith are justified and regenerated without the prerequisite of faith. For Gerhard (as for Luther) the key to resolving this dilemma is that as a visible and effective word, Baptism communicates the very faith necessary to receiving the justification and sanctification of Christ offered in the external means. Gerhard writes:

That the Holy Spirit works faith in the heart of the child being baptized. For since Baptism is (as previously stated) a bath of regeneration and is (as will follow later) an effectual means for the forgiveness of sin, (that is) for sonship with God and for eternal life, so also must faith be ignited and awakened through holy Baptism (understand that this refers to the hearts of those who do not stubbornly resist the working of the Holy Spirit), since the entire Scripture testifies that no one can be regenerated or receive forgiveness of sins nor become a child of God or inherit eternal salvation without faith. On account of that, Baptism is not ordinary water, but the Word of God is also there, making it the means through which people are regenerated.⁶⁵

For Gerhard, the effective justifying and sanctifying power of the word of God in Baptism is not effective only in a single momentary event. Rather, like Luther says, Baptism is an event that continuously becomes contemporary to the believer by means of faith drawing daily on the justifying promise of Baptism. The fact that true believers daily fall into sin does not cancel the promises of God. Since Gerhard holds that the Abrahamic covenant applied via circumcision is identical to the new covenant established by Christ and applied through Baptism, statements about God’s covenant faithfulness in the Old Testament can be parlayed into *sedes doctrinae* for the faithfulness of God to the covenant of grace given in Baptism (for example, Gen 17:7; Exod 6:5; Lev 26:9, 26:44; Num 18:19; Deut 4:31, 7:9; 1 Kgs 8:23; 2 Kgs 13:23; Neh 1:5; Isa 54:10, 55:3; Jer 32:40, 33:20–21; Ezek 16:60, 37:26; Hos 2:18).⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See Martin Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), AE 37:180–188.

⁶⁵ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 76.

⁶⁶ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 106–107.

Although the Israelites had a covenant of unconditional grace with God through the promise to Abraham, they could nevertheless block access to said promise through unbelief. Nevertheless, they were capable of continuously coming back to the promise, and so too are Christians of the New Testament era.⁶⁷ Hence, the efficacy of Baptism is not limited to merely a moment when it is administered but it extends to the whole life of the Christian. Gerhard writes:

St. Peter had grossly sinned and had denied Christ; nevertheless after his conversion he comforted himself with his Baptism, 1 Pt. 3:21 “Baptism saves us” (he includes himself). Thus the holy Scriptures also speak about the working of Baptism in *präterito, præsenti et futuro* (in the past, present, and future), so that we are taught that the power and working of Baptism [are] not to be seen only in the twinkling of an eye moment [when] we are baptized, but stretch out over the entire lifetime.⁶⁸

Although he is more implicit than explicit in his critique, Gerhard recognizes the distinctive Lutheran resolution to the problem that plagued the early church, and which led inexorably to the medieval Latin penitential system and its corruptions. The early church correctly recognized on the basis of texts like Romans 6 that Baptism is death and resurrection with Jesus and therefore represents the definitive eschatological rupture between the old life of sin and death and the new life of faith. This nevertheless raised the problem of how to deal with post-baptismal sin, and its seeming cancellation of the justification and sanctification offered in the event of Baptism.

Many in the early church concluded that this meant that post-baptismal sin was not forgivable.⁶⁹ One attempt at resolving this issue can be found in the visionary work *The Shepherd of Hermas* (AD 110), which asserts that a single post-baptismal penance will reestablish one in baptismal grace.⁷⁰ Others waited until moments before their death to be baptized, in order to be able to maintain their justification in Baptism.⁷¹ Finally, the North African Fathers and the medieval church decided that the justification and sanctification established in Baptism had been lost and

⁶⁷ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 109–111.

⁶⁸ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 108–109.

⁶⁹ Roman Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 131, and Rob Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600–1200* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 16.

⁷⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 216.

⁷¹ Holger Hammerich, “Taufe und Askese: der Taufaufschub in vorkonstantinischer Zeit” (dissertation, Univ. of Hamburg, 1994), 96–102.

consequently needed to be repaired by a supplementary sacrament in the form of penance.⁷²

The weakness of all these approaches to baptismal regeneration is that they focus on the waters of Baptism as a medium whereby a kind of injection of sanctification is given to the soul. If sin occurs, one's inoculation against sin is somehow canceled, almost like how a virus breakthrough case overrides the effectiveness of a vaccine. Luther (and, as we will see, Gerhard) saw the weakness of this theology and demonstrated from the New Testament that the efficacy of Baptism lies in the word of promise that Christ has attached to the act of Baptism. It is the word of God that is efficacious in justifying and sanctifying the sinner through Baptism. From this it follows that this same divine word and its saving power can be accessed by the believer throughout their life. Indeed, the promise of Baptism should be accessed daily. For this reason, although confession and absolution is an equally valid giving of the word of the gospel, it is, as Luther notes in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), nothing other than the reality and promise of the event of Baptism made contemporary to the believer.⁷³

Agreeing with Luther, Gerhard notes the absurdity of the practices of the early church that resulted from not fully trusting in the word of God present in Baptism:

If, however, the power of Baptism did not extend through all of life, it would follow that Christians who fell into sin would have to be regarded as not being baptized; that hypocrites who in Baptism hinder the gracious workings of the Holy Spirit would have to be baptized again; that Baptism [should be] reserved for the final hour of death—and similar additional absurd [conclusions].⁷⁴

In a word, following Luther, Gerhard sees the enduring promise and power of Baptism as making the reality of justification and sanctification attached to the sacrament present to the Christian throughout their life.

Although he does not directly critique or address the Reformed tradition in his treatment of the sacrament, one can also see an implicit confrontation with the problem of perseverance present in Augustine and Calvin. As background, due to concerns raised by monks in Gaul, the late Augustine sought to clarify how baptismal grace related to predestination. Implicitly, the problem seemed to be this: If baptismal regeneration was guaranteed by the administration of the sacrament *ex opere operato* and grace is irresistible, how is it the case that many of the baptized fall away and are damned?⁷⁵ Augustine responded that all who are baptized

⁷² Cf. Abigail Firey, ed., *A New History of Penance* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), and Stuart Donaldson, *Church Life and Thought in North Africa A.D. 200* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1909), 88–91.

⁷³ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), AE 36:124.

⁷⁴ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 109.

⁷⁵ E. Glenn Hinson, *The Church Triumphant: A History of Christianity up to 1300* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1995), 267–268.

automatically receive baptismal regeneration, but only the elect receive the gift of perseverance to maintain their regeneration to the end of their lives. After all, the Lord's Prayer states, "lead us not into temptation." If we must pray that the Lord would prevent us from falling away, then it must be a gift. Nevertheless, there is no way of objectively knowing that one has received the gift of perseverance, and therefore one must pray with humility to the end that one might receive it.⁷⁶

From Augustine, Calvin took over the notion of the gift of perseverance. Nevertheless, standing in the tradition of the magisterial Reformation, Calvin agreed with Luther⁷⁷ that Christians possess the full assurance that they will be saved.⁷⁸ Unlike Augustine, Calvin held that if one is truly converted, then they will never fall away.⁷⁹ Calvin reasoned that this is the only condition by which one can actually gain the full assurance of salvation, since salvation means preserving one's faith to the end. Of course, the question remains as to how one can be certain that one will not lose their faith to the end. Calvin often speaks of the Spirit's gift of interior assurance to the elect.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Calvin also held that many people simply fool themselves that they have genuine faith: "For though only those predestined to salvation receive the light of faith, and truly feel the power of the gospel, yet experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected by almost the same feeling, so that even in their own judgment they do not in any way differ from the elect."⁸¹

Although not directly addressing the Augustinian/Calvinist question of perseverance, Gerhard follows Luther in framing the issue of the certainty of one's continuing and future salvation in terms of the faithfulness and efficacy of God's word,⁸² rather than in speculations about whether God has secretly communicated a particular spiritual gift. Even if one falls away, the promise of God's grace given in Baptism remains accessible:

We, of course, violate the covenant of God on our part [and] thus forfeit the benefits of this covenant, but God on His side remains unmoved. He does not renounce Himself, 2 Tim. 2:13. If we are again to become recipients of the

⁷⁶ Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance*, NPNF¹ 5:39–49.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on First John* (1527), AE 30:281.

⁷⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 3.2.6–7 (= McNeill and Lewis 1:548–550). See also Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005).

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 3.24.7 (= McNeill and Lewis 2:973–974).

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 3.2.36 (= McNeill and Lewis 1:583–584).

⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 3.2.11 (= McNeill and Lewis 1:551).

⁸² Luther writes, "God did not come down from heaven to make you uncertain about predestination, to teach you to despise the sacraments, absolution, and the rest of the divine ordinances. Indeed, He instituted them to make you completely certain and to remove the disease of doubt from your heart, in order that you might not only believe with the heart but also see with your physical eyes and touch with your hands. Why, then, do you reject these and complain that you do not know whether you have been predestined? You have the Gospel; you have been baptized; you have absolution; you are a Christian." Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45), AE 5:45–46.

benefits of the covenant, then we must genuinely repent, as the entire Scripture directs fallen Christians to do. This very necessity for repentance after falling into sin does not indicate that God on His side has totally nullified the covenant, but rather, that we on our part have violated the covenant and thus forfeited the benefits of the covenant. Consequently, the urgency is that we approach God through true repentance, preceded by true confession and heartfelt regret over sin, and comfort ourselves with the grace of God and the merits of Christ (of which we became recipients in Baptism), and thus again be assimilated into the covenant.⁸³

Calvinists may charge that Gerhard (and the Lutheran tradition in general) cannot provide absolute assurance of salvation because it is always possible that believers may fall away. Nevertheless, Gerhard would likely claim that the Calvinists are framing the issue incorrectly. Looking to one's own powers or subjective experience as a human being can never cause the assurance of salvation. It is likewise impossible to know that one has a spiritual gift that will lead them to never fall away.

Nevertheless, as Gerhard notes above, if one looks away from themselves to the promise of the gospel found in one's Baptism, then one can be certain of God's perpetual covenantal faithfulness. To use an analogy: If one is on a boat moving down the Mississippi River from Minnesota, then one can infallibly know that they will end up in New Orleans if they do nothing but remain on the boat. One can trust that the boat and the current of the river will simply move them to that end because of the nature of the boat and the current of the river. Nevertheless, if one looks to themselves, and their ability to jump over the side of the boat and get off, then they might begin to doubt the certainty that they will end up in New Orleans.

Baptism in Gerhard's Annotations on Romans

In this final section, we will examine Baptism in Gerhard's posthumously published commentary on the epistle to the Romans. In particular, we will focus on the section about Gerhard's understanding of Baptism and Baptism's relationship to justification in chapter 6 of the epistle. As we will observe in this final section, the themes that Gerhard emphasizes in his treatment of the doctrine in the *Comprehensive Explanation* are the same themes of the presence of the risen Christ and his guarantee of justification and sanctification.

Earlier in his annotations on Romans, Gerhard discusses the nature of salvation in Christ at some length. In particular, Gerhard affirms the forensic nature of justification and grounds it in the work of Christ. Contrary to the claims made by some within the Lutheran tradition,⁸⁴ the distinction between objective and subjective

⁸³ Gerhard, *Comprehensive Explanation*, 111.

⁸⁴ See Gregory L. Jackson, *Luther versus the UOJ Pietists: Justification by Faith* (no place: Chemnitz Press, 2012), and Paul Rydecki, *Theses on the Article of Justification: and The Forensic*

justification is not a late innovation but finds expression in how Gerhard understands the work of Christ in both his death and resurrection.⁸⁵ Gerhard writes:

He [God the Father] also condemned it, in that He punished our sins in Christ, which were imposed on Him and imputed to Him as to a bondsman. So also, by the very act of raising Him from the dead, He absolved Him from our sins that were imputed to Him, and consequently also absolves us in Him, so that, in this way, the resurrection of Christ may be both the cause and the pledge and the complement of our justification.⁸⁶

In a word, all the sins of humanity are imputed to Christ in the crucifixion and paid for. Raising Christ from the dead, God the Father “absolve[s]” Christ of the sins of the whole world because he has paid for them. Among the many striking images for redemption that Gerhard uses, this is one of the most vivid and compelling. From this it follows that even before believers lay hold of Christ in the act of faith and Baptism, God pronounces them absolved. Through faith they participate in the objective absolution of Christ in the resurrection. Hence, the pastor does not tell his congregation that *if* they believe, then they will be absolved, but rather he tells them to trust that God in Christ has already pronounced them absolved.⁸⁷

Salvation in Christ pertains not merely to forensic justification but also to sanctification. God’s word is effective and produces both. At the beginning of chapter 6 of his treatment of Romans, Gerhard argues that Christ gives a double benefit through his promissory word: justification and sanctification. In treating Romans 6:1, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (KJV), Gerhard writes, “Since regeneration and renewal, justification and sanctification are joined together in believers by an indivisible connection, therefore after dealing thus far with the first benefit of Christ [justification], he now proceeds to His second benefit.”⁸⁸

In Romans 6:2, Paul asserts that Christians have wholly died to sin. Gerhard affirms that this occurs through both justification and sanctification: “But how are

Appeal to the Throne of Grace in the Theology of the Lutheran Age of Orthodoxy (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2014).

⁸⁵ Tom G. A. Hardt, “Justification and Easter: A Study in Subjective and Objective Justification in Lutheran Theology,” in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*, ed. Kurt E. Marquart, John R. Stephenson, and Bjarne W. Teigen (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985), 52–78; Eduard Preuss, *The Justification of the Sinner before God*, trans. J. A. Friedrich (Fort Wayne, IN: Lutheran Legacy, 2011), 29–61; Robert Preus, “Objective Justification,” in *Doctrine is Life: Robert D. Preus Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 147–155; and C. F. W. Walther, “Christ’s Resurrection—The World’s Absolution,” in *The Word of His Grace: Occasional and Festival Sermons* (Lake Mills, IA: Graphic, 1978), 225–236.

⁸⁶ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 214.

⁸⁷ See Jack Kilcrease, *Justification by the Word: Restoring Sola Fide* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022).

⁸⁸ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 253.

believers dead to sin? We reply: In justification and regeneration they receive the Holy Spirit, who begins to renew the nature corrupted by sin and to mortify sin in their flesh, for which reason they are said to be dead to sin.”⁸⁹ Of course this raises the question as to how the Holy Spirit grafts believers into Christ and his benefits. For Gerhard, Baptism is the sacramental instrument through which the Holy Spirit communicates Christ’s twofold grace to the sinner: “The Apostle demonstrates that the salutary medium through which sanctification—that is, the renewal of our corrupt nature, obtained by the death of Christ—is conferred on us: Baptism, which is, of course, a washing, not only of regeneration, but also of renewal (Tit 3:5).”⁹⁰

One is justified and sanctified through Baptism by mystically participating in Christ’s death and resurrection. Commenting on Romans 6:5, “For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection” (KJV), Gerhard writes:

Just as death and resurrection were joined together in Christ so He requires that in us, too, the death of sin and the life of the Spirit should likewise be joined together with Christ—in death and in life. If we have been implanted in Him so that we are like Him in death, we will also be—or rather, we should be—implanted in Him and like Him in resurrection.⁹¹

Gerhard emphasizes that although the “body of death” (Rom 7:24) is destroyed by justification and sanctification, this does not mean that we are somehow ontologically annihilated. Rather, the death of the sinful subject means the removal of the guilt and damage of sin destroying our nature. It does not somehow mean our nature is in its essence composed of sin, as Flacius erroneously claimed.⁹² Hence, death and resurrection with Christ does not mean the destruction of our nature, but rather the condemnation and removal of forensic guilt and ontic privation caused by sin.⁹³ In other words, Christ’s work not just removes guilt imputed to us because of our disobedience to the law, but also renews our nature damaged by sin. Sin is not a positive quality, but is a damage to our nature. Sanctification therefore in part means the healing of the metaphysical and moral damage sin has done to us.

Although Paul makes statements that appear on the surface to suggest that the sinful nature is completely extinguished by Baptism (Rom 6:6–7), this is not the case. Our old nature begins to die in the sanctifying act of Baptism, but is clearly not wholly done away with, as numerous statements of Paul and the New Testament in general prove (e.g., Rom 6:8–14). Our lack of perfection is why we need the forensic

⁸⁹ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 254.

⁹⁰ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 254.

⁹¹ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 257.

⁹² Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 258.

⁹³ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 258.

judgment of the gospel, given to us in our Baptism and perpetually renewed through daily repentance and faith. Gerhard writes:

You are not under the strict rigor of the law, demanding perfect and absolute obedience in each and every point. You are under the grace of the Gospel, which teaches that the obedience that has begun is pleasing to God through faith, if a person has been reconciled to Him. To the reborn he promises victory over sin from the fact that they have been given the gift of grace, which causes them to mortify the desires of the flesh, and which brings it about that the weaknesses of sin that cling to them are remitted to them.⁹⁴

Ultimately, as Gerhard correctly notes, for Paul the removal of guilt frees the human subject for the exercise of righteousness, not for sinful behavior. True freedom is to be found in doing the good. Nevertheless, our sanctified behavior is not the basis of our reception of eternal life. In response to Romans 6:23 (“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”), Gerhard emphasizes that sin earns a “wage” through performing works in contradiction to God’s law. Contrary to the claims of Bellarmine, the premier Roman Catholic apologist of the Counter-Reformation, Paul does not say that good works gain a “wage” in the form of eternal life. Rather, Paul asserts that God gives a “gift” through Christ Jesus and our incorporation into his death and resurrection.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Reviewing the treatment of the doctrine of Baptism in these two seminal texts leads us to recognize and appreciate the richness of Gerhard’s theology. Not only does the Jena theologian provide us with a magnificently elaborate and insightful reading of the *sedes doctrinae* on Baptism and its typological prefiguration in the texts of the Old Testament, but he also expounds on a series of important grace-centered insights. Most importantly, Gerhard sees Baptism as a means by which sinners are justified and sanctified. The visible and auditory divine words in Baptism efficaciously perform this act of divine grace by uniting the sinner to Christ and his real presence in the sacrament. It is Christ, fully present in both his divinity and humanity, who is the ultimate agent invisibly working through the visible means. Through the word of promise and the water, Christ himself washes away the sins of the sinner with his cleansing sacrificial blood and establishes a covenant of grace that the believer can draw on throughout their life.

⁹⁴ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 264.

⁹⁵ Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 272–274.