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The Inclusive Nature of Holy Baptism
in Luther's Writings

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The Inclusive Nature of Holy Baptism in Luther's Writings

By HARRY G. COINER

IN his book, *Pastoral Ministry to Families*, John Charles Wynn makes this comment about the manner in which some children are sometimes baptized:

Pastors sometimes treat this high occasion with a carelessness that is inexcusable, and this may well be the reason that parishioners take it lightly. Failing to take full cognizance of the continuing significance of Baptism, and the ongoing relationships involved for church and family, the service is often held in grand isolation. At its worst, Baptism is just that—an isolated experience unrelated to family life. It is as if the parson were to drop into the Amazon jungle by helicopter, sprinkle a baby, and fly away again, nevermore to return.¹

Though our action or behavior does not make the sacrament valid, nevertheless legitimate concerns are to be expressed from time to time regarding our understanding and employment of Baptism. Luther reminds us that Baptism is no human trifle devised or invented by men, but it is instituted by God Himself; for He strictly commanded that we must be baptized, or we cannot be saved; let no one regard it as a trivial matter, like putting on a new red coat.² He expressed his estimation of Baptism in strong terms.

¹ John Charles Wynn, *Pastoral Ministry to Families* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 62.

² The Large Catechism, IV, 7. Cf. *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) or *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert. The Large Catechism will hereafter be cited as L. C.

This holy sacrament is no mere handful of water,

. . . but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water, and in whatever other terms we can praise it—all on account of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word, that no one can sufficiently extol, for it has, and is able to do, all that God is and can do. (L. C., IV, 17)

Luther's Small Catechism asks four basic questions about Holy Baptism, and in each case Luther supplies his answer with a word of God. His first question is: "What is Baptism?" In reply he states that Baptism is "water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word." When Luther then asks: "Which is that word of God?" he cites the command of Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:20 RSV). In and back of this word and command of Christ is all that He did for our salvation, also the loving will of God that men be brought into a discipleship relationship with Christ.

Out of the relationship to the redemptive work of Christ, established through Baptism, issue what Luther calls the benefits, or gifts, of Baptism. His second question therefore is: "What does Baptism give or profit?" Luther packs his answer tightly to say that we have been given everything we need from God: the whole fullness of His gifts, namely, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. He who believes such

words and promises of God shall be saved. Those who do not believe are condemned.

When in his third question Luther asks: "How can water do such great things?" he wants to impress us with the power of Baptism in our own personal life of faith. Baptism is not simple water only, but it is "a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost" to which our faith can cling and on which we can stand. God's act of saving the world in Jesus Christ becomes a present reality to the baptized when he is "immersed" in Him. In and through the action of Holy Baptism, God takes the redemptive act in Christ out of the past and makes it a present event so that we might participate in its blessings. God establishes a definite point in our existence which is to be determinative for our relationship with Him throughout our whole life and forever.

In his fourth question Luther is after the imperative, the demand, the meaning, which arises out of the new situation. Here at the close of his explanation Luther is emphasizing that what is symbolically suggested in the act of Baptism (the going into the water and coming out of it again) should become a reality in the life of the person who is baptized. In other words, Baptism means the beginning of a new life, a life characterized by repentance and faith, a life marked by the daily dying of the old man and the coming to life of the new. In and behind the ceremony itself we are to see the crucified and risen Lord bestowing on us the fruits of His death and resurrection and setting us in a new and permanent covenant relationship with His redeeming power. Baptism is the sign, seal, and conveying of God's promise to the individual: I have chosen you, I will uphold

you, I will redeem you and bring you to the life in fellowship with Me.

Obviously any one of the short answers to the four questions which Luther asks about Baptism in his Small Catechism might serve as the basis for a lengthy study. The discussion which follows is limited to what Holy Baptism involves in the Christian's life.

I

HOLY BAPTISM INVOLVES DEATH-LIFE PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST

Luther's last question is focused on the significance of Holy Baptism in the life of the baptized believer. He asks: "What does such baptizing with water signify [*bedeuten*, mean]?" His answer is:

It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

This significance of Baptism is drawn from Scripture, and Luther can therefore ask: "Where is this written?" and say in reply:

St. Paul writes, Romans, chapter sixth: We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

When considered in its context (Rom. 6:1-5), this basic passage indeed reveals not only the meaning of the act of Baptism itself but what the fact of Baptism means in the Christian's life: his participation in the death and resurrection of Christ.

In verse 1, St. Paul asks: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" The Law, he has proved, is subservient to the Gospel. He now anticipates the charge that always ap-

pears when the doctrine of justification by faith alone is taught—that this doctrine encourages indifference in discharging the duties assigned us by the Law. If it is true that when we continue in sin, grace abounds and the reign of grace increases (5:20), then the thought is natural that one may as well sin for the sake of advancing the glory of God. Not so, says St. Paul. He now shows how contradictory such a course would be to the very nature of the Christian life. Characteristically, he centers his argument in the nature and effect of Holy Baptism. He begins: “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (v.2). The past tense—“we who died”—points to a specific point of past time, the time of regeneration and justification, that is, Holy Baptism.

V.3: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into His death?” The “have been baptized into His death” points back to “we who died to sin” (v.2). We all, who were baptized, were thereby introduced into a state of conformity to His death and participation in it (cf. Gal.3:27). The thrust of this verse is that the Christian is not to yield to sin, because in doing so he repudiates the union which Baptism effects between Christ and the believer. The Christian has died to sin by entering the baptismal water and has been placed into the death of Christ beyond the dominion and power of sin. Baptism incorporates the believer spiritually into Christ, into His life and the power and efficacy of His death. This is the goal and culminating purpose of the redemptive work of Christ. V.9 states that Christ “will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him.” Bengel says: “It is just as if, at that mo-

ment, Christ suffered, died, and were buried for such a man, and as if such a man suffered, died, and were buried with Christ.”

V.4: “We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” This is the central passage. *Συνετάφημεν*, the tense is aorist, the voice is passive: “we were entombed.” By means of (*διὰ*) our baptism we were buried with Him into His death. Christ did something for us and to us in our baptism. This is the weight of the passive. Baptism is a means through which Christ applies His death and its benefits to us, namely, His resurrection and newness of life, that is, a new kind of quality of life (cf. Rom. 6:10, 11; 7:6; 1 Tim. 6:7). *Καινός* is the opposite of *παλαιός* and differs from *νέος* as something that has never existed before. As our Lord assumed a new mode of life after His resurrection, so believers enter into a new way of life and exercise its powers in their daily conduct. This new life is the resurrected life of Christ Himself.

V.5: “For as we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.” The phrase *σύμφυτοι γεγόναμεν* says, “We have grown together, have become incorporated and vitally connected with.” The root *φύω* has a stronger connotation than “implanting.” If we have grown together to the likeness (of the same nature) of His death, then we shall likewise be grown together in the likeness of His resurrection.

Luther affirms that what happens in Baptism is not allegorical but actual death and resurrection. He says specifically:

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; when he draws him out again it signifies life.³

II

BAPTISM INVOLVES CONTINUING DEATH-LIFE ACTION IN CHRIST

Luther's writings affirm that Baptism is God's Word and action which once and for all gives Christ to us. Yet Baptism initiates a process extending throughout the entire earthly life of the one baptized. The power of sin is not drowned at once or its consequences escaped in a moment. The dying to sin lasts so long as we live and is completed only in death. In like manner the coming to newness of life, the growth in grace and righteousness, lasts until death. The Christian life therefore, in the language of Luther's *Treatise on Baptism* (1519), is a "perpetual Baptism." Luther takes great pains to explain the ongoing significance of the baptismal "reality."⁴ Unlike the external sign (the application of water with the Word), which is soon accomplished, the significance lasts our whole life. He says:

The significance, and death or drowning of sin, is not completely accomplished in this life; it is not fully accomplished until man dies bodily and is totally disintegrated into dust. The sacrament or sign of the baptismal rite is soon over, as we see with our eyes. But the significance, the spiritual baptism or the drowning of sin, lasts all our life and is not completely accom-

plished until our death. Then man is properly immersed in Baptism, and then what Baptism signifies is accomplished. Therefore this life is nothing but a spiritual baptizing without end until the moment of our death.⁵

In speaking of this continuing action in relation to Baptism, Luther goes on to say that God repeatedly refers the Christian to his unrepeatable Baptism through preaching, absolution, and the Holy Communion. These forms of the living Word only reaffirm Baptism, making it possible for the Christian to engage in an act of repentance by which he repeatedly returns to his Baptism in faith.

In his *Preface to Romans* Martin Luther notes that St. Paul teaches us that by faith we are not freed from sin in the sense that we can be idle, slack, and careless, as though there were no longer any sin in our lives. In the Large Catechism this same point is emphasized:

For this must be practiced without ceasing [the putting to death of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man] that we ever keep purging away whatever is of the old Adam, and that that which belongs to the new man come forth. (L. C., IV, 65)

This Christian activity of "daily decreasing until he finally perishes" is repentance and

. . . really nothing else than Baptism. For what else is repentance but an earnest attack upon the old man and entering upon a new life. Therefore, if you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism, which

³ WA 6, 534, 3—5.

⁴ The *res sacramenti*. The sacrament consists of two parts — (1) the *sacramentum*, or the external sign, and (2) the *res sacramenti*, or the thing signified, the sacramental grace.

⁵ Martin Luther, "A Sermon on the Holy Most Venerable Sacrament of Baptism," WA 2, 728, 10—17. Translation taken from Regin Prenter, "Luther on Word and Sacrament," in *More About Luther* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1958), p. 87.

not only signifies a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. (L. C., IV, 75)

How shall we explain this strange tension between the unique act of the baptismal rite, which is performed only once and is soon completed, and its significance, which occupies the whole lifetime of man in a long series of repeated acts of repentance and faith? The answer is that the antithesis here corresponds to the tension between the righteousness of Christ, given to the baptized person once for all, and his remaining sin. A baptized person is righteous (in Christ) and sinful (in his own flesh) at the same time; he is *simul iustus et peccator*. In his *Treatise on Baptism*, 1519, Luther says:

When a man comes out of his baptism, he is pure and without sin, completely innocent. But this is not rightly understood by many persons, who think that there is no sin left at all. They become lazy and careless in their attempt to mortify their sinful nature, like some people when they have just made their confession. Therefore it has to be rightly understood, as I said; and we must know that our flesh, as long as it lives here, is by nature evil and sinful. In order to help man, God has thought out a plan for a total re-creation of our flesh. . . . This plan He begins to work out in Baptism, which, as I said, signifies the death and resurrection in the last day. Therefore, as far as the significance or sign of baptism is concerned, the sins already have died, and man with them. He has risen, and the sacrament accordingly has been accomplished. But the effect of the sacrament has not yet been accomplished; that is, the death and the resurrection in the last day is still ahead.⁶

The Christian at any moment is completely innocent, righteous through and through, and at the same time he is a sinner through and through. Another way of describing this apparent schizophrenia is that the Christian continues to sin, but his sin is no longer counted for condemnation because of the faith that is counted for righteousness. Nothing is lacking when one has the perfect righteousness of Christ which God gave him in Baptism. Yet he remains a sinner who must fight his remaining sinful self, his flesh, and all its evil desires and compel the members of his body to obey the spirit and not the flesh until the very instant of his death. The ongoing nature of Baptism consists in a long series of fresh acts of repentance and faith in the hope and assurance that the perfect righteousness of Christ (though present and real here and now) and its sovereign rule over us may be established and that sin and flesh will hold sway no longer.

All through his life Luther attacked the scholastic doctrine that Baptism completely eradicates original sin the instant the rite is performed. God does not give Baptism as some kind of spiritual detergent in order that we ourselves may use it in our attempt to establish a purity of our own, with which we later may presume to appear before Him. God does exactly the opposite. He concludes a covenant with us, sinners as we are. That is to say: He enters into a personal fellowship with us while we still are sinners and takes upon Himself, while at the same time laying upon us, the unprecedented consequences of this new, incredible fellowship or covenant between the holy God and the sinful human race. So when a person who is attacked heavily by his sin stands in need of a present, not

⁶ WA 2, 729, 19—26, 32; tr. Prenter, p. 89.

only a future, righteousness before God and asks: "What does Baptism mean to me if it does not extinguish or abolish sin completely?" the answer is, "The most venerable sacrament of Baptism means this to you, that in it God allies Himself with you and concludes a covenant with you full of grace and comfort."⁷

Luther goes on to explain that the covenant, full of grace and comfort, which God has concluded with us, puts us in the situation where we must cease seeking our own glory and righteousness in order to seek and pray for what God will give us.

First of all, you must give yourself up to Baptism and its significance, that is, you must desire to die together with your sins and in the last day to be made new according to the indication of that sacrament. Now God complies with that desire of yours, and gives you Baptism, and begins from that moment to renew you. He fills you with His grace and grants you His Holy Spirit, who begins to mortify the old nature and sin and to prepare you for death and the resurrection in the last day. Secondly, you undertake to remain in this covenant and to mortify your sin more and more until the day you die. God complies with this desire too, and disciplines you all your life with many good works and many kinds of suffering, whereby He fulfills what you have desired in your Baptism.⁸

These sentences tell us a great deal about Luther's conception of Baptism. The baptismal covenant establishes a personal relationship with God. Hence a baptized person does not receive something magical, with which he can purify himself according to his own wishes and ideals and thus ob-

tain a righteousness of his own. On the contrary, the baptized and forgiven royal priest is being put under an obligation toward another Person, in this instance the obligation of taking the right attitude toward his God. He must ask and pray for that which God intends to work in him, namely, to mortify his flesh and to make him a fully new creature in the resurrection with Christ. And then, when God begins to fulfill that desire which He has implanted, the baptized person must be willing to receive what God gives him. He must undergo the discipline which God has prepared for him and which God gives in answer to his prayer. To receive God's gift and submit to His operation impels the believer to act. The believer abstains from works of his own choice, performed for the sake of his own righteousness. But he is certainly not inactive in works and sufferings by which God develops his loyalty in His covenant with him.

In the light of this teaching of the New Testament (which speaks of Baptism often and implies it in many places in the writings of St. Paul and others) we understand how foolish it is to expect that the gift of perfect righteousness in Christ, conveyed to us in Baptism, should at once, that is, in an impersonal, almost magical way, do away with all remaining sin and fleshliness in us. The Christian is busy in the day-by-day working out of the significance of the "gracious water of life" as with fear and trembling he works out his own salvation, believing that it is God which works in him both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12, 13). Luther remarks:

Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should

⁷ WA 2, 730, 18; trans. Prenter, p. 91.

⁸ WA 2, 730, 23; trans. Prenter, p. 93.

be found in faith and amid its fruits, every day he should be suppressing the old man and growing up in the new. If we wish to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians. (L. C., IV, 84.85)

In dealing with our remaining sin God has chosen the long, thorny way of personal education. He places us under the Word of God, which comes to us in both Law and Gospel. He disciplines us with sufferings and good works. Under His Word God brings us again and again to the place of new beginning for the child of God—the faith stance in which we disown our own righteousness in order to seek and pray for what God will give us: the enabling power to kill out our old nature and sin and to do those holy works which please God.⁹

III

BAPTISM INVOLVES LIFE IN CHRIST UNDER THE WORD OF GOD

In Baptism the child of God “renounces the devil and all his works and ways” and becomes a soldier of Jesus Christ to “fight the good fight of faith.” He who was once a child of darkness, bound by Satan, is now set free to walk as a child of light (Eph. 5:1-17). When Satan is drowned, the new life in the Spirit begins and continues as the Word of God is heard and obeyed. The baptized royal priest is put into the front line of combat against the devil, the world, and his own flesh. In “the good fight of faith” “he wrestles not against flesh and blood” but “against the spiritual hosts of wickedness.” St. Paul names the weapons, ending with “and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.” (Eph. 6:10-18)

That the Word of God is the Christian’s weapon is Luther’s theme in the introduction to his Large Catechism:

It is an exceedingly effectual help against the devil, the world and the flesh and all evil thoughts to be occupied with the Word of God, and to speak of it, and meditate upon it. . . . For this reason alone you ought gladly to read, speak, think, and treat of these things. . . . If I were to recount all the profit and fruit which God’s Word produces, whence would I get enough paper and time? . . . Therefore I again implore all Christians . . . steadily keep on reading, teaching, learning, pondering and meditating; and do not cease until they have made a test and are sure that they have taught the devil to death. (L. C., Preface, 10—19)

Why does Luther emphasize such diligent use of the Word of God in the Christian life? The answer lies in the obligation which the Christian assumes in Baptism of taking the right attitude toward his God. The covenant full of grace and comfort, which God has concluded with us, does not at once in an impersonal, almost magical way, do away with all remaining sin and fleshliness in us. The Word of God must continually exercise faith to ask and pray for that which God intends to work in us. This is what we confess in the Third Article: I believe in the Holy Ghost . . . the forgiveness of sins.

Therefore Luther says that the promise in Baptism

. . . is, in short, so full of consolation and grace that heaven and earth cannot comprehend it. But it requires skill to believe this [aber da gehort Kunst zu, dasz man solches glaube], for the treasure is not wanting, but this is wanting that men apprehend it and hold it firmly. (L. C., IV, 39, 40)

⁹ WA 2, 730, 23.

And again:

Therefore every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to practice all his life; for he has always enough to do to believe firmly what it promises and brings, victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sins, the grace of God, the entire Christ, and the Holy Ghost with His gifts. (L. C., IV, 41)

God's living Word, that is, His judging and forgiving activity in the crucified Christ, is found everywhere in the Scriptures. God's living Word becomes active in all phases of our personal life from the moment of our baptism till our resurrection in the Last Day. The movement of the living Word runs through the whole history of mankind and reaches into our contemporary history through the preaching and teaching of the church. As the living Word is active in our individual life and embraces it in the form of the baptismal covenant from life's beginning to its end, so the Word is also to touch our life again and again in the spoken and visible Word in preaching, teaching, and the Holy Communion. The living Word of the Cross makes possible the submitting of our life to perpetual discipline. The covenant of God with His people, recorded in the Bible, becomes the history of God's living Word now told and worked out in our lives from the time of our Baptism to the end of our earthly sojourn. The living Word becomes incarnate in Christians as they speak the Gospel to one another.¹⁰

¹⁰ Col. 3:1-17 speaks directly to this. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is. . . . Put to death therefore what is earthly in you. . . . Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom."

"Implant Thy Word in Us"

That Baptism and life under the Word of God are correlatives is perceived in Luther's answer to "What is Baptism?" He says: "Baptism is not simply water only, but it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word." Baptism is connected (*verbunden, obsignata*) with God's Word. God's Word makes Baptism valid both in its sign and its significance. And it is in connection with the latter that the Word is taught, for the Word is a disciplining and enabling Word. When Luther asks the question "Which is that word of God?" he answers: "Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Matthew: Go ye into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (Small Catechism, IV, 1—4)

The Word of God in Holy Baptism is not to be, in Luther's language, "engraved on dead tablets of stone" or "hidden in the Scriptures," but is to be that Word "sounding in a living voice," the "message of living men expounding the Bible."¹¹ This is reminiscent of the passages in the Old Testament which speak to Christian education (Deut. 4:9-13; 6:6-12; 11:18-21). These directives are set within the context of the covenant which God had made with His people, a covenant signed and sealed by the words of promise and law. The covenant was to become real and live from father to son in the telling; it was to be taught and spoken from generation to generation.

The Word of God in Holy Baptism is to be the "bread and water of life" as the child of God is instructed, trained, and nur-

¹¹ *Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519—20, WA 5, 537, 11—20. 16—18. 21; *Church Postil*, 1522, WA 10, I, ii, 48, 5.

tured to have his life under the covenant. Faith cannot sustain itself, but must feed upon the forgiving Word of God (Rom. 10:17). The significance of Baptism demands that the Christian life is kept in and under the Word of God. Baptized royal priests are to grow up in Christ in all things (Eph. 4:15). Children, youth, and adults are to continue in Christ's Word (1 John 2:13; John 8:31; 2 Peter 3:18). They are to let the Word of Christ dwell in them richly in all wisdom (Col. 3:16). They are to be kept in faith through the Word and the Sacrament (Acts 2:42).

The church prays in the Collect for the Word:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Thy holy Word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. . . .

A major purpose of religious instruction from the very beginning of the Christian church was to teach the individual the significance of his baptism. The baptismal formula was used as the "text" in the earliest catechetical schools. The catechetical creed of the church, the Apostles' Creed, is but an amplification of the baptismal formula.

IV

BAPTISM INVOLVES "LENDING COUNSEL AND AID" TO THE BAPTIZED

The origins of Christian sponsorship at baptism are lost in obscurity. The first explicit reference to sponsors at baptism is in Tertullian.¹² Sponsors are so called

because they respond or answer for the child to be baptized, that is, they engage themselves to answer for another's default. They are called "sureties" in the Anglican Church because they give security to the church that the child shall be virtuously brought up.

Over the years there has been some discussion in the church about the value of sponsors. Granted that there were *sponsors* for the catechumens in the early church and granted that the custom as it applies to infants has the sanction of long historical usage — is the practice still valid? Attention has been called to the lack of seriousness with which people today "undertake" their sponsorship obligations, although the "Exhortation to Sponsors" in the Lutheran Order of Holy Baptism imposes grave obligations upon sponsors:

You should at all times remember him in your prayers, put him in mind of his Baptism, and as much as in you lies lend your counsel and aid (especially if he should lose his parents), that he may be brought up in the true knowledge and fear of God, and be taught the holy Ten Commandments, the Christian Creed, and the Lord's Prayer; and that, as he grows in years, you place in his hands the Holy Scriptures, bring him to the services of God's house, and provide for his further instruction in the Christian faith, that, abiding in the covenant of his baptism and in communion with the church, he may be brought

of sponsorship, see Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Sponsors at Baptism and Confirmation* (New York: The Macmillan Company [1950]). Bailey says: "At the beginning of the third century it is clear that sponsors constitute already a recognized and well-established institution, the form of which, however, is neither greatly developed nor standardized throughout the Church." (P. 1)

¹² *De baptismo* (which Quasten dates between 198 and 200) 18. On the early history

up to lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ.

This exhortation is in keeping with Luther's concern that the Christian life be sustained in the fellowship of believers and that it be nurtured by means of the use of the Word and the sacraments. He says:

This message should have been impressed upon the people untiringly, and this promise should have been dinned into their ears without ceasing. Their Baptism should have been called to their minds again and again, and their faith constantly awakened and nourished. For just as the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but to be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us in Baptism.¹³

It is not only the pastor who baptizes, says Luther, but the church as well.

When a child is baptized, the act is not performed by the pastor alone but also by the sponsors as witnesses, yes, by the entire church. For Baptism, just like the Word and Christ Himself, is a common good of all Christians.¹⁴

When a child is baptized he is at the same moment made a member of Christ and united with the members of His body, which is the church. The church, therefore, has a new recruit now enlisted in the Christian battle. Having renounced Satan and all his works and ways, the child is signed with the mark of the cross. St. Augustine uses the phrase: "Thou art to be signed this day on the forehead with the sign of the

passion and the cross."¹⁵ St. Jerome speaks of "bearing the banner of the cross" on his forehead.¹⁶

Adalbert R. Kretzmann speaks of an ancient custom which reveals the importance of this sign:

Baptism had its daily-renewed significance when the early Christians stopped at the font within the walls of the church to sign themselves with the water of baptism and the sign of the cross as a reminder that they were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.¹⁷

The sign of the cross (after baptism) is explained in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* since 1552 as having this meaning:

We receive this child into the congregation of Christ's flock and do sign him with the sign of the cross in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under His banner against sin, the world and the devil and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant until life's end.¹⁸

It is both interesting and pertinent to note Luther's form for inviting sponsors:

Grace and peace in Christ, honorable, virtuous lady, dear friend. Since God has presented me and my dear housewife with a poor little heathen girl, I beg of you for God's sake to have the kindness to help

¹⁵ Evan Daniel, *The Prayer-Book: Its History, Language, and Contents* (London: William Wells Gardner, 1879), p. 350.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

¹⁷ *The Cresset* (October 1959), p. 18.

¹⁸ In the *Prayer Book* of 1549, the child was to be signed with the sign of the cross upon his forehead and breast at an earlier part of the service when the ceremony of exorcism was performed.

¹³ WA 6, 528, 8—13; in *Luther's Works*, Am. ed., *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), Vol. 36, p. 59.

¹⁴ WA 40, 600, 16—18.

this poor heathen to become a Christian, and be her godmother so that through your service and help (by prayer) she may by Holy Baptism pass from the old birth of Adam into the new birth of Christ. I will be greatly obliged to you. I commend you to God! Amen.¹⁹

Although sponsors are not essential to a valid Baptism, they do serve a valid and gracious purpose. The custom is certainly in keeping with the intent and obligation of the church to give the child nurture in the Word of God by bringing him under the means of grace.

Sponsors serve several ends. They are witnesses of the child's proper baptism, being present to attest the situation, the act. If anything is amiss, they make correction. The principle that no one should be uncertain concerning his baptism is affirmed in the use of sponsors. Even though the memory of the sponsors may grow dim in years to come, or if because of the mobility of people today they may become removed from the scene, the fact that "Christian brothers stood by when I was baptized and affirmed it" affords comfort and reassurance. I can tell myself: "If there had been any doubt about my Baptism, it would have been corrected at the time."

Sponsors also pledge themselves to be responsible for the child's Christian training. Although this is the primary duty of the parents (Eph. 6:4), the sponsors are to "stand by" with Christian admonition and encouragement in case parents neglect their duty. If the parents are lost to the

child, the sponsors are especially to be concerned in a direct way. If the child is under the care of foster parents or placed with relatives, the sponsors are to follow through with their responsibility and bring Christian witness and concern to bear. They also promise to pray for the child. This intercession is another way in which the child is surrounded by the Christian activity of his fellow members in the body of Christ.

Sponsors represent the Christian congregation or church in its obligation for the Christian training of the child, which it discharges through its educational program under the leadership of the pastor. In a special sense the congregation or church particularizes or individualizes its responsibility in the persons of the sponsors by having them "undertake" together with the parents as additional surety.

The Lutheran Order of Holy Baptism has these concluding words of admonition to the sponsors: "May God enable you both to will and to do this charitable work and with His grace fulfill what we are unable to do." It needs to be pointed out that when the pastor says "we," he is speaking of himself, the parents, and the congregation.

In these several meaningful ways fellow Christians are "organized" or "organize" themselves about the child in the Christian community.

One should note that Luther's *Baptismal Booklet* appended to the Small Catechism contains these significant and serious comments:

In all Christian earnestness I ask all those who administer Baptism, who hold the child, or witness it, to take to heart this admirable work and its great seriousness and solemnity. For here in the words of this prayer you hear how plaintively, pitifully and earnestly the Christian Church

¹⁹ Conrad Porta. *Pastorale Lutheri* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1842), p. 376; trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman in an essay, "Holy Baptism," Proceedings of the Sixty-Fifth Convention of the Central District, p. 32.

concerns itself about the little child, and confesses before God in straightforward words, which cannot be doubted, that he is possessed by the devil and is a child of sin and disfavor, and prays so diligently for help and for grace through Baptism so that he may become a child of God.²⁰

Luther pleads that the people should pray earnestly and that they should aid the child with all their heart and strong faith:

Therefore please remember that it is by no means a light matter or a bit of fun to take sides against the devil and not only to drive him away from the little child but to load on his little shoulders such a mighty and lifelong enemy. Remember, too, that it is very necessary to aid the poor child with all your heart and strong faith; to intercede for him earnestly, that God, in accordance with this prayer, will not only loose him from the power of the devil, but also strengthen him, so that like a good knight he may resist him in life and death. And I suspect that the reason why people turn out so badly after Baptism is that our concern about them has been so indifferent and careless and that at their Baptism we interceded for them with but little earnestness.²¹

Luther exhorts all to join in the prayers with earnestness, to choose excellent, moral, earnest, pious priests and sponsors. One cannot but be impressed by the seriousness of Luther's tone when he speaks of the regard which Christians are to have for Baptism, both for what it means in their own life and the life of others.

²⁰ Taufbüchlein 2 (Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, 4th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1959], pp. 535—536); WA 19, 537, 15—22. *Luther's Liturgical Writings in Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932), VI, 204.

²¹ *Ibid.*

V

BAPTISM INVOLVES OBLIGATION
FOR NURTURE IN THE WORD

Children are not to be baptized in a "vacuum," that is, Holy Baptism is not to be administered unrelated to the obligations of parents and the church to provide nurture and admonition in the Lord. Parents and sponsors should be reminded, preferably in a prebaptismal counseling-teaching session of (1) the commitment which God makes to them and to the child in Holy Baptism, and (2) the commitment which they make to God in presenting the child to be baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity.

The Christian congregation, by the same token, should be refreshed regularly in the understanding of its right to baptize and made aware of its corresponding responsibility to bring the child under the Word of God. The church stands under her Lord's command to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." To baptize where there is no assurance that Christian teaching will follow has been regarded as questionable practice, since to exercise the right to baptize involves the responsibility to educate, to edify.

Under God's order and design parents bring children into the world. They are to protect and take care of their offspring. Christian parents are given an even larger and more important task, namely, to provide for the spiritual development of their children. They assume this "nurture function" at the baptism of their children, standing before the congregation with the sponsors and confessing their Christian faith. In effect they say: "We want to

bring up our child as a Christian in the faith which we have confessed, and to that end we publicly pledge ourselves to give him Christian training by word and example." The pastor may speak these words to the parents: "Go then in the strength which God supplies and fulfill your mission, bringing up your child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

When once a Christian is born of the water and of the Spirit, then the long, hard task of nurturing, molding, guiding, exhorting, admonishing, and stimulating spiritual life begins. It never ends until God summons the pilgrim to "the Father's house." Made a member of the body of Christ in Holy Baptism, the child is absorbed into the teaching ministry and brother-keeping activity of the Christian family in the church. The words of the baptismal formula: "Wherefore I beseech you out of Christian love to intercede for this child, to bring him to the Lord Jesus, and to ask for him the forgiveness of sin and the grace and salvation of Christ's kingdom, nowise doubting that our dear Lord favorably regardeth such work of love and certainly heareth our prayers," are addressed to the assembled congregation, not merely to the parents and sponsors. Parents may rightly expect the congregation to join them in carrying out the task of Christian nurture. They say in effect: "We want the church to assist us in this holy task. We expect the other members in fellowship with our child to edify him, to pray for him, to admonish him. We recognize the church's obligation to teach as well as her right to baptize."

The Christian pastor will do everything he can to impress upon the parents their obligations and will help them in meeting

them. He will make sure that the sponsors understand their responsibility and will be ready to help them discharge it. He will guide and encourage the congregation in the development of an effective program of Christian education. He will be concerned that the educational literature of his church body (Sunday school materials, devotional materials, etc.) rightly emphasizes the significance of Holy Baptism and brings the child under the means of grace, teaching him to disown anything in himself and to seek and pray for that which God will give him. The pastor will make sure that the congregation has an effective program of "soul keeping." From Baptism on pastor and people will account the baptized as members of the fellowship of the redeemed, an integral part of the church.

Although a great deal more could be said on this matter, we conclude with one word more from Luther, the word with which he ends the section on Baptism in the Large Catechism:

Thus it appears what a great, excellent thing Baptism is, which delivers us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, suppresses and takes away sin, and then daily strengthens the new man. . . . For this reason let every one esteem his Baptism as a daily dress in which he is to walk constantly, that he may ever be found in the faith and its fruits, that he suppress the old man and grow up in the new. For if we would be Christians, we must practice the work whereby we are Christians. But if anyone fall away from it, let him come again into it. For just as Christ, the Mercy-seat, does not recede from us or forbid us to come to Him again, even though we sin, so all His treasure and gifts also remain. (L. C., IV, 83—86)

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