

Gottes Wort im Wasser: Baptism in the Lutheran Confessions

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“Baptism is nothing else than God’s Word in the water.”¹ “God’s Word in the water,” *Gottes Wort im Wasser*—so wrote Martin Luther for his confession of faith in 1537, which has come to be known as the Smalcald Articles in the Book of Concord.

Numerous historians and scholars of the Reformation have noted that Luther and his coworkers were fighting theological battles on two fronts. On one side was Rome, whose sacramental system, Luther had become convinced, was rife with problems. He had been critiquing it (perhaps “critiquing” is too mild a word) since 1520 in his treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, if not well before that. On the other front was the rising tide of the Anabaptist groups. They advocated a rebaptism of those once baptized as infants. Of course, to Anabaptist groups, this was not a rebaptism at all; it was the first valid Baptism that one would receive.

Therefore, in Luther’s mind, some erred by placing too much emphasis on the water and not enough on the word. For many raised in the medieval Roman church, the water, or the rite of Baptism itself, had taken on a superstitious air. Many had come to believe that they benefited from Baptism *ex opere operato*, by the “work” of Baptism simply having been performed. There was too little reliance on the word of God that made Baptism what it was, and too little taught about the faith needed to receive the gifts of God given in that sacrament.

On the other hand, the Anabaptists spoke much about personal faith being necessary, but to the extent that they ceased to regard the water, that is, the water-Baptism itself, as saving. They were right to speak of faith, but they emphasized it so much that the sacrament itself, though instituted by Christ, had no validity apart from the faith of the recipient.

“God’s Word in the water,” *Gottes Wort im Wasser*, thus reminds us of two truths in the Lutheran Confessions regarding Baptism. The first is an emphasis on the word of God, instituting Baptism and connecting promises to it, promises received by faith, created by the Spirit through the gospel. And the second truth is the

¹ 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), 319. All citations from the Book of Concord are taken from this edition and are hereafter noted parenthetically.

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water, that is, the use of God's creation, connected to his word, as a delivery mechanism for his saving grace. This water, connected with the word, stands as valid despite it sometimes being rejected. The word and the water must not be separated.

The purpose of this essay is simply to walk through what each of the Lutheran confessional documents says regarding Baptism. It is worth noting at this point that the three ecumenical creeds are certainly part of the Book of Concord, and each is related to Baptism in some way. The Nicene Creed confesses "one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins." The Athanasian Creed speaks of the Trinity, into whose name we are baptized, and of Christ, to whose death and resurrection we are joined in Baptism. Additionally, the Apostles' Creed began as a baptismal creed. Though the creeds are all most worthy of our attention, this article will focus on the confessional documents produced in the sixteenth century: the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord. (Also, in the interest of space, this article will not treat Luther's *Taufbüchlein*, his "Baptism Booklet," which was appended to the Small Catechism—though it is fascinating.) It is also worth noting that studies like those of Albrecht Peters and Jonathan Trigg proved most valuable, and they are commended to readers for further information on this topic.²

I. The Small Catechism

In the late 1520s, the Saxon Visitations, in which political and religious leaders examined the conditions of parishes throughout the territory of Saxony, revealed a disturbing state of affairs. Generally, the laity barely knew—and in some cases refused to learn—the fundamentals of the Christian faith. (Reportedly, some refused to memorize the Lord's Prayer because it was too long.) Biblical knowledge among the clergy was not much better. To address this problem, Luther seems to have at first delegated to coworkers in Wittenberg the task of producing a catechism, or program of instruction, to address this problem. Not content with what they produced, however, he set about writing one himself.

This effort resulted in the Small and Large Catechisms. The production of these catechisms seems to have overlapped, and the Large Catechism was likely available before the Small Catechism.³ For our purposes today we will begin with the Small Catechism.

Luther begins the Small Catechism's treatment of Baptism with a simple definition, drawn from the Scriptures, of what Baptism is. The question is, *Was ist die*

² Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Baptism and Lord's Supper*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), and Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

³ Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 73–74.

Taufe? “What is baptism?” and the answer, “Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead it is water enclosed in God’s command and connected with God’s Word” (SC IV 1–2).

Thus emerges what will prove to be the main emphasis in the Lutheran Confessions’ view of Baptism: the command and promise of God make Baptism what it is. In *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord*, Charles Arand, James Nestingen, and Robert Kolb comment, “Luther poured his understanding of the Word of God as the power of God for salvation into his treatment of [the sacraments]. In each of the sacraments, the oral word clothes itself as a visible word as God embodies or materializes the gospel by joining the Word with the visible stuff of everyday life.”⁴

One can view this from a creedal perspective. Through the power of his creative word, the Triune God—the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier spoken of earlier in the Small Catechism’s section on the Apostles’ Creed—is active in the sacraments. He sets apart people as holy by conveying to them the forgiveness of their sins, won by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, using elements of his created world to accomplish his work. Creation, redemption, and sanctification harmonize in the sacraments.

The command of God, in which the water of Baptism is “enclosed,” is the one spoken by Jesus: “Go into all the world, teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (SC IV 4).⁵ (As he did in his Bible translation, so in the Small Catechism Luther translates the participles in Matthew 28:19 as imperatives: *taufet* and *lehret*.) For Luther, the clear words of Christ instituting Baptism were *Gottes Gebott*, God’s command that made Baptism more than “simply plain water,” but instead something alive with divine power.

Peters notes, by way of examining Luther’s preaching through the 1520s, that Luther at first spoke more often, not of Matthew 28:19, but of Mark 16:16 as what we might call the *sedes doctrinae* for Baptism. Since Mark 16 was the appointed Gospel for the Festival of the Ascension, Luther encountered it every year and evidently delighted to speak about the good news Christ wanted “all creation” to hear. But starting in 1526, Luther began inserting the verses from Matthew’s Gospel to accompany the verse from Mark, and it is those verses that become the basis for the Small Catechism’s first section on Baptism.⁶

Mark 16:16 remains a key verse, however, as Luther cites it as the basis for the next section.

What gifts or benefits does baptism grant? Answer:

⁴ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology*, 82.

⁵ Scripture translation is Kolb and Wengert’s. Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 359.

⁶ Peters, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms*, 81–82.

It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.

What are these words and promise of God? Answer:

Where our LORD Christ says in Mark 16[:16], “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be damned.” (SC IV 5–8)

In short, Baptism is the gospel, and so it brings about what the preached gospel does. Baptism distributes to people the forgiveness of their sins. It frees them from the power of death and grants the certain hope of resurrection and *ewige seligkeit* (“eternal salvation”). Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb comment, “Baptism is a dress rehearsal for the Last Day, and it is more. It is the actual enactment of the promise of God that finds fulfillment in that day, no day of judgment for those made alive in Christ as the judgment of being buried in Christ’s tomb fell upon them in baptism.”⁷ Baptism releases people from the stranglehold of the devil himself; though Satan may harass and harm, he cannot conquer. The baptized are “saved,” as Christ himself declares, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.”

Still, Luther anticipates skepticism. In the third section on Baptism, he voices objections that were in the air in the late 1520s. “How can water do such great things?” His answer: not the water, but the power of God, conveyed through his word, does such great things. Again, Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb state, “Because the Word is God’s self-expression, it accomplishes what it declares. So the sacraments have no meaning whatsoever, no matter how pious the packaging may become, apart from the promise of Christ, which they convey, but they do everything that the Word of the gospel in oral or written forms does.”⁸

And what does Baptism do? Luther incorporates Paul’s letter to Titus as he responds to “How can water do such great things?” in the third section:

Clearly the water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life and a “bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit,” as St. Paul says to Titus in chapter 3[:5–8], “through the bath of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he richly poured out over us through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that through that very grace we may be righteous and heirs in hope of eternal life. This is surely most certainly true.” (SC IV 9–10)

Years later, Titus 3:5 would remain a passage that came to Luther’s mind when preaching about Baptism. From a 1534 sermon:

⁷ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology*, 83.

⁸ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology*, 83.

Here you have the reason why, the end to which it is called Baptism, and what its ultimate meaning is: to be a washing for the soul or (as St. Paul calls it [Titus 3:5]) “a washing of new birth,” by which we are born out of this fleshly, sinful birth and way of life to the new, spiritual life, in which we are justified before God and become heirs of heaven.⁹

And a sermon from 1538:

Here [in Baptism] God washes not the outside only, but the whole man, so that it is a “washing of renewal and rebirth” and the one baptized becomes a new man who goes about in an angelic garment and by Baptism enters the state of innocence.¹⁰

The Small Catechism’s fourth section on Baptism deals with the sacrament’s ongoing significance in the life of a believer:

What then is the significance of such a baptism with water? Answer:

It signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written? Answer:

St. Paul says in Romans 6[:4], “We were buried with Christ through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we, too, are to walk in a new life.” (SC IV 12–14)

Luther calls on each of the baptized to return to Baptism every day. A person’s sins were buried with Christ when he or she was baptized, and by that Baptism a new person was raised to life, righteous and pure *coram Deo*.

A daily return to Baptism . . . but what about growth in a Christian’s life? Trigg observes a tension regarding the fourth section on Baptism in the Small Catechism. Luther does speak at times of progress in faith. Trigg cites Luther commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory” (NIV).¹¹ Here is Luther on that text:

⁹ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, ed., *Martin Luther on Holy Baptism: Sermons to the People (1525–39)* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 31.

¹⁰ Mayes, *Luther on Holy Baptism*, 75.

¹¹ The Vulgate may help explain some of Luther’s phraseology: *Nos vero omnes, revelata facie gloriam Domini speculantes, in eadem imaginem transformamur a claritate in claritatem, tamquam a Domini Spiritu.*

But every day we make progress “from brightness into brightness, as by the Spirit of the Lord,” for repeatedly we understand more clearly from day to day, and yet we learn nothing else, but are “transformed into the same image.”

The same thing happens in the changing of our will, which also makes progress daily, as, little by little, we learn more and more to hope, to trust, and to be patient. Therefore, the faith that begins, that makes progress, and that is brought to completion is one and the same faith. For we are always “being transformed into the same image.” But the Word has been given so that it may be exercised, and may exercise you, every day and hour, until you grow into a complete man.¹²

The tension is that between *proficiens*, making progress, and a daily return to Baptism. Trigg explains, “Luther imposes a circular shape upon the Christian life. The Christian must never presume to claim any achievement or progress which places him beyond the call for a continual repentance of the past *in toto*, and a repeated return to the promise of righteousness in Christ—to the promise of baptism itself.”¹³ This will be a major theme in the Large Catechism as well.

Later in his treatise, Trigg illustrates this tension between Spirit-wrought growth and daily return to Baptism by modifying the geometry. Instead of picturing a circular shape for the Christian life, imagine a spiral, “which combines the circular pattern with a linear element.”¹⁴ The spiral is the Christian moving forward from day to day, living in his or her vocation, while the word, often through cross and trial, works growth in faith. Add to this mental image, though, a straight line on top of the spiral; as the spiral moves forward, with each rotation it touches that line. The ever-present line is Baptism. Each day the Christian acknowledges sin and turns to the Savior, with whom he or she was united in Baptism: daily contrition and repentance, daily walking in newness of life, connected to Christ. A Christian grows in faith but never outgrows the death and life God worked in Baptism. For Luther, Baptism is always present-tense in the life of a believer.

One more place in the Small Catechism merits mention regarding Baptism. Luther suggests in the Small Catechism prayers for morning, evening, and mealtime.

¹² Trigg, *Baptism*, 95–96. The reference is from Luther’s comments on 2 Cor 3:18 in the context of comments on Gen 41:8. Noteworthy is Trigg’s note 155, in which he further clarifies the context in which Luther is speaking. “He is talking of progress in faith and clarity of knowledge, not explicitly of progress in righteousness. And even here, there is a qualification to the notion of progress in the Christian life; there is not progress to new knowledge; *Wir lernen ye lenger ye mehr daran, und doch nichts anders*. (WA 44, 401, 33) There is no progression to a new stage, to the assimilation of new truths, or to a new level of faith; merely an ever clearer grasp of what is apprehended from the beginning.” Trigg’s citation abbreviated “WA 44, 401, 33” refers to Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–1545/1544–1554), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Schriften)*, 73 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009). Cf. LW 7:139.

¹³ Trigg, *Baptism*, 96.

¹⁴ Trigg, *Baptism*, 171.

How the head of the house is to teach the members of the household to say morning and evening blessings[.]

In the morning, as soon as you get out of bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say:

“God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over me. Amen.”

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. If you wish, you may in addition recite this little prayer as well. . . . (SC VI 1–2)

Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb comment, “Morning begins with the sign of the holy cross, a reminder of God’s claim through his recreating Word in baptism, and evening ends in the same way.”¹⁵

II. The Large Catechism

Based on a series of Luther’s catechetical sermons, the Large Catechism expands upon the enchiridion, or handbook, that is the Small Catechism. The Large Catechism can be called the “teacher’s guide” for the Small Catechism. The Large Catechism is accessible, eminently practical, and down to earth, and it exemplifies Luther’s law-gospel dialectic and other key theological motifs.

The Large Catechism’s section on Baptism comprises five main sections, which roughly mirror the Small Catechism’s, though not precisely: 1) Baptism’s institution and foundation, 2) its benefits and blessings, 3) the reception of those blessings by faith, 4) an excursus defending infant Baptism, and finally 5) Baptism’s continuing significance. Following are some highlights from each section.

1. *Baptism’s Institution and Foundation*

Matthew 28 and Mark 16 are the two foundational passages. Christ himself instituted Baptism, “so that no one may doubt that baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by human beings” (LC IV 6). In fact, “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own act” (LC IV 10). We are not to be fooled by Baptism’s lowly appearance, for “What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. Rather, it is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it may not be worth a straw” (LC IV 8). With this in mind, “Now you can understand how to formulate a proper answer to the question, What is baptism? Namely, that it is not simply plain water, but water placed in the setting of God’s Word and commandment and made holy by them. It is nothing else than

¹⁵ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology*, 84.

God's water, not that the water itself is nobler than other water but that God's Word and commandment are added to it" (LC IV 14).

Luther confronts the "new spirits," the Anabaptists who had been increasing in number. Their error? They miss that when God's command and promise are attached to the water, it becomes an instrument in the hands of God. Luther states:

Who does not know that water is water, if it is considered separately? But how dare you tamper thus with God's ordinance and rip out his most precious jewel, in which God has fastened and enclosed his ordinance and from which he does not wish it to be separated? For the real significance of the water lies in God's Word or commandment and God's name, and this treasure is greater and nobler than heaven and earth. (LC IV 16)

Luther affirms Augustine's axiom *Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*, "Let the Word come to the element and it becomes a sacrament" (cf. LC IV 18). Trigg examines what Luther likely was referring to with *verbum*, "the word," in this context. First, Luther likely thought of the command to baptize, highlighted in the first and second parts of Baptism in the Small Catechism, found in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16. But closely related to this are also the words of promise connected to Baptism, like Titus 3:5 and Romans 6:4. In reality, many divine commands are given because the Lord wants to bless people through them. It is akin to saying to a starving person, "Here is food; eat it!" It is a command but also a promise of life. Think of Peter's words, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Or Ananias' to Saul, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). God's words of command and promise are "in the water" of Baptism.

Luther concludes this section with words that reflect this essay's theme:

I therefore admonish you again that these two, the Word and the water, must by no means be separated from each other. For where the Word is separated from the water, the water is no different from the water that the maid uses for cooking and could indeed be called a bath-keeper's baptism. But when the Word is with it according to God's ordinance, baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ's baptism. (LC IV 22)

2. Baptism's Benefits and Blessings

"This is the simplest way to put it: the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. . . . To be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever" (LC IV 24–25). Luther goes on to cite Titus 3:5, as he does in the Small Catechism.

Then he addresses again the Anabaptists, who claim that the Evangelicals¹⁶ view Baptism as a work, an external rite, that they are adding to faith, when—so the Anabaptists say—nothing should be added to faith. Luther responds by saying that they misunderstand what Baptism is. Since it is given by God, who attaches great blessings to it, Baptism is essentially the *object* of faith. The promises attached to Baptism are what faith holds on to. Yes, there is an external element to Baptism, but that is true of every form the gospel takes. Luther comments:

Now, these people are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and secured, all on the grounds that the object is something external. Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart, just as the entire gospel is an external, oral proclamation. In short, whatever God does and effects in us he desires to accomplish through such an external ordinance. No matter where he speaks—indeed, no matter for what purpose or through what means he speaks—there faith must look and to it faith must hold on. (LC IV 30)¹⁷

Faith is vital to receive the blessings of Baptism; that will be Luther's next point of emphasis. But faith is not something that exists independently. Faith is dependence on the words and promises of God, and these words and promises are what Baptism embodies. Therefore, to make much of Baptism is not to go against faith, but quite the opposite—it is to lift up faith by lifting up the promises on which faith depends.

3. Reception of Baptism's Blessings by Faith

But now Luther speaks to the other side, to those who exalt Baptism as an act but fail to see that God-given faith is needed to receive what Baptism gives.

This again is most beautifully and clearly expressed in these same words, "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved," that is, faith alone makes the person worthy to receive the saving, divine water profitably. Because such blessings are offered and promised in the words that accompany the water, they cannot be received unless we believe them from the heart. Without faith baptism is of no use, although in itself it is an infinite, divine treasure. (LC IV 33–34)

To the Anabaptists, Luther explains that to value Baptism is not to denigrate faith. He writes, "Therefore, those who cry out against us as if we were preaching against faith do commit violence against us. Actually, we insist on faith alone as so

¹⁶ "Evangelicals" used in the original sense, synonymous with "Lutheran."

¹⁷ On Luther's emphasis on God working via outward means, see also Arnold J. Koelpin, "On Baptism, the Challenge of Anabaptist Baptism and the Lutheran Confession," in *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord 1580–1980* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1980), 273–274.

necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed” (LC IV 37). But to those in the Roman Catholic church, who may believe that the act of Baptism works *ex opere operato* without regard to faith, Luther says that faith is essential:

Just by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive or retain baptism in such a manner that it does you any good. But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God’s command and ordinance, so that, baptized in God’s name, you may receive in the water the promised salvation. Neither the hand nor the body can do this, but rather the heart must believe it. (LC IV 36)

A mistake made by the Anabaptists was to classify Baptism as a human work, a human ritual, rather than as a work performed by God. If you view Baptism as a human ritual and then hear someone say “Baptism saves,” you will hear them saying “A human ritual saves.” But Luther classified Baptism as *God’s* work, not a human work. Yes, a ritual performed by humans is involved, but that is God’s work in a visible form—God working through human agents and a created substance. So, “Baptism saves,” for Luther, means “God saves through Baptism.”

Since Baptism is God’s work to which faith clings, Baptism deserves high billing, so to speak, in every Christian’s life. Permit a longer quotation—one of the sections in the Large Catechism frequently cited, for good reason:

In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of baptism are so boundless that if our timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true. Suppose there were a physician who had so much skill that people would not die, or even though they died would afterward live eternally. Just think how the world would snow and rain money upon such a person! Because of the throng of rich people crowding around, no one else would be able to get near. Now, here in baptism there is brought, free of charge, to every person’s door just such a treasure and medicine that swallows up death and keeps all people alive.

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: “But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.” (LC IV 41–44)

Baptism is present tense for the Christian. Each day the promises given in Baptism are being fulfilled; Christians struggle against the doubts of the flesh to grasp the reality of those promises, to “believe firmly” that they actually possess the gifts of victory, forgiveness, and grace. Especially in the face of failure and sin are

Baptism's promises valuable. The Christian is to say, "I am baptized!" That is to say, "Baptism happened to me in the past, but its gifts are real in the present."

4. *Excursus on Infant Baptism*

Luther cites several reasons why baptizing children and infants is a practice that ought to be continued. The simplest argument Luther adduces is that many who were baptized as infants went on to be faithful, even "all-star," Christians: Bernard of Clairvaux, John Huss, and others. That is to say that throughout centuries of infant Baptism being practiced, the Lord blessed and grew the holy catholic church. A rhetorical question is implied: would this have been the case if no valid Baptism had been practiced for centuries?

Then Luther turns to another argument: Baptism is valid because of the word and commandment of God, period. Therefore, Baptism is valid whenever it is administered, regardless of the faith or lack thereof on the part of the person being baptized. (This is similar, Luther notes in LC IV 56, to how the Sacrament of the Altar is what it is because of God's word, not because of the faith of the recipient.) Therefore, we administer Baptism trusting that God is present therein with his gifts, and we trust God to give the baptized faith to receive those gifts. Luther writes, "We bring the child with the intent and hope that it may believe, and we pray God to grant it faith" (LC IV 57). As Trigg summarizes:

The foundation of Luther's defence of *Kindertaufe* is the core of the whole of his baptismal theology; the water of baptism joined to the word which ordains, founds and establishes it. The unshakeable, objective validity of baptism is grounded upon the dominical word of command and promise. The necessity of faith does not undermine its objectivity: it depends upon it. At each stage of Luther's treatment of baptism in the *Grosse Katechismus* he refers back to its foundation in the word.¹⁸

5. *The Ongoing Significance of Baptism*

This section in the Large Catechism expands on what was discussed under the fourth part of Baptism in the Small Catechism. There Luther had said that "through daily contrition and repentance" the old self is to be put down and the new self is to arise—essentially a daily replaying of Baptism (SC IV 12). In the Large Catechism, he says, "Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth" (LC IV 65).

¹⁸ Trigg, *Baptism*, 107.

Here we see the tension we noticed earlier, between growth in faith and a daily return to Baptism. Luther here acknowledges the role of growing in faith, even as he says that a Christian's life is a daily Baptism. "Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption [of the old Adam] must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more we break away from greed, hatred, envy, and pride" (LC IV 67). The old creature, left unchecked, will get worse and worse. But the power of Baptism, continually at work in the Christian's life, drowns the old creature daily and rejuvenates the new.

For this reason, there is a confluence between Baptism and confession. Luther notes:

Here you see that baptism, both by its power and by its signification, comprehends also the third sacrament, formerly called penance, which is really nothing else than baptism. What is repentance but an earnest attack on the old creature and an entering into a new life? If you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in baptism, which not only announces this new life but also produces, begins, and exercises it. (LC IV 74–75)

But what about those who fall away from Christian faith? Their Baptisms are still valid, and the fallen may be restored. Luther illustrates:

The ship does not break up because, as we said, it is God's ordinance and not something that is ours. But it does happen that we slip and fall out of the ship. However, those who do fall out should immediately see to it that they swim to the ship and hold fast to it, until they can climb aboard again and sail on in it as before. (LC IV 82)

Luther closes by (again) lauding Baptism, which is nothing other than God's saving work. "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory" (LC IV 83). Since that is what Baptism is,

Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new. . . . As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, that is, as long as we carry the old creature around our necks. (LC IV 84, 86)

III. The Augsburg Confession and the Apology

When they arrived in Augsburg for the imperial diet in 1530, the Evangelical delegation had a plan. Luther could not attend, since he had been declared a non-person nine years earlier at the Diet of Worms. He stayed in safety as close as he could, in the southern tip of electoral Saxony at Coburg Castle. So, led by Philipp Melanchthon, linguist extraordinaire, rhetorician, biblical humanist, and now highly respected theologian, the Evangelical group planned to state the practices in the Roman church that they found objectionable and in need of reform. They would lay out their rationale from Scripture in hopes that the validity of their grievances would be recognized.

That was the plan. But the outcome was different. A preemptive strike came from John Eck, a Roman Catholic theologian and an opponent of Luther since 1519, when Eck had debated Luther at Leipzig. Eck had circulated a document around Augsburg, *404 Articles (or Propositions) for the Imperial Diet*. The document listed quotations from Luther, Melanchthon, and many others. Some quotations were true and accurate, while others were taken out of context in order to paint the Lutherans in the worst light. And—important for our purposes in this essay—Eck grouped Luther's views on Baptism with those of Anabaptists like German Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier.¹⁹

So, Melanchthon and crew changed course. Rather than leading with the abuses that needed to be addressed, they would begin their statement to the emperor by going back to basics, laying out their beliefs about God, the person of Christ, and other topics. In doing so, they would send a message: we believe and teach what the church catholic has always believed and taught.

For this reason, the Augsburg Confession's article on Baptism is rather short. The corresponding article in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession is likewise brief compared to other articles, since the Roman delegation, in their response to the Augsburg Confession, the Confutation, did not object to the article in the Augsburg Confession. The text of Augsburg Confession Article IX (from the German text), is as follows:

Concerning baptism it is taught that it is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him.

Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the baptism of children is not right. (AC IX 1–3)

¹⁹ Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 59. For example, Luther is quoted in Eck's *404 Articles* at numbers 222 and 228; Hubmaier is quoted at number 226.

First, we note a word that may catch a reader's attention: Baptism as *necessary*. John Meyer, a professor for 44 years at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in the mid-twentieth century, comments on this wording:

But, someone may say, is not the word "necessary" a little too strong? Can no one be saved without Baptism?

When we say that Baptism is necessary to salvation [the wording used in the Apology], we do not wish to be understood as though God could not save anyone without this sacrament. God can apply his grace and create faith by other means than Baptism. He did so in the Old Testament. . . .

In the New Testament Christ instituted Baptism and gave it to us as a means for receiving his grace. He tied up his grace in Baptism for us. Anyone, then, who refuses to be baptized thereby throws away this grace of God which was offered to him in Baptism.²⁰

Meyer goes on to note that "God did not tie his own hands" when he made Baptism necessary. God still can save people by faith without using the means he has appointed. Meyer cites the tragic circumstance of parents arranging for the Baptism of a child, whom the Lord then calls out of this life before the child is baptized. God can grant that child "faith unto salvation—even without Baptism."²¹

Yet Baptism, because it is commanded by God and intended by him to be a means of delivering his grace, cannot be regarded as optional. We know of no category of Christians, in the New Testament or early church history, who decided to "pass" on Baptism. No doubt God has saved people without Baptism, but he has not left Baptism as something we are free to do or not do. In love, he wills to give his saving gifts through Baptism. So, we rightly confess that "Baptism is necessary to salvation."

Likely because of Eck's insinuation that the Lutherans were in some way kindred spirits with the Anabaptists, Melancthon expressly mentions the Anabaptists in AC IX. In the Apology, as he distances Lutherans from the Anabaptist assertion "that the baptism of children is not right" (AC IX 3), he fleshes out his argument a bit more, echoing a point Luther had made in the Large Catechism. "That God approves the baptism of little children is shown by the fact that God gives the Holy Spirit to those so baptized. For if this baptism had been ineffectual, the Holy Spirit would have been given to no one, none would have been saved, and ultimately there would be no church" (Ap IX 3; older enumeration Ap IX [IV] 53). Before that, though, he adds an argument from the words of Jesus instituting Baptism:

²⁰ John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 128.

²¹ Meyer, *Studies*, 129.

Therefore it is necessary to baptize little children in order that the promise of salvation might be applied to them according to Christ's mandate [Matt. 28:19], "Baptize all nations." Just as salvation is offered to all in that passage, so baptism is also offered to all—men, women, children, and infants. Therefore it clearly follows that infants are to be baptized because salvation is offered with baptism. (Ap IX 2; older enumeration Ap IX [IV] 52)

That is to say, since the command in Matthew 28:19 to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them" (NIV) is broad and inclusive, children and infants should not be excluded from receiving God's gifts through Baptism.

A key phrase in AC IX 1–2 on Baptism is that "grace is offered through" Baptism. The Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, "Concerning the Use of Sacraments," picks up on that point, stressing that the purpose of the sacraments is for God to impart his grace to people. Peters comments, "Baptism is arranged as the way God condescends to us; it is God's gift of grace for us and in that sense it is in direct opposition to all sacrificial activity offered by human beings; it is how God brings Himself down to us, not how we strive to bring ourselves up to God."²²

A pastor friend likes to ask a question Norman Nagel reportedly liked to ask: "When someone is baptized, who's doing the doing?" That is, when someone is baptized, who is really at work? To the human eye, humans are the ones acting: they come to be baptized or they bring their children. They may confess their faith and desire to be baptized. A human administers the water and speaks the words. All these are acts born of faith and therefore good things. But we dare not think that therefore Baptism is primarily a human activity. No, *God* is the one "doing the doing" in Baptism. He is delivering his gifts of forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation, along with the faith to receive them.

This grace that is offered through Baptism, AC XIII 1 says, works to "awaken and strengthen our faith." Like Luther, Melancthon does not go into detail to describe the precise way or moment faith is awakened through Baptism, particularly through the Baptism of infants. But he, like Luther, implies that since Baptism is the gospel, and the Holy Spirit uses the gospel to create faith in the promises it offers, Baptism therefore awakens faith.

In Article IX the Augsburg Confession speaks against the teaching of the Anabaptists. In Article XIII 3 it addresses the other front, Rome. "Rejected, therefore, are those who teach that the sacraments justify *ex opere operato* without faith and who do not teach that this faith should be added so that the forgiveness of sin (which is obtained through faith and not through work) may be offered there." In medieval piety, some viewed the sacraments almost as magical incantations; if people were present when the right words were spoken and the proper rituals performed, they

²² Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms*, 88.

benefited from the sacraments *ex opere operato*, merely by “the work having been worked.” The Apology rejects this notion and confesses that faith is needed to receive the blessings given in the sacraments.

So, in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, Baptism is defined against two views. First, against those who say that Baptism cannot awaken faith, the Augsburg Confession and the Apology confess that it can because it is the gospel, an instrument of grace graciously used by the Holy Spirit. Second, against those who say Baptism justifies apart from faith, Melancthon states that the word—and the faith it engenders—and the water—the act of baptizing—are both vital, and must each be honored.

IV. The Smalcald Articles

John Frederick, elector of Saxony beginning in 1532, was working in the mid-1530s to strengthen the Smalcald League, an alliance of German princes against Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. As part of this effort, Frederick encouraged Luther to set down his personal views about a number of doctrinal topics. Luther had done this to a degree in 1528, appending his doctrinal “last will and testament” to his *Confession concerning Christ’s Supper*. Also at this time, the prospects were favorable for a church council, at which the Evangelicals could confess their faith and engage in discussions with Roman Catholic counterparts. Luther’s confession of faith could serve as the statement from his side of the table. So it was that Luther, in December 1536, began writing what we know as the Smalcald Articles.²³ Heart attacks in mid-December delayed completion of the work, but he managed to finish.

The article on Baptism begins, “Baptism is nothing other than God’s Word in the water, commanded by God’s institution, or, as Paul says, ‘washing by the Word’” (SA III V 1). “God’s Word in the water,” as noted before, serves as a concise definition of Baptism. Luther connects the definition of Baptism to Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:26, λουτρὸν τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι (“washing of water in word”), or *lavacrum verbi* (“washing of the word”) as Luther cites it here from the Vulgate. Λουτρόν (“washing”) is the vocable found also in Titus 3:5. There is water and there is the word of God—a “washing of the word.”

As he had done in the Large Catechism (LC IV 18), Luther goes on to affirm the axiom of Augustine “Let the Word be added to the element, and a sacrament results” (SA III V 1). Augustine’s description of a sacrament fits with Luther’s: Baptism is God’s word in the water.

In the Smalcald Articles again we find Luther taking aim at the position of the Anabaptists, which Melancthon had already done in the Augsburg Confession and Apology. On the other side of the theological aisle, Luther names two theological

²³ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology*, 146–147.

luminaries with whom he disagrees about Baptism: Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus.

Therefore we do not agree with Thomas and the Dominicans who forget the Word (God's institution) and say that God has placed a spiritual power in the water which, through the water, washes away sin. We also disagree with Scotus and the Franciscans, who teach that baptism washes away sin through the assistance of the divine will, that is, that this washing takes place only through God's will and not at all through the Word and the water. (SA III V 3)

Luther's objection to Aquinas seems to be that Aquinas locates a metaphysical power in the *elementum* itself, in the water of Baptism. Even if, according to Aquinas, the source of this power is God, Luther nevertheless objects because the source of power should be God's command and promises connected to Baptism. The power of Baptism must be located in the word, not in the element.

Luther's objection to Duns Scotus is that Duns Scotus locates the power of Baptism in the inscrutable divine will. True, Luther would grant, God does will to give his gifts through Baptism, but for Luther God has bound himself, so to speak, to acting in this way through water and the word. Duns Scotus overemphasized God's freedom to will and act. Yes, Duns Scotus might say, God decided to act via Baptism now, but God could act in numerous ways to achieve the same ends. True enough; God is utterly independent. But when God makes a promise, Luther would contend, God binds himself to that promise. And that is what God has done in Baptism. "Baptism is nothing other than God's Word in the water."

Luther adds a brief note advocating the Baptism of children. His rationale echoes what he had written in the Large Catechism. In short, God wants to give his gift of redemption also to children: "We maintain that we should baptize children because they also belong to the promised redemption that was brought about by Christ. The church ought to extend it to them" (SA III V 4). The Kolb-Wengert edition notes that the "it" in "ought to extend it to them" is ambiguous in the original Latin; it could refer to Baptism or redemption.²⁴ Since Luther believed God imparted the fruits of Christ's redemption through Baptism, the ambiguity does not affect his meaning. His logic is straightforward and filled with the gospel. God loves children. Jesus redeemed children. God gives his gift of redemption through Baptism. Therefore, the church ought to extend Baptism to children.

V. The Formula of Concord

The three decades after Luther's death were tumultuous in many ways for his theological heirs. Political turmoil came with the Lutherans' defeat in the Smalcald War in 1547 and the subsequent reviled Augsburg Interim that reinstated Roman

²⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 320, fn 135.

Catholic practices with threat of force. The Leipzig Proposal, an attempt to soften the Augsburg Interim, only exacerbated matters by giving the impression that Melancthon was willing to sacrifice some doctrinal stances for the sake of an illusory peace. Yet that was only the beginning. Religious and political currents combined to create a volatile atmosphere that interacted with church affairs, each often inflaming the other. Theologically, this became the era of intra-Lutheran controversy. Those who had loved and learned from Luther fought over how his statements and viewpoints should look in new situations and contexts. Melancthon, whose contributions to the Lutheran cause were undeniable, became a polarizing figure, often fanning flames despite his conciliatory intentions. In time, though, there were those like Martin Chemnitz, Jacob Andreae, and others who, after failed attempts, did increase understanding among theologians. The Formula of Concord represents their efforts to achieve intra-Lutheran theological consensus. The consensus was not total, but it was significant.

Since the Formula speaks mainly to controversies within Lutheranism, it does not speak specifically to Baptism until its final article, though, as will be noted below, Baptism and the sacraments generally do come up before that. Article XII makes clear what the Augsburg Confession had almost fifty years before: Lutherans should not be lumped together with radical reform groups. On the issue of Baptism, this meant primarily the Anabaptists. In the 1560s, Andreae had again made clear that Lutherans differed from them in many respects. Andreae's writing on the subject became part of his Swabian Concord and then part of the Formula.

The following is an excerpt from the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XII, under the heading "Erroneous Articles of the Anabaptists":

2. That unbaptized children are not sinners in God's sight but instead are righteous and innocent and therefore in their innocence are saved without baptism, which they do not need. They thus deny and reject the entire teaching of original sin and everything connected with it.
3. That children should not be baptized until they attain the use of their reason and can confess their faith themselves. (FC SD XII 11–12)

This section addresses an element of Baptism not yet discussed at length in the Lutheran Confessions, the question "Do infants and children, particularly children of Christian parents, *need* Baptism?" Lutherans answered, "Yes, because all enter the world in a sinful state." The Formula had stressed this truth in its first article, on original sin. A sample:

3. Likewise, we also reject the Pelagian error, which asserts that even after the fall human nature has remained uncorrupted and especially in spiritual matters remains completely good and pure in its *naturalia*, that is, in its natural powers. (FC Ep I 13)

6. Likewise, [we reject] that in the human being, human nature and its essence are not completely corrupted but that people still have something good about them, even in spiritual matters, such as the capability, aptitude, ability, or capacity to initiate or effect something in spiritual matters or to cooperate in such actions. (FC Ep I 16)

This was fully in line with Luther in the Smalcald Articles: “This inherited sin has caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures (Ps. 51[:5] and Rom. 5[:12]; Exod. 33[:20]; Gen. 3[:6ff.])” (SA III I 3). The Lutheran position was (and still is) that children and infants, too, inherit sin and need God’s forgiveness. Yet this forgiveness is the very thing God gives them in Baptism, along with the faith to receive and cling to that gift.

Is there an age at which children “can confess their faith themselves”? Certainly, though that age varies from one person to another. But the position of the Lutheran Confessions is that the gifts given in Baptism 1) are needed even by infants and 2) can be apprehended in faith even by infants. An illustration that can be useful (recognizing that every illustration has its limits) is that of gifts given to one-year-olds on their first birthdays. Do they understand what is happening as people give them gifts? No, and they could not articulate it even if they did. But can clothes given as gifts to infants benefit them and keep them warm? Yes. In a similar way, the positive version of what the Formula of Concord states here is that infants need Baptism and can receive it for their souls’ benefit and salvation, even before they can confess their faith.

A related point is addressed next in the Formula.

4. [Rejected is the teaching that] the children of Christians, because they are born to Christian and believing parents, are holy and God’s children without and before baptism. Therefore they do not regard infant baptism as very important nor do they advocate it, against the expressed words of God’s promise, which only extends to those who keep his covenant and do not despise it (Gen. 17[:4-8, 19-21]). (FC SD XII 13)

The children of Christians, too, need the gifts that God gives through Baptism. The similarities and differences between circumcision and Baptism are fascinating but beyond the scope of this article. Perhaps it suffices to say that the reference to Genesis 17, where circumcision is instituted, implies that as Abraham and his eight-day-old male descendants received the sign of circumcision, so too can children receive Baptism—and that, in fact, it is God’s will that they do.

A final point from the Formula that helps explain the rejection of the Anabaptist positions is found in the Formula’s Article III, on righteousness and justification. Notice here the role that the sacraments play. Baptism is not a means by which people confess their faith or do something else for God, but it is a means by which *God*

does something for *people*—he imparts to them the righteousness of Christ. And he does this for children and infants too:

As a result of [Christ's] total obedience—which he performed on our behalf for God in his deeds and suffering, in life and death—God forgives our sin, considers us upright and righteous, and grants us eternal salvation. This righteousness is conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel and in the sacraments. It is applied to us, appropriated and accepted through faith. Therefore, believers have reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, and God's grace, and are children and heirs of eternal life. (FC SD III 15–16)

Lutheran pastor Andy Wright, in his book *Faithfully Formed: The Lutheran Confessions in Daily Life*, brings this truth home:

Think about the work of Christ and think about Baptism. Baptism delivers Christ's righteousness to us and recreates us so that we are free to live and enjoy life in this world as only a Christian can do. "[God] regards us as godly and righteous, and He eternally saves us." That's the confidence our Baptisms give us and the outlook we have in life. We see the world differently because of our Baptisms.²⁵

VI. Conclusion

This essay does not claim to include every quotation from the Book of Concord concerning Baptism, nor does it attempt to answer every possible question. The fact is that Baptism in the Lutheran Confessions is such a rich topic that much more time could be profitably spent discussing it. Pastors, professors, and theological students are encouraged to take up some of those questions in further study, and to remember personally what Baptism is: "God's word in the water," through which he delivers his saving grace. A final encouragement from Luther is appropriate here: "Ah, dear Christians, let us not value or treat this unspeakable gift so half-heartedly. For Baptism is our only comfort and the doorway to all of God's possessions and to the communion of all the saints. To this end may God help us. Amen."²⁶

²⁵ Andy Wright, *Faithfully Formed: The Lutheran Confessions in Daily Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024), 96.

²⁶ From Luther's "Baptismal Booklet," in Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 373.