

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Preface

At first I thought of discussing only the baptism of children, because it is such a timely subject. Not only are numerous Protestant communions and movements opposed to infant baptism, but quite a few churches which traditionally have observed this practice are now calling it into question, more or less officially and with the encouragement of certain eminent theologians.

What, however, is the baptism of children if it is not that one and only baptism, that unique baptism which Christ instituted, administered to children? Besides, it is impossible to speak of children's or infant baptism without speaking of baptism per se. Are we for or against the baptism of children and infants? How we answer this question necessarily depends on the doctrine of baptism which is being professed. A confessional Lutheran cannot renounce the baptism of children, for what he professes with regard to baptism would preclude this. Conversely, a Baptist cannot approve of child or infant baptism because his concept of baptism will not permit him to do so. It is impossible to take a stand for or against the baptism of infants and children without first of all showing that baptism is the sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ, and that from this fact baptism derives its benefits and its efficacy. Thus, very naturally, we are led to show what a wealth of grace baptism comprises.

This will be more than a simple introduction. The Biblical doctrine of baptism is so rich, and its significance for the daily existence of the Christian so profound, and its consolations and

admonitions for those who receive it so great (and the errors taught concerning this matter so grave), that it is worth the effort to explore this question at length. It is only in the second half that we shall show not only that it is proper to baptize children and infants but that it is actually a crime against the divine law not to do this.

May this study serve to convince the reader that God performs wonders of love, grace, and faithfulness every time anyone is baptized, great or small, child or adult, and prompt him to give thanks to the Lord for this unspeakable gift!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	p. 1
Introduction	p. 4
I. The false teachings about baptism	p. 8
II. The Biblical doctrine of baptism	p. 17
A. Its divine institution	p. 17
B. Its essence	p. 19
C. Its efficacy:	
1. Baptism and forgiveness	p. 21
2. Baptism and putting on Christ	p. 23
3. Baptism and salvation	p. 26
4. Baptism and regeneration	p. 30
5. Baptism and circumcision	p. 34
III. The significance of baptism in the daily life of the Christian:	p. 47
A. In view of our natural corruption and of sin . .	p. 48
B. In view of the afflictions of the flesh, the world, and the devil	p. 51
C. Amid earthly distress and difficulties	p. 55
D. At the approach of death	p. 59
E. In our sanctification	p. 62
IV. Immersion or sprinkling?	p. 72
V. Infant baptism	p. 76
A. Its theological justification	p. 76
B. Its historical justification	p. 86
Conclusion	p. 99

INTRODUCTION

Many churches reject the baptism of infants and children, maintaining that this sacrament should be received only by adults. More precisely, they reject the "baptism of nurture" and administer only "believers' baptism" to those who make public profession of it, i.e., those who have had a personal conversion experience and who publicly confess their faith in Christ. This is the case particularly with the Mennonites, the Baptists, the Pentecostals and a number of similar denominations. Still others leave the question open, allowing the parents to decide whether their children should be baptized. This tendency asserts itself more and more in the Reformed churches and now is showing itself among Lutherans as well. Such an attitude is neither a mere matter of liturgics nor a simple question of ecclesiastical practice, but the rejection of infant baptism, i.e., the baptism of nurture, and constitutes the surrender of the entire Biblical doctrine of baptism. A genuine doctrinal rift separates the proponents and the opponents of infant baptism. This is what the following chart attempts to demonstrate. After each Biblical statement we shall contrast the Baptist and the Lutheran teachings, allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions. For the Baptist position we cite the work by A. Kuen, Baptism.¹ For the Lutheran teachings we shall refer to Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism.

¹Le Baptême, Société des Publications Baptistes, Paris, 1970.

THE BIBLE

"Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

--Acts 2:38

"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

--Acts 22:16

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word . . . "

--Ephesians 5:25-26

Baptist teaching

"Baptism: the symbol of a washing of purification"

(p. 44)

"Baptism is only connected with this purification because it symbolizes it."

(p.46)

Lutheran teaching

"What gifts or benefits does Baptism bestow?"

"Answer: It effects forgiveness of sins . . . "

(The Sacrament of Holy Baptism)

THE BIBLE

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

--Mark 16:16

"...and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also -- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . "

--I Peter 3:21

". . . he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior . . . "

-- Titus 3:5,6

Baptist teaching

"The water of baptism ... stands for life, inasmuch as the baptism of the Spirit which it represents grants access to a new life of fellowship or communion with God, a life of resurrection with Christ." (p. 60)

Lutheran teaching

"Baptism . . . delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare."

(Ibid.)

THE BIBLE

Titus 3:5-6 as above

"In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. . . . No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.'"

--John 3:3,5

Baptist teaching

"Baptism, a sign of belonging to Christ, was consequently also a sign of the reception of the Holy Spirit." (p. 53)

"The seal of the Holy Spirit is indeed given to us by this same Lord, but He leaves to the church the manner of conferring the visible act which symbolizes the spiritual seal."
(Ibid.)

Lutheran teaching

"For without the Word of God the water is merely water and no baptism. But when connected with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul wrote to Titus ..."

(Ibid.)

We could continue this side-by-side encounter with reference to other Biblical statements; but these examples undoubtedly suffice to persuade the reader that a chasm separates the two positions, and to show him which of the two positions does greater justice to the teachings of Holy Scripture.

How does Baptist theology arrive at its position? How, when confronted with such clear texts from the Scriptures, can it end up robbing the doctrine of baptism of practically all its scriptural elements, giving this sacrament such a poor definition as to empty it of all of the blessings which Scripture attributes to it? By a double maneuver:

1. It affirms a priori that God does not offer His salvation through the visible means He has instituted, but that the Holy Spirit works directly within the heart, an action for which the sacraments become mere symbols.

A. Kuen writes, among other things, that "it is impossible for water to bring about the great spiritual changes which the Apostle Paul describes in Romans 6 and parallel passages" (p. 33). We ask: How does the author derive such a notion? By what criterion is he to determine that something is impossible even when the Scriptures declare it to be so? Is this not placing a philosophical principle above Scripture, making that a sovereign norm for our interpretation? When the angel comes to Mary to announce the birth of the child Jesus, she asks: "How can this be, since I have no husband?" the angel responds: "With God nothing is impossible" (Luke 1:34, 37).

2. It purely and simply lays aside the texts which it finds inconvenient, by maintaining either that they do not speak of baptism or that they have to do with the "baptism of the Spirit," the activity of the Holy Spirit within the heart, an activity for which baptism is

nothing more than a visible symbol.

That is what we now proceed to examine in detail.

I. THE FALSE TEACHINGS ABOUT BAPTISM

The error which we have just described is nothing new. We find it already in the writings of Zwingli in 1530. In his work Fidei Ratio (Rule of Faith) the Swiss reformer writes to the Emperor Charles V:

I believe, in fact I know, that all the sacraments, far from conferring grace, neither impart nor dispense it. Perhaps I shall appear very presumptuous to you in stating this, worthy Emperor. But grace, because it is created and given by the divine Spirit alone, comes solely to the mind. . . . Now, it is not necessary to have a conductor or vehicle for the Spirit, since He Himself is the force and the carrier of all things and therefore has no need of being conveyed. We have never read in Holy Scripture that such visible things as the sacraments carry with certainty the Spirit with them.

Accordingly, Zwingli establishes the principle that the Holy Spirit works in the heart in a direct and invisible manner. We call this theological "enthusiasm" or spiritualizing. The sacraments are conceived of as simply the visible witness of this invisible action of the Spirit.

In the same work Zwingli writes: "The sacraments are said to be the public witness of that grace which previously is present in each individual in private." Accordingly, they are nothing but the symbols, the visible acts which symbolize and bear witness that one has received the Holy Spirit. This is particularly true for baptism:

Through baptism the church receives publicly the one who previously has been received through grace. . . . Baptism, then, does not impart grace; it witnesses to the church that grace has been given to the one who is baptized.

Again: "Baptism only enters onto the records the individual who has been added to the church. Through baptism no sin is forgiven."² Or again:

Only an outward act is performed when one baptizes while reciting the sacred words: 'In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' This is nothing but the sign of a reality and a ceremony.³

Finally, Zwingli asserts:

All the doctors since the age of the apostles have been deceived on this point when they attributed to water an efficacy which it does not possess.⁴

We read the same in the New Instruction Manual of the Mennonite Church: "Baptism is an act of obedience through which the Christian renders his witness that he has believed in the grace of God for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit."⁵

The Baptist theologian Alfred Kuen settles upon the following task in the work from which we have already quoted:

"Based on the statements of the Bible, we shall try to delineate seven aspects of the significance of baptism without, of course, claiming to exhaust the meaning of the symbol" (p. 32). His chapter on the significance and value of baptism is subdivided into seven parts under the following titles:

²Epistolar. I, 60 f.

³De vera et false religione, 239.

⁴Le Baptême, Zurich, 1525.

⁵Nouveau Manuel d'Instruction des Églises Mennonites, Montbéliard, 1956, p. 68.

1. Baptism: symbol of a union with Christ (p. 32)
2. Baptism: symbol of a death and a burial (p. 35)
3. Baptism: symbol of our resurrection with Christ (p. 39)
4. Baptism: symbol of a washing of purification (p. 44)
5. Baptism: symbol of an investiture (p. 46)
6. Baptism: symbol of the seal of the Holy Spirit (p. 51)
7. Baptism: symbol of a passage to a new world, a new
humanity (p. 55)

The net effect of all this is a systematic reduction of baptism to a symbolic action which supposedly represents, in a visible manner, an invisible or inward reality. If we ask the author what, then, he does with all of the Biblical texts which state that baptism obtains for us the forgiveness of sins, that it delivers from death and the devil, regenerates the sinner, and offers him eternal salvation, he will reply that "all such statements actually have to do with the baptism of the Spirit, of which baptism with water is only the symbol" (p. 64). "All that is symbolically represented in baptism is brought about spiritually by the Holy Spirit within the believer" (p. 43). To be "baptized in Christ" is interpreted to mean that "the one newly baptized is dedicated to Christ and united to Him, thereby becoming a defender of Christ's cause and a soldier in His army" (p. 34). That magnificent Pauline text, Galatians 3:27: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ," is interpreted like this (p. 50):

By the same token the world must be able to read in our conduct that we belong to Christ, that we profess to follow Him, that He has changed our manner of life right down to our most ingrained, deeply rooted habits

(care, modesty, conformity to His Word instead of to the world). . . . Those who observe us must be able to discern the character of Christ in our outward demeanor: His sweetness, His goodness, His patience, His fervent compassion, His humility.

What a miserable explanation of such a marvelous text!

Where does this obstinate refusal to let the Bible speak, to accept what it says without trying to circumvent it, originate? Because such proponents believe they have discovered a contradiction between the Biblical passages which speak of the Holy Spirit and of faith and those which deal with baptism. They argue: If it is the Holy Spirit who regenerates mankind, then it is not baptism that does it! If it is through faith that we obtain forgiveness, then it is not through baptism! If the sinner is saved through faith, then he is not saved through baptism! Baptism thus can be nothing but a symbol. One encounters the term symbol on practically every page of Kuen's book even though Scripture never uses it even once, nor any of its synonyms, in speaking of baptism.

What results from such a theology is a doctrine of baptism devoid of all Biblical substance. Kuen writes (p. 73):

If baptism is not a sacrament which confers a grace upon us, if it is not an indispensable act for our salvation, of what value is it then for the Christian? What does it add to the simple act of faith? According to the Bible it is (1) a commitment, (2) the outward and visible expression of an inward experience, (3) an occasion for confessing one's faith, (4) a proclamation, (5) an occasion for self-examination, (6) an aid toward sanctification, (7) an act of obedience.

That is all. Not only is there no longer any mention of grace, forgiveness, and salvation, but God Himself is driven out of baptism.

It is man who acts, man alone: he promises to do something, he expresses something, he confesses, he proclaims, he examines himself, he sanctifies himself, he obeys! God is nothing but a benevolent onlooker, the silent and inactive witness to man's piety. What a miserable theology of baptism with respect to the Biblical revelation!

John Calvin never went this far. He has a higher regard for baptism than Zwingli does, For him the sacrament is more than a gesture or a ceremony which symbolizes our belonging to Christ:

Those who have ventured to write that baptism is nothing but a mark and a sign by which we profess our religion before men, somewhat as a man under arms carries the livery of his prince, have not considered what is essential in baptism: namely, that we must take it with this promise, that all who have believed and will be baptized will be saved.⁶

The reformer of Geneva thus establishes a bond between baptism and the forgiveness of sins. However, he rejects the statement that the water of baptism confers this pardon by virtue of the promise attached to it:

St. Paul did not wish to indicate that our cleansing and our salvation are accomplished by means of water or that the water possesses power to purify, to regenerate, or to renew. St. Peter also did not ^{wish} ~~want~~ to say that the water is the cause of our salvation. . . . Baptism promises no other purifying than through the sprinkling with the blood of Christ, which is symbolized by the water, to which it bears a resemblance through the power it possesses to wash and to make clean.⁷

⁶Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV, 15, 1.

⁷Ibid., 2.

It is in this sense that Calvin is able to consider baptism as a means of grace: that the water of baptism with which the promise of God is united does not confer forgiveness and salvation but only confers the certainty of forgiveness and salvation. It gives to the one baptized the certainty that, just as water washes and cleanses the body, so the blood of Christ purifies the soul and obtains forgiveness. But Calvin refuses to believe that God forgives and saves through the water of baptism.

Numerous Reformed theologians like F. J. Leenhardt, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner have undoubtedly understood that Calvin's doctrine represents an untenable compromise. They have more or less turned sharply away from it to take up again Zwingli's position, which is ultimately that of the Baptist theology. Therefore, they have expressed their opposition to the baptism of infants and children. This rejection of pedobaptism is indeed the necessary and logical outcome of the Zwinglian-Baptist teaching.

If baptism is, to use A. Kuen's terms again (p. 73), a commitment, the outward and visible expression of an inward experience, an occasion for confessing one's faith, a proclamation, the occasion for self-examination, an aid toward sanctification, and an act of obedience -- if baptism is indeed all this and no more, it must then follow that the Christian church baptize only those who confess their faith. One does not ask a mere baby to confess his sins and his faith or to make a personal commitment to God.

Kuen writes: "The baptism of infants has nothing in common with what the Bible calls baptism, except the name....Anyone who has undergone as an infant a presentation, accompanied by the sprinkling of a few drops of water, cannot say that he has been baptized in the Biblical sense of this term" (p. 199). Again (pp. 77 ff.):

For a contract to be valid, the law requires that the contracting party be capable of doing so voluntarily. . . . Our conscience is repulsed by the idea that infants should be sold without their consent to a master who will make them work. We call that slavery. We disapprove of the practice of certain tribes of marrying children at the moment of their birth. Why, then, should we not be shocked at the thought that God would approve a commitment made for us without our knowledge through substitutes (sponsors or godparents) at the time of our birth, and that He would compel us to keep these vows which we actually have not made for ourselves?

All of this is logical and consistent. If the Baptist teaching is Biblical and correct, infant baptism is not valid.

The New Instruction Manual of the Mennonite Church similarly states: "According to Scripture only those who have personally accepted the Lord by turning from their past life in order to live for God can validly receive baptism. This excludes all infant baptism" (p. 70).

Karl Barth writes:

What is wanted is very simple: instead of the present infant-baptism, a baptism which on the part of the baptized is a responsible act. If it is to be natural, the candidate, instead of being a passive object of baptism, must become once more the free partaker of Jesus Christ, that is, freely deciding, freely confessing, declaring on his part his willingness and readiness.⁸

From the standpoint of a doctrine of baptism, infant-baptism can hardly be preserved without exegetical and practical artifices and sophisms -- the proof to the contrary has yet to be supplied! One wants to preserve it only if one

⁸ The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism, translated by Ernest A. Payne, London: SCM Press, 1948, p. 54.

is resolved to do so on grounds which lie outside the biblical passages on baptism and outside the thing itself. The determination to defend it on extraneous grounds has certainly found expression from century to century.⁹

On a visit to the Netherlands in 1933, Barth had been warned by the theology professor of the theological faculty of the Free University of Amsterdam, G. C. Berkouwer, that within ten years he would take up the cudgel against infant baptism. Barth protested; yet within a decade he did take the position that infant baptism was incompatible with his teaching concerning this sacrament. If he delights in opposing the positions of Luther and Calvin, he does not explain how he was able for so long to stand alongside them. Yet his evolution in this respect is logical, also. One cannot be in favor of infant baptism when one accepts the baptismal teachings of Karl Barth!

Nor is it possible to reject infant baptism and believe in original sin at the same time: to believe, that is, that infants stand in need of grace and pardon. F. J. Leenhardt, the Reformed theologian, maintains that the children of believers,

if they are sanctified, have no need of baptism [since they] have by birth what baptism ought to confer on them. . . . The welcome which Jesus reserved for children proves, on the contrary, that they have no need of baptism.¹⁰

A. Kuen shares this opinion:

The doctrine of original sin has been defined by Augustine. Nowhere does Scripture speak of any defilement from which baptism is supposed to purify us. No one is going to die because of original sin (Jeremiah 31:30).¹¹

⁹Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰"Sur le sens du mot 'anti-pédobaptiste,'" in Foi et Vie (Faith and Life), 1950, pp. 67 ff.

¹¹Le Baptême, p. 195.

Finally, to cite Pastor A. Maillot:

How can anyone accuse an eight-day-old infant of original sin (even if he has kept you awake for eight days)? The stratagem was simple: one imposed upon them an original sin transmitted by the parents, from which (at least from the consequences of which) baptism was supposed to make them clean. Infants are baptized with the remission^s of original sin in mind. Theologians never get stuck. Never!¹²

Right after the end of World War II, the Reformed Church of France created a commission on baptism, charging it with the formulation of a certain number of principles governing the administration of the sacrament. A series of resolutions was submitted to a vote of the regional synods. The third of these reads: "Believers should be granted the liberty not to have their children baptized if they judge that baptism cannot be administered except upon the personal request of the candidate for baptism."¹³ The baptism of infants and children was officially declared an open question about which each could hold his own personal opinion. The influence of Karl Barth is evident! Need we add that few Lutheran pastors would agree, or that a pastor in the Church of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine was asked to resign his position some years ago because of his refusal to baptize an infant?

The Lutheran Church affirms:

Our churches teach that Baptism is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through Baptism,

¹²"Les péchés enlevés" in Le Christianisme au XX^e siècle, p. 4.

¹³La Revue Réformée, October, 1950, p. 200.

and that children should be baptized, for being offered to God through Baptism they are received into his grace.

Our churches condemn the Anabaptists who reject the Baptism of children and declare that children are saved without Baptism.¹⁴

Is such a statement Biblical? That is what we shall now attempt to determine.

¹⁴Augsburg Confession, IX, "Baptism"; The Book of Concord, Tappert ed., p. 33.

II. THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM

We shall not attempt to take up the entire Biblical doctrine of baptism at length, nor can we deal with all aspects of it in detail. The aim of our study is rather to demonstrate the efficacy or power of this sacrament and its significance. We shall therefore confine ourselves to those matters which will allow us to achieve this purpose, to everything capable of helping the reader learn about the marvelous benefits which baptism confers.

A. Its divine institution

Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the New Covenant. For this reason it is, together with the preaching of the Gospel and the Lord's Supper, a means of grace. Only God, who alone has grace at His disposal, is able to determine by what means He will offer His grace to mankind. His will is sovereign. If He had commanded us to pick up a straw with the promise that we would thereby be forgiven, we would have to do it. Whoever despises any of the means of grace which He has instituted is thereby despising grace itself, since it has pleased God to select such means of grace in order that man may not base his redemption upon his own personal merits. Baptism is such a means of grace.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became man for the redemption of the world. Before He returned to heaven He instituted baptism. He also commanded the church to administer it: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you

always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). Therefore, Jesus intends for mankind to be baptized, and for His church to baptize people from every nation until His return at the close of time. He has promised to be with His people until that day. And where Christ is, there His grace is also. Furthermore, because His grace is offered to sinners by the means which He Himself has chosen, these means of grace must be administered:

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

-- Mark 16:16

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

-- Acts 2:38

Now it is true that baptism had been administered before Jesus commanded His apostles to do it. John the Baptist baptized in the Judean desert, and his baptism had the same efficacy as the baptism instituted by Jesus. John, too, baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). Here we have a case of one and the same baptism, with this difference: John baptized those who came to him for the forgiveness of sins which Christ must yet obtain for the world through His death on the cross, while the Christian church baptizes for the forgiveness of sins which He has obtained. And it is still true today, as the Scripture says about the scribes and the Pharisees who refused to be baptized by John, that they "rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John" (Luke 7:30).

Baptism, then, is not merely a pious custom. It is submission to a solemn command of the Lord.

B. Its essence

What is baptism? A sacrament, as we have said. We define a sacrament as a sacred act instituted by God Himself, in which His Word is united with a visible element and through which God offers and guarantees to us the forgiveness of sins which Christ has obtained for us. In baptism this element is water. It is not, however, any ordinary water. As the Small Catechism states, it is "water used according to God's command and connected with God's Word." By virtue of this promise connected with it, the water of baptism becomes "a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul wrote to Titus (3:5-8)."

Just as it is God's Word which makes baptism what it is, so it is the Word which gives baptism its efficacy and its power. Baptism, then, means the application of water to the sinner upon the Lord's command, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It means that the sinner rests upon the promise which is connected with baptism. Such a baptism accomplishes great things and provides marvelous blessings.

C. Its efficacy

Baptism is the washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit through which God offers mankind, conceived in sin and thus guilty, cursed, and condemned under the law and subject to death and the devil, the divine forgiveness for all their sins, covering them with the righteousness of Christ and causing them to be born anew as God's beloved children, temples of the Holy Spirit and heirs of everlasting life.

We are not dealing with some pious conception of baptism or with some personal notion of the Lutheran theologians about the

efficacy and significance of baptism, but -- as we shall see-- with the clear teaching of Holy Scripture. Let us first consider this marvelous word from Luther:

. . . Baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself. Moreover, it is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved. We are not to regard it as an indifferent matter, then, like putting on a new red coat. It is of the greatest importance that we regard Baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted. It is the chief cause of our contentions and battles because the world now is full of sects who proclaim that Baptism is an external thing and that external things are of no use. But no matter how external it may be, here stand God's Word and command which have instituted, established, and confirmed Baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. It is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it may not be worth a straw. If people used to consider it a great thing when the pope dispensed indulgences with his letters and bulls and consecrated altars and churches solely by virtue of his letters and seals, then we ought to regard Baptism as much greater and more precious because God has commanded it and, what is more, it is performed in his name. So the words read, 'Go, baptize,' not in your name but 'in God's name.'

To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized ~~not~~ by men but by God himself. Although it is performed by men's hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act. From this fact everyone can easily conclude that it is of much greater value than the work of any man or saint. For what work can man do that is greater than God's work?¹⁵

¹⁵Large Catechism, Fourth Part: "Baptism"; The Book of Concord, Tappert ed., p. 437.

1. Baptism and forgiveness

In baptism God offers the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38, 22:16). The baptism instituted by Jesus has the same power as that of John the Baptist, about which Scripture says: "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

The forgiveness of sins! That is mankind's greatest need. Conceived and born in sin (Psalm 51:7), man is by nature flesh and born of flesh (John 3:6), a child of wrath (Ephesians 2:3) in whom no good thing resides (Romans 7:18). He is dead in his offenses and his sins (Ephesians 2:1), guilty (Romans 3:19), condemned under the law (Galatians 3:10), subject to evil and to unrighteousness along the broad way that leads to perdition (Matthew 7:13). His sins separate him from his Creator and earn him disgrace and eternal damnation. Nevertheless, in baptism Jesus Christ grants him that forgiveness which He has earned for him on the cross, a full and complete pardon for which He has poured out His own innocent and precious blood. John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance. On Pentecost Peter proclaimed to his hearers who were upset by his preaching: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you" (Acts 2:38). Repentance consists of contrition (genuine sorrow for one's sins) and faith in Christ. It is the attitude of the one who knows himself to be condemned under the law and accepts that verdict, but who also has discovered in Jesus the Son of God who has redeemed him by His sacrifice and in whom he can find pardon. Such repentance leads to baptism, which is administered to him "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4, Acts 2:38).

We must let this text speak for itself. It does not say: "Search for forgiveness and find it, and then come to be baptized." Rather, it says: "Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." What God lays before us in baptism, then, is genuine forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul affirms the same truth when he writes: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Ephesians 5:25-26). It is perfectly clear that the apostle is speaking here of baptism. After having declared that Jesus loves His church and, by virtue of this love, gave Himself for her, subjecting Himself to death and thereby paying the price for the sins of all mankind, Paul shows how Christ applies to His church the benefits of His sacrifice. He sanctifies her, i.e., makes her His own, edifies her, and establishes her in faith, piety, and holiness, having purged her of her sins and bestowed forgiveness on her through the washing of water through the Word. Baptism is not really ordinary water; it is water administered according to God's command and united with His Word, a water which carries with it the marvelous promise of forgiveness. As the water we wash with cleanses us externally, so baptism cleanses us inwardly. What lies within us to soil us? The stain of sin, all the filthiness of heart and soul, all our inward impurity which daily manifests itself in numerous sins. From all this, baptism cleanses us by virtue of the divine promise: not that it blots out our sins, but rather that it covers them with the righteousness of Christ, imparting to us the merits of the Savior (cf. Galatians 3:26-27).

Dear Christian, as you read these lines, know that Christ has

not just won and earned the forgiveness you so desperately need, nor does He merely offer it in His Word. He also has truly and personally laid it before you in your baptism.

"Through baptism?" you may ask. "Through something as common and insignificant as water from the faucet?" Yes, through that, through a water which by itself possesses no such marvelous power but which receives it through the promise with which it is joined, through water which can bring about so marvelous a thing because your God wills it to be so.

Consider how water purified Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy because God had so decreed it. Consider how Jesus' own saliva gave the blind man his sight because Jesus willed it to happen that way. It pleases God to use water to bestow forgiveness on us. Let us not take offense at this, but believe with humility and gratitude what the Bible declares. Let us not reach for some "symbol" which is not there. Rather, let us believe that the Lord grants forgiveness where the Scriptures tell us He does. It is not man who acts in baptism, man who loves to presume so much in what he does and to reap glory from it. No, it is God who provides the sinner with what he so desperately needs: the forgiveness of all his unrighteousness. We need to crush our arrogance, subdue our reason, and in simple faith and gratitude take hold of His inexpressible gift (II Corinthians 9:15)!

2. Baptism and putting on Christ

Through baptism the sinner puts on Jesus Christ and becomes a child of God.

You are all sons [children] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into

Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

--Galatians 3:26-27

Paul sees no adversary relationship between faith and baptism as the Baptists do. The Baptists say that since faith saves, baptism cannot save also. If through faith one becomes a child of God, they say, it does not follow that baptism accomplishes this. Yet in saying this they oppose what the apostle considers in tandem and actually joins together in this splendid text. The second part of our text actually explains the first: faith has made us children of God, for when we received baptism we "became clothed with (in)" Christ. In the Greek text the words "all of you who were baptized" are preceded by a particle which means "for" or "indeed." It is because they have been baptized into (en) Christ that believers are children of God through faith in Christ. From the believer's viewpoint baptism is the expression of his faith in Jesus and his seeking after forgiveness. But from God's viewpoint baptism is that act through which the Lord offers the believer His promises of forgiveness and ratifies them for him in a visible, personal fashion.

"For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." For Baptists like Kuen this phrase merely means that when the believer undergoes baptism he witnesses to the world that now he belongs to Jesus, that he promises to follow in His footsteps and live for Him. Baptism means far more than that. To be clothed in Christ literally means to be wrapped in His merits and His righteousness so that God looks upon us through Christ. It means that through forgiveness we share in the Redeemer's own holiness and righteousness so that God no longer beholds our sins. From now on we are as righteous and innocent in His eyes as His own dear Son. Jesus becomes our Brother so that we are with Him, and thanks

to Him, His brothers and sisters and children of God. To put on Christ is to be clothed through faith in the costly robe which the Father has reserved for His prodigal son (Luke 15:22), in the wedding garment without which there is no salvation (Matthew 22:11). It means to wash one's garments and make them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14). It is to exult with the prophet:

I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices
in my God. For he has clothed me with garments
of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteous-
ness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

--Isaiah 61:10

I will clothe her priests with salvation, and her
saints will ever sing for joy.

--Psalm 132:16

To put on Christ is, in the Apostle Paul's words, to be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ -- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

--Philippians 3:9-11

Nowhere does Paul say that baptism is merely "a symbol of an investiture."¹⁶ It is rather the very means through which such an investiture is brought about, through which the believer becomes through faith a participant in the righteousness of his Savior. Through this means God bestows His grace upon us, turning us from the children of wrath that we were into His beloved children.

In this text as in those quoted earlier, God connects baptism and faith. Here is a truth of the utmost importance. It is indeed

¹⁶Kuen, Le Baptême, p. 46.

inadvisable to attribute some magic power to baptism. And it is certainly not our faith which makes baptism a means of grace or a sacrament. Baptism is such by virtue of the divine institution and promise. But it is through faith that the sinner lays hold of forgiveness, salvation and all the blessings offered to him in baptism. If, as we will have opportunity to show, we say that "baptism saves," then it saves through faith. It is a covenant and a relationship which man may reject, thereby becoming faithless. "Baptism saves," if we persevere through faith in the forgiveness and the salvation God has promised and offered to us. Many who are baptized do end up being lost because they turn away from Christ and from His forgiveness.

Dear Christian, nothing is closer to you than the clothes you wear on your body. Jesus has become your robe, your clothing in baptism. In baptism you have become as closely united with Him as it is possible to be, and made a participant in His redemption. In baptism God through faith has made Christ your personal Savior. It is up to you to see that He remains your Savior in life and in death, for time and eternity. Your baptism is an inexhaustible well of consolation and strength for you. Therefore, commit yourself to remain faithful to Him until death.

3. Baptism and salvation

In baptism God offers eternal salvation. "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). Once again Scripture connects faith and baptism.

Someone will immediately object: "But Jesus does not say that he who does not believe and will not be baptized shall be condemned. Only the one who will not believe will be condemned. That means baptism is not indispensable for salvation and does not obtain it."

To this we reply: it is true that baptism is not absolutely necessary for salvation. The thief on the cross undoubtedly never had been baptized. Yet this does not give us the right to say that baptism does not obtain salvation. Jesus says it does: "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." He thereby links faith with baptism and asserts that salvation comes through both. It is through both that one is saved, and both always go together. From the moment an individual comes to faith, he welcomes baptism and desires it, for in baptism God promises eternal life and seals it for the one who receives this sacrament in faith. Faith is based upon the promises of baptism. Yet faith is a subjective matter, a reliance upon the divine promises. Baptism is an objective act through which the Lord implements His promises. It cannot be a mere symbol, conferring nothing, for then baptism could not be as closely linked as it is with salvation. A symbol has never saved anyone! From God's side baptism offers, and by faith the believer through it receives, salvation from his Savior's hands. Baptism, then, is the channel, the means through which God offers the world the salvation of Christ. To affirm otherwise and refuse baptism is a contradictory position which proceeds from a faulty understanding of this sacrament. No one is condemned because he could not be baptized; but, should anyone deliberately refuse baptism, such an action will nullify God's plan for him (Luke 7:30).

What is it that saves the sinner? "Faith," say the Baptists. "Faith and baptism," says Jesus. The one does not exclude the other. On the contrary, faith and baptism save, although not in the same way. Baptism saves because it is the objective means through which God confers His salvation upon me. Faith saves because it is the personal means through which I lay hold upon my salvation. We do not say:

"Because faith saves, Jesus does not save. He is not the author but the symbol of salvation." No, the Scriptures teach both that Jesus saves and that faith saves. They likewise teach that baptism saves and faith saves!

God in His mercy has given us still other texts in Scripture which confirm that baptism saves, and it is difficult to make them say anything else (Titus 3:4-5). Earlier, Jesus has affirmed that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, thereby making an ultimate salvation the result of both faith and baptism. Paul, on the other hand, speaks in the perfect tense, declaring that God has saved us according to His great mercy and through baptism. God has chosen and instituted this sacrament to confer salvation upon us and to grant us entrance into the kingdom of Jesus' grace, in which we have the assurance that we are reconciled with and in Him as His beloved children and as heirs of everlasting life. The believer is already saved through baptism. He is already in possession of eternal life even though he still must die in order to enter into the full enjoyment of it and be freed from sin forever.

The Apostle Peter confesses that after His death Jesus Christ went to proclaim His victory to the spirits in prison, i.e., to the damned, particularly the unbelieving contemporaries of Noah who had refused to be converted while Noah was building the ark. Then Peter compares the flood to baptism:

He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes [is a type of] baptism

that now saves you also -- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.

--I Peter 3:18-21

We readily concede that this text introduces some difficulties. Let us translate it literally: ". . . during the building of the ark, in which a small number of souls, i.e. eight, were saved through the water. In the same way baptism now saves you also."

For the moment we shall lay aside what follows in this text, which has to do with a good conscience toward God. We shall have to take this up later. Let us bear in mind that the apostle draws a parallel between the water of the flood and the water of baptism. In what way are they alike? In this way, that both save. In the same way as the waters of the flood allowed Noah and his family to escape the judgment which struck the men and women of his day, so again it is water that saves us -- the water of baptism, i.e., as water "used according to God's command and connected with God's Word." Baptism allows the believer to escape condemnation. The water which allowed Noah and his family to escape God's fearful judgment, and later to set foot upon a renewed and rejuvenated earth cleansed of the sins of their contemporaries, will carry the believer over and beyond the final judgment toward the new heavens and the new earth which shall spring forth from the cleansing fire which awaits the world. Jesus, who has redeemed humanity in its entirety, opened up the gates of heaven for us on the day we were baptized. Salvation is ours. On the day when the Lord shall bring our earthly life to its close, if we have remained faithful and have held fast through faith to His promises, He will admit us to the full enjoyment of our salvation. The prayer which He addresses

to His Father, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24), will be heard for the benefit of all who will have put on their Savior in baptism and remained faithful to Him (Galatians 3:26-27).

Let us allow these texts to speak once more, to point out to us what they really intend to tell us -- what the Holy Spirit wants to reveal through them. May the Christian who believesⁱⁿ the inspiration of these texts, who believes and confesses that God speaks through them, let them speak and accept their message without forcing them to conform to a particular theological system. The Scriptures tell us explicitly: Baptism saves!

4. Baptism and regeneration

Holy Baptism renews us, making us temples of the Holy Spirit.

We are born in iniquity and conceived in sin. The thoughts of our hearts are evil from our youth. Ever since the fall of Adam no pure human being has lived on earth. Original sin is a reality, a fearful reality, as the Bible clearly teaches (Psalm 51:7; John 3:6; Ephesians 2:1,3; Genesis 8:21; Romans 7:18, 8:7 et al.). All humanity lies within Satan's power, then, by its very nature and is subject to the divine wrath and condemnation.

Nicodemus believed it was enough to strive for justice and piety and to avoid evil as much as possible -- in short, to become a better person -- to enter the kingdom of God. That well-intentioned man deceived himself. Jesus taught him a revolutionary truth: that one must not become a "better" person; one must become a totally new person. One must undergo a transformation of one's innermost being to such an extent that it can be compared with a new birth. "I tell

you the truth," Jesus states, "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Nicodemus asked himself how an adult could be born anew and be changed to the point of becoming a new individual. Note how Jesus answered: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:5-6).

Every reader who is not closed off a priori to the Scriptures, who is not a prisoner of prejudice and does not proceed from the assumption that whenever the Bible speaks of water and of regeneration it "cannot" be a question of baptism because baptism "cannot" be anything more than a symbol, must acknowledge that Jesus is referring to the sacrament of baptism.

Baptism is water enriched by a marvelous promise of grace, forgiveness, and salvation, through which the Holy Spirit regenerates (grants the new birth to) sinners. The Holy Scriptures attribute to baptism the same power or efficacy as the Word, concerning which they state:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

--I Peter 1:23

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

--James 1:18

St. Augustine has rightly said that a sacrament is an element to which the Word is joined, making it a "visible Word." On that basis it has the same effect as the preaching of the Gospel. It is thanks to the Word and to the promise attached to that Word that the sacrament is what it is and that it expresses what the Bible says.

St. Paul teaches exactly the same truth as Christ when he writes:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

--Titus 3:4-7

Even if baptism is not the sole means to bring about the new birth, it is the sole washing for it. Therefore, there is no reason to say, as Kuen does, that the apostle is speaking of something other than baptism, unless it is said out of a dogmatic prejudice or a conviction that our text "cannot" be referring to baptism. And, just as an ordinary or physical bath is not a simple sign or symbol of purification but the means of washing ourselves, so baptism is not simply a symbol of regeneration but the very means or washing through which the Holy Spirit effects the new birth. That is why St. Paul adds that it is a washing of rebirth and renewal (or regeneration) in the Holy Spirit.

Second, translator of the most popular version of the Bible among French Protestants, translates this text "for the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit." While this translation is grammatically correct, we nevertheless prefer the other translation, which is just as correct grammatically and is also dogmatically more accurate because it better affirms the union of water and the Holy Spirit in baptism: "for the washing of regeneration and of renewal of the Holy Spirit."

What, then, really happens in baptism? We have seen how God offers us His grace, His forgiveness and His salvation in baptism. This offer is more than just a simple proposal. It is efficacious; it accomplishes something! Not only does God promise and offer us all He does, but He sees to it that we will take hold of it. In our hearts He awakens that faith through which all of these blessings become ours. He radically transforms us by giving us a new heart which accepts His grace, His forgiveness and His salvation, and which will live off of them in faith.

Someone will undoubtedly object: "But the three thousand persons who were baptized on the evening of the first Pentecost were converted before they received baptism. That means they already had been born again; they already had forgiveness and salvation."

This is true; yet it is still just as true that baptism is a washing of regeneration. It has pleased God in His infinite mercy to use several means of offering us eternal life. Should this shock us? Are we going to react in surprise and amazement, with doubt and skepticism? Should we not instead thank Him for this? So anxious is He that we should be saved that He has a number of ways to deal with us. While preaching is directed to all who will hear it and offers forgiveness and salvation in general, in baptism God comes to us privately with His treasures of grace, offering them ^{to us} individually and sealing and guaranteeing them to us through the visible sign of water. He knows what kind of creatures we are, and how susceptible our human hearts are to doubts, questionings, and reservations. He knows how prone we are to call His gifts into question and to weigh the pro and con of His promises. That is why He has recourse to the water of baptism, to seal for the pagan just converted the gift of forgiveness and salvation just heard in the pro-

clamation of the Gospel.

On the other hand, the new birth is not something God does once for all. One is not born again just once for an entire lifetime. It is rather an act of mercy which God has to repeat and to renew continually in the lives of His children. Otherwise they would soon turn away from Him to chase after other gods and other treasures. That is why the Christian regularly reads and hears the Word of God as daily nourishment for his soul. That is also why he desires that forgiveness and salvation be sealed for him personally. Moreover, that is why he is eager to commune regularly, to receive personally the forgiveness of sins through the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

"For the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit": the Holy Spirit can do nothing with a mere symbol, but if He does renew or regenerate the believer through baptism, then baptism must truly be the means He has chosen to carry out His work in the human heart. It is not His only means, but it is one of them. Therefore, the believer who requests baptism thereby becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit, the place where He is actively pursuing His work of salvation, a work which He wishes only to continue.

Many who are baptized still deny Christ. But that is not because the Holy Spirit did not take up residence in their hearts when they were baptized. Alas, one can be a sincere believer and a temple of the Holy Spirit at a certain time in one's life only to deny Christ later on, die in unbelief, and be eternally lost.

5. Baptism and circumcision

Like circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism is the seal of

the covenant of grace. God had told Abraham:

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. . . . This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

--Genesis 17:7,10

God had chosen Abraham in order to make of him the forefather of a great nation, the people of Israel. This nation would become the cradle for the Savior of the world, the Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ. God made with Abraham a covenant which He later solemnly renewed with all of the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. He also prescribed the sacrifices and ceremonies which together prefigured the great work of redemption which Christ was to carry out in His day. He sent His prophets to proclaim His will to His people, above all the imminent coming of the Savior into the world. Through circumcision one became a member of this people by divine right, under God's law. One thereby became a partaker in the promises which God had given to Abraham. Paul further explains that Abraham

received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still circumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

--Romans 4:11-12

In Jesus the promise made to the patriarch was fulfilled. He was the seed, the posterity which God had promised to Abraham (Galatians

3:15-16). And it is through faith in Him that mankind, Jews and Gentiles (or heathen), become children of God. In Christ all the nations of the earth are blessed to the extent that they accept Him through faith as their Redeemer.

Consider also what the Apostle Paul writes to the Colossians:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

--Colossians 2:11-12¹⁷

There is a circumcision which is distinct from the Jewish circumcision performed by human hands, a circumcision consisting not of lancing the skin or of cutting off one small portion of it but the complete stripping of the body from the flesh. It affects our whole earthly body which is totally governed by our sinful flesh. This is an inner circumcision which completely transforms the individual. In Christ the body now becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. That is why Christians are warned not to give their bodies over to sin but to give themselves wholly over to God (Romans 6:12-13). How does this inner transformation come about? Through baptism. It is through baptism that the believer has been buried with Christ and awakened through faith to God. Baptism buries us with Christ; that is the strongest picture one can use to state unequivocally how baptism unites the believer with Christ's death. Paul uses it once

¹⁷A literal translation might read: "It is in Christ that you have been circumcised with a circumcision not by human hands, by the stripping away of the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, since in baptism you have been buried with Him and raised through faith in the power of God, who has raised Him from the dead."

more in his letter to the Romans when he asserts:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

--Romans 6:3-4

This has to do with an actual burial and an actual resurrection with Christ, not with some symbolic or figurative act. Jesus has indeed atoned for the sins of the world and has reconciled the world with God. All that God has done, He has done for mankind. Yet mankind must become partakers in all this. Therefore, we must be united with Christ and His crucifixion. It is baptism which brings this union about. To be buried in His death means, quite simply, to die. Anyone who is buried is truly dead. Baptism unites us with the death of Christ. It makes the Christian a participant in all that Jesus has done for him and for all mankind throughout the world. It is as though the believer himself had died on the altar of Golgotha and personally atoned for his sins. Just this is what the Bible attests in stating that we have put on Christ through baptism (Galatians 3:26-27). This intimate union with Christ, this deliverance from guilt and condemnation, starts the believer (as we shall have occasion to note) on the road to sanctification. Freed from sin, he also is freed from its dominion in order to live in Christ and for Him (cf. Genesis 17:7,10 as well as verse 13, ". . . My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant").

It is a mistake to consider circumcision a simple outward sign of belonging to the Jewish people. Its institution goes clear back to Abraham, to a time when Israel was not yet a nation. St. Paul is explicit about this. He regards circumcision as the authentication of the righteousness which Abraham had received through faith while still uncircumcised (Romans 4:11). From this he concludes that through circumcision Abraham became the father of believers, both circumcised and uncircumcised. Circumcision, then, is no mere ethnic sign of belonging to the people of Israel. On the contrary, it possesses a profound spiritual significance derived from these texts and the interpretation Paul gives to them. (Genesis 17:7, 10; Romans 4:11). Circumcision, then, is at the same time a covenant and the sign of that covenant. It concretely certifies that God has concluded a covenant of grace with the recipient of circumcision and that the latter shares in all of the promises attached to this covenant. Circumcision is the visible sign and seal that we are dealing here with someone to whom God has offered His gracious promises in the person of the Messiah. At the same time, circumcision is the act through which this individual is taken up into the covenant first concluded with Abraham.

"It shall be an eternal covenant, and I will be your God": we first encounter this expression, "I will be your God," whenever the covenant question is raised throughout the Old Testament. " . . . Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5 f.). "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2).

This is what the Lord says: "The people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert; I will come to give rest to Israel."

The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying:

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt . . . "

--Jeremiah 31:2-4a

" This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

--Jeremiah 31:33

But now, this is what the Lord says -- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . . "

--Isaiah 43:1-3a

"Your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior": this is the magnificent promise whose fulfillment circumcision guaranteed to the Jew who believed in its fulfillment. But now there is another means of entry into the covenant of grace, another seal of this covenant besides circumcision. Therefore, the apostle will not tolerate the introduction of circumcision into the Christian church (Acts 21:21). To do so would be to revert to the shadow of things to come after these promises already have found their fulfillment

in Christ. It would be a denial that Jesus is the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets. Baptism therefore has taken the place of circumcision (Colossians 2:11-13). Baptism plays the same role in the new covenant that circumcision played in the old. Baptism enables the sinner to receive the blessings which Christ has earned for the world. It makes him a member of God's people, one of the heavenly Father's children and an heir of eternal salvation.

Through baptism, just as previously through circumcision, God solemnly declares to me that He is my Father and I am His child. Through baptism the Lord tells me, as He once told His people: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

What a marvelous sacrament this is, and how amazingly efficacious a source of abundant grace and sublime blessing! It is no surprise that the Scriptures continually remind us that we have been baptized, and that baptism evokes the power we need to persevere in our faith and to live as Christians. It is the source of that living water which follows us throughout our lives, the spring from which our souls are called to drink until we come into that glorious destiny of eternal salvation which the Lord has reserved for His own. Even if we live to be eighty, ninety or a hundred years of age we are invited to keep on drawing from this fountain of grace.

The tragic error in Baptist theology consists of setting up an adversarial relationship between faith and baptism. It declares that if faith saves, baptism cannot save; yet if one maintains that baptism saves, it is thought to be no longer possible to teach salvation through faith alone (as we already have quoted from Kuen's Baptism, particularly page 11). Kuen also maintains that Luther's

doctrine of baptism consists of contradictions. With regard to the reformer's definition of baptism in the Small Catechism Kuen writes: "It is difficult to reconcile these assertions with other statements of Luther" (p. 10). Yet he experiences the same difficulty with the Apostle Paul, even though he states his own case otherwise, because he dares not accuse the apostle of contradictions. When the apostle speaks of forgiveness, of salvation, and of being born anew with regard to baptism, and when he elsewhere teaches salvation through faith alone, Kuen maintains that he cannot attribute these effects to water baptism: "It is impossible for water to effect such great spiritual changes as Paul describes for us in Romans 6 and in the parallel passages" (p. 33). One must, therefore (so Kuen says), either admit that Paul speaks of the baptism of the Spirit and not of water, or else circumvent the difficulty by claiming that water baptism only symbolizes these things -- it does not bring them about. He writes: "Luther's tragic mistake was that he returned to Catholic sacramentalism in order to satisfy the expectations of the masses" (p. 111). He also holds, along with the Dictionnaire Biblique de Westphal, that under the influence of Augustine Luther, "after having gained a glimpse of the Biblical perspective on baptism and the Lord's Supper, did an about face, thereby risking a return to the Roman position, and abandoned strict symbolism" (p. 114). But this is a grave historical error. Martin Luther never "abandoned strict symbolism" for the simple reason that he never taught it. He also never subscribed to the Catholic doctrine of opus operatum, i.e. of a baptismal efficacy that is virtually magical simply because it is administered by a man whose ordination has endowed him with certain special powers.

Luther always taught:

1. That faith alone saves, to the exclusion of every human work, and that this faith is essential for salvation;

2. That God imparts His grace, His forgiveness, and His salvation through baptism;

3. That this gift is valid even when the candidate for baptism does not believe;

4. That baptism effectively justifies and saves only if the person baptized apprehends, accepts, and receives in true faith what God offers him; and,

5. That the one who does not believe is lost and condemned even if he has been baptized a hundred times.

Now let us cite several quotations from Luther which illustrate these points:

Further, we are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends on the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that Baptism is simply water and God's Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.

Even though a Jew should today come deceitfully and with an evil purpose, and we baptized him in all good faith, we should have to admit that his Baptism was valid. For there would be water together with God's Word, even though he failed to receive it properly. Similarly, those who partake unworthily of the Lord's Supper receive the true sacrament even though they do not believe.¹⁸

My faith can be what it wants, absent or present: this neither adds to nor subtracts anything from baptism. Suppose I had never believed: baptism still would be just as right, just as complete. It does not depend on my faith or the lack of it, but on the divine institution and command. . . . Shall His command and precept be reduced to nothing, or hindered by my unbelief and abuse? Let us rather abide by what St. Paul says in Romans 3:4: 'Let God be true, and every man a liar.' Do you believe and rightly receive baptism? So much the better for you. Do you not believe? Well, then, you receive the sacrament to your condemnation.¹⁹

But it is also true that if I believe, baptism is useful for me. If, on the contrary, I do not believe, then never in all eternity will baptism be useful for me. Indeed, as Christ says, 'He who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but whoever does not believe shall be condemned.' This is God's Word and it shall stand.²⁰

Luther, then, is justified in concluding that the believer ought not base his baptism on his faith, but -- on the contrary -- he ought to base his faith on his baptism, the source of all grace:

The Anabaptists maintain that only those who confess their faith should be baptized. They refer to Cornelius, extrapolating a general rule from this specific instance. But this means nothing. Peter did not baptize Cornelius because of his own faith but because of Christ's own righteousness and the word and command of God. For if no one should be baptized without first being sure of his faith, not a single person could be baptized. And if I were to be baptized because of my faith, faith then would be mightier than Christ's own word and command to baptize. Similarly,

¹⁸Large Catechism; Tappert ed., p. 443.

¹⁹Sermon on Holy Baptism, January 6, 1535; W², X, 2072.

²⁰Commentary on St. John 1-4, 1537-1540; W², VII, 1731 f.

God's Word would have no power at all if my faith could not receive it. Then we should be measuring the power of God by our weakness, and that is blasphemy.²¹

The foundation of our baptism is the strongest and most certain there could be: the covenant God has made with all the world, to be the God of all the people in the world, according to the word of the Gospel that Christ has commanded this to be preached to all the world, just as the prophets unceasingly proclaimed it. And for a sign of this covenant He instituted baptism, prescribing it for all people as Matthew 28:19 says, . . . just as He formerly made a covenant with Abraham and his seed, making circumcision the outward sign of this covenant (Genesis 17:7,11). Here is our sure and certain foundation: that we let ourselves be baptized, not because I am sure of my faith, but because God has ordained it and desires it. For even if I were no longer sure of my faith, I am still sure of the commandment: that God has commanded baptism and publicly intended it for all the world. Here I cannot go astray; God's commandment cannot lie.²²

Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory.

Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should 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. But if anybody falls away from his Baptism let him return to it. As Christ,

²¹Table Talk; W², xxii, 546.

²²Besondere Streitigkeiten, February, 1528; W², xvii, 2212 f.

the mercy-seat, does not recede from us or forbid us to return to him even though we sin, so all his treasures and gifts remain. 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 Adam about our necks.²³

In the spiritual kingdom of Christ the servant of the church baptizes with water and the Word according to Christ's command. When a godless man or an unbeliever sees this, he makes sport of it as an insult to the intelligence, because he does not see or feel what is taking place: that all three Persons of the divine Majesty are present and that they baptize, taking the individual who was conceived and born in sin and freeing him from the kingdom of Satan, ushering him into the heavenly kingdom where the sinner's redemption, grace, and salvation are to be found.²⁴

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, assert that faith alone saves and that works and external things contribute nothing to this end. We answer: It is true, nothing that is in us does it but faith, as we shall hear later on. But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe -- something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand. Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through the water, as we have sufficiently stated, but through its incorporation with God's Word and ordinance and the joining of his name to it. When I believe this, what else is it but believing in God as the one who has implanted

²³Large Catechism; Tappert ed., p. 446

²⁴Sermon on Psalm VIII, August 6, 1545; W², V, 244.

his Word in this external ordinance and offered it to us so that we may grasp the treasure it contains?

Now, these people are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and bound on the ground 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 effects in us he does through such external ordinances. No matter where he speaks -- indeed, no matter for what purpose or by what means he speaks -- there faith must look and to it faith must hold. We have here the words, 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved.' To what do they refer but to Baptism, that is, the water comprehended in God's ordinance? Hence it follows that whoever rejects Baptism rejects God's Word, faith, and Christ, who directs us and binds us to Baptism.²⁵

²⁵Large Catechism; Tappert ed., p. 440.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN

The Biblical doctrine of baptism is, and according to the will of God must be, an unfailing source of comfort for the faith of the Christian in every affliction and distress of body and soul.

For the believer it must also be a continual and efficacious incentive for a Christian life pleasing to God, giving the Christian the strength he needs.

In this chapter we shall address ourselves primarily to believers who have received the sacrament of baptism in infancy of childhood. Baptism stands, so to speak, at the beginning of life like a lighthouse whose beam follows believers throughout their lives. It is an endlessly flowing source of water which is always fresh, clear, and refreshing, imparting to the believer the grace, consolation, and strength which he needs.

In baptism we put on Jesus Christ and His salvation. What is given to us in baptism is not just of value for that moment when we received the sacrament but for our entire lives, and it will follow us into eternity.

Christian preaching, therefore, must concern itself with opening the eyes of believers to their baptism, to this inexhaustible treasure of grace which they possess. This would not be necessary if we always persevered in baptismal grace. Then we would have no more need for God's Word and the Holy Supper. Salvation in its entirety is contained in baptism; nothing God gives to us in our life on earth has not already been granted to us in baptism. A child who

dies in baptismal grace already possesses all that is needed to stand before God and enter into the realm of salvation.

Yet it pleases God, whose goodness is infinite, to remind us anew and continually what it is that He offers us in our baptism. He continually offers it to us anew so that we can rejoice without ceasing in his indescribable gift. Holy baptism is a fountain which never runs dry and to which we can continually return. Freely and without price we can draw from this fountain the living water which we need (Revelation 21:6).

A. In view of our natural corruption and of sin

When a Christian beholds his natural corruption and the sins which he commits daily, and when his conscience accuses him, he can console himself with the grace of God in Jesus Christ which is offered, sealed and guaranteed to him in baptism.

Baptism effects the remission of sins. Through baptism these are no longer imputed to us. Yet evil continues to dwell within us. We sin continually in many ways -- not deliberately or out of love for evil, to be sure, but out of weakness. How lazy and lukewarm the believer can be when it is a matter of conforming to the will of his heavenly Father! How often do we not stumble in our everyday life! We need daily absolution. It is true that God announces His forgiveness to us in the Gospel, in holy absolution, and in the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Yet baptism more than all the rest serves as a continual reminder that our God is gracious, that He has sworn to forgive us and make us heirs of eternal life. That is why Paul comforts the Christian in Galatians 3:27: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

Jesus is our Savior, not only where our sins prior to baptism are concerned, but also for all of our sins which mar our lives and burden our consciences. He has borne and atoned for all of them on the cross. The robe of His righteousness is great and ample enough to cover them all. As long as we wear it, no sin can condemn us, if we sincerely confess our sins to our God and pray to Him for forgiveness in the name of Christ and of the grace He has conferred on us in baptism. If we die in faith, that is, in baptismal grace, God will not deal with us according to our sins. He will behold us clad in our Savior's righteousness and will take us unto Himself in heaven.

. . . Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

--Ephesians 5:25-27

This passage is again a reminder of the greatest benefit of baptism: that through it Christ has purified His church, clothed her in holiness and righteousness, and made her beautiful in His Father's eyes. "But," you ask, "isn't the church composed of sinners, of human beings who sin every day and are far from being what God wants them to be?" Of course. But Paul knows what he says and why he says it. He knows that baptism purifies the believers and cleanses them daily from their sins through repentance and faith. Every Christian is pure before his God if he humbly and trustingly turns to the marvelous promises of forgiveness which have been offered to him in baptism.

[You were] buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God,

who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins . . .

--Colossians 2:12-13

Note: "He forgave us all our sins." All our sins have been buried along with us through baptism in Christ. When we were baptized God offered us beforehand His divine forgiveness for all our sins, both those which were committed prior to that day and those which would be committed afterward. It is therefore because we trust in the covenant of baptismal grace that we can pray daily to God for forgiveness. We know that He will grant us forgiveness as truly as He faithfully stands by His promises, for "he cannot disown himself" (II Timothy 2:13). This sacrament is precisely "for sinners such as I," just as my God wills: " a fountain . . . to cleanse . . . from sin and impurity" (Zechariah 13:1) in which we have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of His God (I Corinthians 6:11).

Luther writes:

The first thing we need to notice in baptism is the divine promise: "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." Upon this promise our entire salvation depends. . . . When we renounce sin and come to repentance, we therefore do nothing else than turn back to the power and the faith of baptism from which we have fallen, going back to the promise made to us in baptism which we abandoned through sin. . . . You see, then, how rich a Christian or a baptized person is. He cannot lose his salvation, not even through the greatest of sins, unless he chooses no longer to believe. No sin can condemn him except that of unbelief. When faith returns and trusts in the promise God made to us in baptism, all other sins are forgiven, yes, swallowed up by God's truth.

For God cannot deny Himself, if we confess Him and in faith cling to Him who promised it to us. . . . You see, then, how dangerous and false it is to believe that 'repentance is the second plank of salvation after shipwreck,'²⁶ to imagine that the power of baptism is completely destroyed, and how shameless is that heresy that the power of the ship through our sin is beaten into fragments. No, this ship remains secure and invincible! It will never be destroyed. . . . Your baptism will never be wiped out, unless in your despair you no longer wish to turn back to your salvation.²⁷

We have in Christ's baptism -- indeed, in our own baptism by which we were baptized into Christ -- the perpetual remission of sins, so that even if through weakness you should fall and sin (as is unfortunately always the case), run, crawl back to your baptism in which all of your sins were forgiven and washed away. Seek comfort; raise yourself up again; believe that through baptism you have been cleansed not just from one but from all of your sins. For just as He who has baptized you, Jesus Christ, does not die but lives and endures throughout eternity, so also the forgiveness of sins which He has acquired and offered to you is eternal. Thus, baptism is a glorious washing which cleanses us from sin.²⁸

B. In view of the afflictions of the flesh, the world,
and the devil

When a Christian suffers affliction in his flesh, from the world or from the devil, he remembers that he is a child of God and that his heavenly Father will never break the covenant of grace He has made with him.

²⁶St. Jerome. Cf. Luther's closing remarks on Baptism in the Large Catechism and the footnote in Tappert, op. cit., p. 446.

²⁷On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520; W², XIX, 66 f.

²⁸Sermon for Epiphany on the Baptism of Christ, 1546; W², XII, 1142 f.

In baptism God has promised to be our Father forever. This promise is firm and sure. It is just as sure that our flesh, our sinful and corrupted nature, is still with us, taking no pleasure in our status as the children of God. Moreover, we live in a world which longs for us to doubt and to fall. The moment God became our Father, Satan became our archenemy. He desires our downfall; he cannot abide having God save us. Our sin is the rampart behind which all our enemies take cover. They will not rest until we have renounced our Savior. To drive us to this, they afflict and torment us without letup.

The more seriously a Christian takes his Christianity, the more aggressive these foes become. Afflictions threaten to become permanent; doubt tortures the heart. But these enemies of our salvation are liars. What they say about us is generally true; what they say about God is a lie. To be able to defend himself against them, the Christian must take refuge in the Word of God. God's Word assures us that what our Savior has done for us in our baptism is true, that He cannot deny Himself, and that He rests faithfully upon His promises even when we become unfaithful to Him. To believe this is to build upon the Rock and to use the weapons baptism itself gives us:

God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son
Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

--I Corinthians 1:9

But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect
you from the evil one.

--II Thessalonians 3:3

If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he
cannot disown himself.

--II Timothy 2:13

For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

--Romans 11:29

But now, this is what the Lord says -- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O

Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.'

--Isaiah 43:1

Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

--Isaiah 54:10

Our conscience accuses us, preaching to us that we are sinners. It reminds us that we are utterly unworthy of God and of His love. It makes us face up to our unfaithfulness. The flesh, the world, and the devil want us to turn away from the Lord. "Your faith is in vain!" they charge. "God can't accept you the way you are. Your prayers can't reach Him." But neither flesh nor world nor devil can level the mountains or shake the hills. How then could they possibly shake the grace of God, our Redeemer? He knows our weakness. That is why He gives us these marvelous promises. Our baptism teaches us: "I am your God." "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) Neither our own flesh nor the world nor the devil and his angels can destroy the covenant which the Lord has concluded with us at the time of our baptism:

Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave

us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

--Colossians 2:12-15

Buried with Christ through baptism, we are set free from every accusation and condemnation. Not even the devil has any more power over us. Trusting in the grace which has made us His own in baptism, we can reply:

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died -- more than that, who was raised to life -- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

--Romans 8:33-34

Luther writes:

Baptism is not my work but God's. . . . That is why I can and must say: God, my Lord, has baptized me by human hands; I can boast of this; and I must trust in this and say that God, who will not and cannot lie, has given me a sign to assure me that He is gracious and wants to save me. In His Son He has bestowed all He has upon me. Thus nothing remains on our side but faith alone, and on His side the Word and the sign.²⁹

Once Dr. Martin Luther asked his wife if she believed that she was a saint. She was astonished at this question, saying: 'How can I be a saint, I who am such a great sinner?' To which Dr. Martin answered: 'Behold now the

abomination of the pope, which has made our hearts sick and penetrated to our very marrow. We look only at the outward and personal piety and at the saintliness of which a person is capable.' Then he turned to her and said: 'If you believe that you have been baptized and are a Christian, you must believe that you are a saint. Indeed, baptism has the power to change us and to take away sin, not so that it is no longer there and one no longer feels it, but so that it no longer condemns us.'³⁰

C. Amid earthly distress and difficulties

The Christian in all his earthly difficulties and anxieties may always be sure of the fatherly love and faithful providence of Him who in holy baptism has declared that He is his Father.

The old Adam still resident in the believer would like to convince him of a great error: that after becoming a child of God through baptism, after the Lord of heaven and earth had concluded a covenant of grace with him and had assured him that He would love him with an everlasting love, it would logically follow that he would be spared suffering and testing and would thus experience greater happiness than others. If already in this world the son of a king knows a different estate than the son of a beggar, shouldn't one have the visible proof that Christians have the God of heaven for their Father?

However, the Christian not only has no guarantee that he will be happier on earth than the unbeliever, but he may well have

³⁰Table Talk; W², XXII, 542.

experiences which will seem to him to be incompatible with his status as a child of God. It is a well known truth that the unrighteous often wallow in happiness and prosperity while the righteous suffer and mourn. Psalm 73 expresses this eloquently. And how often does a believer not have the feeling that his God has forgotten and abandoned him, that his prayers no longer rise any higher than the ceiling?

Baptism is a powerful help at such dark hours of our lives. It reminds us how great a God we do have in heaven and how firm and certain His promises are. It gives us a guarantee that no matter how things may appear to be, this merciful God never forgets us and faithfully abides by His baptismal covenant. We never serve Him or pray to Him in vain. In the midst of trials the believer can be persuaded that God effectively accomplishes everything He has promised to do in Holy Scripture. Our baptism has placed us on the road to heaven, a heaven not of this world -- it must be sought above. An inexpressible joy is promised the children of God. Yet to attain it, they are asked to follow a way which, in the wise and unfathomable will of God, passes through trials and afflictions which they need to undergo. Holy Scripture tells us that these are salutary for us:

'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' [Paul and Barnabas] said.

--Acts 14:22

'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes

everyone he accepts as a son.'

--Hebrews 12:5b-6

A Christian requires testing. Without it, he would soon deny his God and fix his heart upon the pleasures of this world. Trials, therefore, are among the means God employs to remind the Christian that he is a human being and a sinner. God does this to keep the Christian from loving the world with its false gods and goods and to oblige him to turn to His Word for refuge and to live by its promises. The Scriptures tell us that trials are not a punishment or an expression of divine wrath. God tests us as a father tests his children. Far from giving way to doubt and despair, the believer must learn to see in his trials an expression of God's solicitude and paternal love. He should learn to base his certainty solely upon the promises of the Gospel and his own status as a child of God -- not on how much happiness he may feel or how much he may possess in the way of worldly goods. He must learn, like Abraham, to ^{hope} /against all hope (Romans 4:18) and to walk by faith and not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). His baptism, then, also gives him the guarantee that God will assuredly grant him that measure of happiness which is salutary for him:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

--Romans 8:31-32

I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.

--Psalm 37:25

From six calamities he will rescue you; in seven no harm will befall you.

--Job 5:19

No, however things may appear, I shall not doubt His love which He has sworn to me in baptism -- that He shall be my Father in plenty and in want (Philippians 4:11-12), in life and in death. I shall not doubt Him who cannot deny Himself but who will remain steadfast even though I may be steadfast no longer. God knows exactly what He sends my way and why He does it. He knows that I need testing. My old Adam will not go along with this and rebels against this clear, irrefutable truth. And God will adjust my testing to my strength:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

--I Corinthians 10:13

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

--Romans 8:37-39

Like God's faithfulness, it is equally true that His love abides with us if we persevere as His children. We can have this unshakable certainty in the midst of our testing.

Luther has clearly shown the connection between baptism and the faith of the Christian undergoing testing:

We should often read the accounts of the patriarchs, to teach ourselves to stand courageously in the faith and to appreciate at their full value the promises God has made to us. You should not underrate yourself. When you are baptized, when you have God's Word, when you are called by Him, do not forget that the kingdom of heaven is spread out above you; that not only God Himself but also all His angels have their eyes trained upon you. If everything were destroyed; if heaven and earth were thrown into a heap and the very gates of hell were shaken; if pope and emperor and Turk would rage and roar in a fearful manner, you still can say: I am baptized. With such faith and trust you shall conquer. Since God will take care of you, He shall never abandon you. Nothing which can harm you or hinder your salvation shall befall you.³¹

D. At the approach of death

When death approaches, the Christian who has based his faith upon Jesus as his Savior can have the rich and comforting assurance that God will open for him the heaven which was offered him in baptism.

Every child of God has one final enemy who would like to snatch him out of God's arms and deliver him to Satan, prince of darkness, causing us to doubt the grace that was offered to us in baptism and plunging us into despair. That enemy is death. But, in keeping with the Scriptures, we confess that baptism "effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare."³²

³¹Commentary on Genesis, W², II, 1098 f.

³²Small Catechism, Part IV; Tappert ed., pp. 348 f.

But what do we see? A body which grows weaker day by day and which is less and less capable of resisting the onslaught of sickness and the ravages of the years. Memento mori! -- remember, man, that you must die! The body reminds us daily of this. Let us admit it: death frightens us! We can deny this as long as we view it from afar, but it is hard to do this when death draws near. On what is this dread based, if not upon our forgetting the wonderful promises we have been given, those very promises which are sealed for us in baptism and which God daily renews for us in the Gospel?

How death can talk! Its language is terrifying. It reminds us, we who know and live by its message, that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) and that we must die because we are sinners.

What shall we do? There is only one thing we can do: answer death in the language of the Bible. "Death, whatever you may think you can do, you cannot kill us! You can only render us the service of delivering us out of this valley of tears, for our baptism is as firm and solid as He who has baptized us: God! The Lord will not go back on what He has given us in this sacrament. All you can do, Death, is enable us to take possession of the inheritance which our blessed Savior has laid up for us in heaven. You try to make us believe that on the other side of you lies hell, and that is often the case; but for us who believe in Christ, for all those for whom Jesus Christ has atoned and justified, on the other side of death lies the glorious paradise of our Savior. We know this because it is what our God has promised us. This is no illusion; it is a certainty based on solid ground, on the Word of God!"

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved . . .

--Mark 16:16a

. . . and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also -- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . .

--I Peter 3:21

Baptism saves us through faith, not by virtue of any power inherent in the water but through Jesus Christ in whom it clothes us, who also has redeemed us and earned salvation for us. It is He who offers us this salvation in the sacrament. Through Him death has been swallowed up in victory. Thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:57) and given it to us in baptism. This is the anchor of our faith! This word is sure!

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." . . . It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

--II Corinthians 1:18, 21-22

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory.

--Ephesians 1:13-14

The Holy Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance. He who has lived in us ever since the day of our baptism guarantees for us that we shall inherit eternal life. Can death kill the one who has become a temple of the Holy Spirit, whom God has made His child in baptism and who is sanctified by the Holy Spirit? How could such a person become the prey of death? However cruel death may be, it cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Romans 8:39). It is to Jesus that we go when we die in faith. We win the victory over death by virtue of the grace that was offered us in baptism, the grace God never revokes. As Luther writes:

Look to your baptism. Why have you been baptized? Why are others baptized? ... The holy apostle writes: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3) Even if we must die along with those who do not believe, death is for us a pledge, a seal, the assurance that Christ has died for us, that we share in His death, and that we are destined to live eternally with Him. That is why, when you reflect upon your baptism, you reflect upon this hope. . . . Prepare yourself for this blessed departure. Commend your soul to Christ in the true knowledge and a right confession of your faith. Earnestly desire to leave this world and to be with Christ.³³

E. In our sanctification

The Biblical doctrine of baptism must offer the Christian a genuine incentive continually urging him to live a Christian life pleasing to God, instilling in him the will and the strength to so live.

³³Hauspostille: First funeral sermon, W², XIII, 1326.

Baptism is a washing of regeneration, of the new birth, and renewal in the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5 f.). Through baptism the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us (Acts 2:38). Through faith He has made us a new creation. From then on it is fitting for the Christian to live the new life of the child of God toward the fulfillment of His will. It is to this that baptism obliges us. On the day of our confirmation we renew our baptismal promises. It is our calling as Christians to live as children of God, thereby pleasing our heavenly Father. His blessing rests upon us. This very life will fill us with joy.

Through baptism we find the will and the strength to live in accordance with our calling as believers. In effect, baptism reminds us with clarity and vigor what we have become through this sacrament: the children of God, once the children of wrath but now forgiven sinners, changed from the lost and condemned sinners we were into heirs of eternal life -- no longer candidates for hell!

If, as soon as we were baptized, God were to cease caring for us, we would very rapidly cease to believe in Him and to live as Christians. But He gives us His Spirit to provide us with the will and the strength to persevere in faith and in piety. He works through the Gospel, which reminds us unceasingly of the efficacy and power of baptism and what it prompts us to do. It is impossible to be a child of God and not live like one. It is inconceivable that anyone baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit should live like a sinner in the love of evil and in contempt of the will of God. A baptized Christian who believes in Christ with his whole heart renounces Satan and all his works and ways.

Baptism "delivers from death and the devil" as we confess in the Small Catechism. It snatches us out of the kingdom of Satan and

through forgiveness provides us with an entry into the kingdom of Christ. The devil therefore has no more power over us. By virtue of our baptismal covenant, we can and must struggle against him, resisting him in the hour of temptation. Baptism summons and motivates us to serve God alone.

. . . giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

-- Colossians 1:12-14

All we have said about baptism has shown us that what St. Paul confesses in this text has been accomplished in our baptism. Would it be through living in sin, scoffing at the will of God, and grieving Him with our unrighteousness and impiety that a believer would offer Him thanks for His magnificent grace? God forbid! Baptism urges and exhorts us to live as new creatures. It prompts us to take to heart the numerous admonitions of Holy Scripture:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

--I Peter 5:8

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

--James 4:7

It is the same way with the world. Satan uses it to tempt us. He uses the unbelievers in this world to trick us into denying God and His salvation. "But," says Jesus, "I have chosen you out of the

world" (John 15:19). Therefore, do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (I John 2:15). And God also has given us this promise: "For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (I John 5:4).

We have seen how baptism accomplishes the new birth, causing us to be born of God through faith in Christ. It makes us partakers in Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil as well as over the world. We know that if we cling to the promises we have made in baptism and in the Gospel, the world has no power over us. As long as we hold fast to God and to His Word, the world cannot separate us from Him or drag us into the damnation toward which it is headed. We live in the world without being of it. From the day of our baptism, through faith in Christ we are pilgrims of eternity, citizens of heaven, cherishing a happiness far greater and far more lasting than anything the world has to offer us.

Finally, the devil has a trump card -- ourselves. In us he has an ally; he has a spy and a traitor on his payroll -- our flesh with its lusts and desires, the old Adam which is determined to be disobedient to God, obstinately rejecting His Gospel and salvation. Man is the hostage of his own flesh as long as he is in Satan's power. He remains in Satan's power as long as God has not come to make His abode in him. But God has made the baptized believer a new being, a new creation. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

Here we ought to read in its entirety the sixth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. In a remarkable fashion the apostle sets forth the doctrine of justification by faith without works, by grace alone through the merits of Christ. He now poses the question:

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?" (Romans 6:1) What shall we say or conclude concerning such a marvelous teaching? That we should continue in sin in order for grace to abound just that much more? That is inconceivable. A Christian cannot reason that since God has forgiven his sins through grace there is nothing more to worry about -- it is enough just to ask God's forgiveness and so be saved. "God forbid!" exclaims the apostle. That would be the best way to fall from grace. "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (6:2) Then Paul explains what it means to die to sin (6:3): "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

This is the strongest possible way of affirming that through baptism we are swallowed up in Christ's death, that we are partakers of it just as though we had been subjected to it ourselves. In baptism we are clothed with the Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world. How can one be in Christ, a participant in His death, and still be a lover of sin? It is impossible. "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (6:4).

It is also certain that Jesus has swallowed up our sins in His grace. We are dead to them; we are alive to them no more; they no longer exist for us. Sin simply cannot rule over us any more. "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (6:6, 7).

Freed from sin, from its condemnation, as well as from its

dominion! The apostle states:

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

--Romans 6:11-14

It is this to which the covenant God has concluded with us now binds us. It is more than a mere commitment; it is also a powerful motivation. It is a rich source from which we can derive the will and the capacity to do what God expects of us. When the Lord stipulates something for us, His commandment is always accompanied by a magnificent promise -- a promise we can rely on and to which we never return in vain.

Luther writes:

In baptism we all promise the same thing: to die to sin and to sanctify ourselves by what we do and by the grace of God. In baptism we hand ourselves over to God like clay into the potter's hand. . . . There is no higher, no better, no greater promise than the one in baptism. What more can one promise than to drive out all sin, to die, to hate this life, and to strive toward becoming a saint?³⁴

³⁴Sermon on the Sacrament of Baptism, 1519; W², X, 2124.

The Apostle Paul writes:

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step
with the Spirit.

--Galatians 5:25

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentle-
ness and self-control. Against such things there is
no law.

--Galatians 5:22-23

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly
loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness,
humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each
other and forgive whatever grievances you may have
against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave
you. And over all these virtues put on love, which
binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as
members of one body you were called to peace. And be
thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly
as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom,
and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with
gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do,
whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the
Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

--Colossians 3:12-17

This is what baptism urges us to do after we becoome, in baptism
and through faith, the "elect, holy, and beloved children of God."

We still must return to a text cited earlier, in which Peter
draws a parallel between baptism and the Flood, in particular stating
that just as Noah and his family were allowed to escapè punishment

during the flood which destroyed mankind, so the water of baptism now ~~saves~~ us. The apostle becomes more precise in I Peter 3:21: "And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also -- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . "

Baptism is the commitment of a good conscience toward God. The opponents of infant baptism love this text. They see in it Biblical evidence that through baptism the believer makes a decision for God, which they say cannot be expected of infants.

Actually, baptism is nothing more to a Baptist than a pledging of oneself to God. Baptist theology is notorious for its silence about (or at least its circumvention of) those passages of Scripture which affirm that before being a commitment, baptism is a sacrament through which God acts, offers His grace, pardons, and saves. It is true that if God does not do all these things, infant baptism has no reason to exist. But let us not repeat what we already have explained at length. We only wish to pose the question: What is the meaning of the apostolic affirmation that baptism is the pledge of a good conscience toward God?

The views of the commentaries differ widely here. One view has it that for Peter baptism is an act through which the one baptized prays to God for a good conscience. Another view has Peter asserting that through baptism one obtains a good conscience before God which then asks the Lord a question or formulates a prayer. Which is right? The apostle does not say. Should he not, then, explain his thinking so that we can understand it? What we have said about this sacrament shows clearly that it is more than a prayer addressed by the believer to God to receive a good conscience or because we have already acquired one. Peter speaks finally not of the baptized but of baptism. He does

not tell us what the baptized person does or should pray for, but what God does through baptism and what benefits He bestows on us through it.

Peter states that baptism is not a washing away of physical impurities as ordinary water would do it. What then is it? Should not Peter say that it is an inner purifying of someone or of his conscience? Or (what amounts to the same thing) that baptism gives the believer a good conscience before God? This is exactly what the apostle appears to say by using the particularly strong expression suneidēseōs agathēs eperōtēma, "the pledge of a good conscience." The word which Segond's popular French translation of the Scriptures translates as engagement is borrowed from legal terminology. It means an agreement, a contract. Luther translates it as "covenant." The translation "commitment" is not in error, but it is valid only if it shows God to be the author or the source of this commitment. We have noted that Peter intends to tell us, not what man does in baptism, but what God accomplishes in it. It is God who first incurs the commitment in baptism. He pledges Himself to be our Father and our Savior. It is He who concludes the covenant. Man takes no initiative before God, yet he is the beneficiary of what God wishes to offer him. It is true that baptism also is a commitment on man's part. We think the present chapter shows this clearly. But that is not what the sacred author intends to say in our text. When Peter says that "baptism saves" as the Flood once saved Noah and his family, and then says that this is not a washing away of physical impurities, he maintains that this is a commitment on God's part. The Lord obligates Himself in baptism to give us a good conscience through the assurance of His forgiveness. Or, if one prefers, He concludes a covenant with the one baptized, in the strength of which He forgives us our sins and

confers a good conscience upon us. It is on the basis of this text and the parallel which Paul establishes between baptism and circumcision (Colossians 2) that we can speak of the baptismal covenant.

It stands to reason that the believer, as the beneficiary of this covenant of grace, is obligated to respect its terms and to be faithful to his God and to do His will.

In the Large Catechism Luther writes:

Finally, we must know what Baptism signifies and why God ordained just this sign and external observance for the sacrament by which we are first received into the Christian church. This act or observance consists in being dipped into the water, which covers completely, and being drawn out again. These two parts, being dipped under the water and emerging from it, indicate the power and effect of Baptism, which is simply the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man, both of which actions must continue in us our whole life long. Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued. For we must keep at it incessantly, always purging out whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new man may come forth. What is the old man? He is what is born in us from Adam, irascible, spiteful, envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud, yes, and unbelieving; he is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in him. Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more free from greed, hatred, envy, and pride.³⁵

³⁵Large Catechism; Tappert ed., pp. 444 f.

In his Sermon on Holy Baptism Luther declares:

This is the crown with which we adorn our blessed baptism. It is thus that we exalt it and celebrate it before everyone, testifying that we have received it in salutary fashion and that we are counted among the true Christians. On the other hand, he who does not live in accordance with the estate in which the Lord has placed him dishonors and profanes His teaching and his baptism and is nothing but a blot upon and a disgrace among Christians.³⁶

IV. IMMERSION OR SPRINKLING?

Everyone knows that the Baptists and the so-called "evangelical" churches generally baptize by immersion. It is considered a condition for the validity of baptism. Baptism by sprinkling is declared to be inconsistent with what Christ has instituted.

The arguments they invoke are linguistic and theological in nature. "In all dictionaries," Kuen writes, the word baptizō is translated 'immerse, plunge, submerge.' Our word baptize is not a translation of the Greek verb but simply a transliteration which fails to explain what the Greek verb means. . . . We rightly protest against those who have withdrawn the cup from the faithful when the Lord has said, 'Drink from it, all of you.'³⁷ Why, then, should we be satisfied with merely pouring a few drops of water upon the head when Jesus Christ has commanded us to 'immerse them'? Are we wiser than He?"³⁸

Kuen thereby translates "baptize them" with "immerse," drawing

³⁶Sermon on Holy Baptism, January 6, 1535; W², X, 2112.

³⁷Matthew 26:27. "This refers to the former Roman Catholic practice regarding the Holy Supper" (author's comment to translator).

the conclusion that baptism should be performed by immersion if it is to conform to what Christ has instituted.

It is true that the Greek verb often signifies "to immerse," to plunge into water. To insist that it always and necessarily means this, however, is as false as pretending that the verb "to handle" always means doing something with the hands because etymologically this verb is derived from "hand." Mark 7:4 says of the Pharisees: "When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles." ("Washing" means a "baptism" in Greek.) Concerning the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner in Luke 11:38, we read: "But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised." (Again, "wash" means "baptize" in Greek.) It is clear that the washing the Pharisee thought Jesus should have done did not mean an immersion. In fact, "to baptize" means simply to wash, to clean, without being precise as to the mode or method. We are, of course, ready to acknowledge that the term generally refers to immersion; yet we refuse to hold to this definition exclusively.

In fact, the words baptize and baptism also had a ritual meaning for the Jews. They designated the various kinds of washings and cleansings prescribed by the Law which the Jews had subsequently instituted. These ritual cleansings consisted not only of immersion (in that case were they total immersion?) but also sprinkling and pouring. These are the various washings or "ablutions" of which Hebrews 9:10 speaks: ". . . various ceremonial washings -- external regulations applying until the time of the new order." The verb "to baptize" does not specify the mode of washing or cleansing. Had Jesus

³⁸Le Baptême, pp. 131, 140.

wished to specify that baptism be done by immersion, He likely would have used another word (kataduō, for example).

The insistence of the evangelicals is easily explained, since they consider baptism to be purely a symbol. Kuen writes:

Why does God attach so much importance to the form? Because a change of the form modifies the meaning and alters the message which the symbol is supposed to transmit. Baptism by immersion was to underscore the truth most important at the beginning of the Christian life: the necessity of dying to our old nature and of being reborn in Christ to a new life. Baptism by sprinkling diverts the attention away from this truth and substitutes for it either a commonplace notion, the thought of some vague divine benediction descending upon the one baptized, or an anti-Scriptural doctrine [!]: the sacramental purification from sins.³⁹

In this "theology" everything has its own logic. Our response is that the outward, visible form of baptism must represent not only our burial with Christ into death (Romans 6:3 f.) but also the fact that in baptism we have been washed clean of our sins (Acts 22:16) as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon us (Titus 3:5 f.), and that we are sprinkled with the blood of Christ (Hebrews 9:19, 12:24). If immersion represents one aspect of baptism, sprinkling represents another. The two modes of applying the water have their own significance. Let us add also that the efficacy of baptism is not something inherent in the water; it comes from the Word with which water is united. Consequently, it does not depend on the quantity of water used.

³⁹Ibid., p. 141.

Finally, it is futile to want to prove from the New Testament that baptism in the apostolic church was always done by immersion. Three thousand souls were baptized in Jerusalem on Pentecost, i.e., in the month of June. Now, water was much too scarce in Jerusalem, especially in summer, to allow for the immersion of such a multitude all on the same day. As for the desert of Gaza where Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, no stream of water deep enough to immerse a person is known in that region. The water available at that place could scarcely have gone over the eunuch's knees! And as for the baptism of entire families in their homes, it is difficult to imagine that they had a place in their homes which allowed for immersion.

God has not laid down any precise command by which to apply the water of baptism. This is what we call an adiaphoron, an open question. We do not reject immersion; we have no right to do that. But we do deny that it must be the indispensable mode of application in order for baptism to be valid. Auguste Lecerf writes on this subject:

I conclude, therefore, that the mode of administering baptism has been left imprecise as the result of a deliberate and divine dispensation. The Christian dispensation of the covenant of grace is not a ceremonial dispensation in the ritualistic sense of the word. To make the validity of baptism, or its reality even, dependent upon the quantity of water or whether the body is partially or totally covered, would be a return to ultraorthodox Jewish legalism. Paraphrasing the words of St. Paul, we shall say that the kingdom of God consists neither of sprinkling nor of immersion but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

⁴⁰"Des Moyens de la Grâce" in La Revue Réformée, XXII, 1955/2, 44.

V. INFANT BAPTISM

It is well known how inimical the Baptists and evangelical circles generally are toward the baptism of infants and children -- or, more precisely, to nurture baptism. Their teaching about baptism holds that in order to receive the sacrament one must have the capacity to confess one's faith, because of the symbolic character of the baptismal action. They accuse the churches which baptize infants and children of having a pluralistic character in which one becomes a member simply by undergoing baptism.

In the missionary situation in which the apostles found themselves, Jews and Gentiles were converted to Jesus Christ as a time when the Christian church as we know it did not yet exist. They had to baptize for the first time essentially as adults. Obviously, those who had been gathered together in the preparatory stages of Christian catechesis were baptized essentially as adults -- although we may be allowed to believe, and we want to say right away before we return to this line of thought later on, that when these adults had children the latter were baptized along with them.

In short, nothing authorizes us to say that the apostles did not baptize children.

We shall divide our chapter into two parts, studying in turn the theological and the historical justification for the baptism of children. Then we shall see what it is to which we commit ourselves when we bring our children to holy baptism.

1. The theological justification for infant baptism

a. Without rebirth, no salvation

Holy Scripture teaches that man does not become a sinner by

committing sin; he commits sin because he is a sinner from birth. This is the Biblical teaching concerning original sin and not what Kuen would have us believe, that it was a speculation by St. Augustine developed in order to justify the baptism of infants and children. The Scriptures are explicit here:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

--Genesis 5:3

The Lord . . . said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done."

--Genesis 8:21

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

--Psalm 51:5

Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.

--Job 14:1

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

--John 3:6

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

--Ephesians 2:3

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned . . .

--Romans 5:12

. . . the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

--Romans 8:7-8

What is man, that he could be pure, or one born of woman, that he could be righteous?

--Job 15:14

Every Bible-believing Christian submits himself to these texts and renounces any distortion of them under the pretense that they are offensive or that he does not agree with their doctrinal content. The faith of the parents does not protect the child from original sin or exempt it from the new birth. It was of no use to the Jews to call themselves children of Abraham. One's natural birth has never sanctified anyone. No outward circumstances or special privileges of birth regenerate anyone. Regeneration is exclusively the work of God. So Jesus teaches: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12-13). Therefore, to reject the doctrine of original sin is an extremely grave error.

It is an equally serious error to maintain that the children of believers escape original sin or are cleansed from it as a birthright. Usually, this word from the Apostle Paul is cited: "For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her unbelieving husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (I Corinthians 7:14). To conclude from this text that the children of believers are saints in such a way as to be fit for the kingdom of God, born again

and made pure, is tantamount to saying that an unbelieving husband is born again and made pure because he lives with a believing wife, and that consequently he is regenerated and saved through his Christian wife. Such a conclusion is inadmissible. Paul, therefore, must be speaking of another sanctity or purity than that which comes by faith in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. It has to be a matter of ritual purity or holiness. Marriage to an unbeliever does not make one unclean before God; neither are one's children unclean before God on the grounds that they stem from a marriage to an unbelieving partner. On the other hand, it is permissible to say that the unbelieving spouse and the children from such a marriage share in the blessings of God which come upon that home in response to the prayers of the believing spouse.

It is just as erroneous to say that children are baptized in anticipation of their future faith. Future faith regenerates no one and justifies no sinner. Future faith does not put on Christ and His forgiveness.

b. For the regeneration of mankind, including infants, God has instituted a means of grace

The problem is not whether we know what God can or cannot do. We believe in an all-powerful God. This certainty, however, does not authorize us to say that God can save children without any means of grace. The Lord has revealed Himself in Holy Scripture. There He tells us, not what He can, but what He will do. And even if He Himself is not bound by the means of grace but could fill John the Baptist with the Holy Spirit while John was still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15, 44) it is nevertheless true that He has bound us to the means of grace by deciding to save mankind through faith and

baptism (Mark 16:16; Titus 3:5 ff.; John 3:5). This clearly means that if we want our children to be born again and saved, we must turn to the means which the Lord has instituted for this purpose. To be sure, we could wait until our children become adults, hear the Word of God, and are converted and then request baptism. But we would be assuming a grave responsibility indeed if we were to deprive them of a salvation the Lord wants to confer on them right now, which is for them as much as it is for us and which they need as much as we do. Our children are by nature children of wrath, corrupt, unclean and condemned by the Law. They are sinsick before God. Now, what do we do when one of our children is ill? Do we wait until the child has reached adulthood before we do anything so that he or she may decide whether to go to the doctor and take medicine? What if the child were to die in the meantime? We have no right to refuse our children a treasure of grace, blessing, forgiveness and salvation which God wants to confer on them now!

c. Baptism is the means God has instituted for the
regeneration of infants to lead them to salvation

It goes without saying that we cannot lead a baby to Christ by preaching the Gospel. But what the Gospel does, ^{baptism,} the promise of the Gospel united with the water, does likewise. We have discussed this in Chapter II.

Since baptism both bestows forgiveness and salvation and is also a means of regeneration (John 3:3, 5; Titus 3:5) and nobody, not even children, can be saved apart from the new birth, it is not only right but necessary to baptize infants. With reference to John 3:5 Luther states:

Let us take this text to heart, especially against those blind guides called the Anabaptists who consider

the baptism of children to be inefficacious and unprofitable. How is this possible when Christ has told us that His water is there for regeneration through the activity of the Holy Spirit? If it is necessary that infants be born again, without which they cannot enter the kingdom of God, why should we deny them baptism? What authorizes us to declare that water administered in keeping with God's command and united with His Word is not efficacious for the regeneration of children? Is it not true that according to the words of Christ, whoever desires to be born again must be regenerated through water?⁴¹

The words of institution in baptism are of such a nature as to compel us to baptize our children: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). We should bring our children to holy baptism even if we knew only that children have a need for regeneration, that baptism is the water of regeneration, and that God nowhere forbids them to be brought to baptism. These three Biblical certainties alone ought to convince us that infants and children have the right to be baptized.

St. Paul declares that Christ has cleansed His church through the water of regeneration with the Word (Ephesians 5:25 ff.). If children are not supposed to be baptized, it would follow that they cannot belong to the Lord's church, that flock which the Good Shepherd is leading to heaven.

If the same apostle maintains that one is a child of God through faith in Christ, and that all who are baptized into Christ have put

⁴¹ Sermon for the Festival of the Holy Trinity; W², XIII a., 687.

on Christ (Galatians 3:26 f.), it follows that by declaring that children lack the necessary qualification for baptism we exclude them from grace and prevent them from becoming children of God.

If God wants all men to be saved (I Timothy 2:4), and if no one, not even a child, can be saved apart from Christ, then baptism is the means by which we can lead children to Him. What else does this word of Jesus mean: "...your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:14)?

If there is a parallel between circumcision and baptism, and if the first of these conferred under the old covenant what now is offered under the new covenant, and if Jewish boys were circumcised when they were eight days old, what then authorizes the church to refuse baptism to infants? Because an infant cannot understand what takes place in baptism? But could he have understood what took place in circumcision? God had promised Abraham that He would be his God and the God of his descendants (Genesis 17:7 ff.). Nevertheless, He prescribed circumcision. To deny circumcision would have amounted to an annulment of His promise. The promises of grace and salvation are meant for children as well; but if they are to benefit from them, they must enter into the covenant of grace through the means which God has instituted for that purpose. The divine promises do not render the sacrament superfluous; on the contrary, it is through them that we have access to the promises.

d. Through baptism God, for whom nothing is impossible,
can awaken saving faith in the heart of the child

We have already shown that it is not the faith of the one baptized that makes a sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a sacrament by virtue of the divine promise, independent of faith, even though without faith one

cannot actually receive the graces which are bound up with baptism. Is it therefore necessary, however, for the child to believe already before receiving baptism in order for that baptism to be valid? The opponents of infant baptism maintain that such is the case. But should they not also conclude that for this same reason the Gospel should not be preached to those who do not believe? The Gospel, too, cannot be received without faith. Are we therefore to refuse to preach it to unbelievers? On the contrary, they need to hear in order to come to faith in Christ, for it is precisely the Gospel which creates faith in man. "Faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17), and the Gospel which is heard is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16), an incorruptible seed which brings about the new birth (I Peter 1:23; James 1:18). Now, just as the Gospel produces faith in the heart and effects the new birth, so baptism produces in the heart what it requires in order to be rightfully received: faith in Christ.

"But," you say, "a little child cannot have faith. The Holy Spirit cannot do His work in the child's heart!" Yet that is precisely what He did for John the Baptist. It is a grave error to imagine that for faith to be genuine we have to be conscious of it, or that it depends on our reason and our intellect. Luther states:

Tell me, is it Christian to judge concerning God's works as we please, that because a child has not attained the age of reason he cannot have faith? What if, instead of arriving at faith by his reason as you do, he were to come to faith by his lack of reason?⁴² My friend, what good can reason do in bringing you to faith and God's Word? Is it

⁴²Or, "by his unreasonableness." Luther is playing on words between Vernunft and Unvernunft in a way not easily reproduced in English.

not reason which more than anything else opposes faith and God's Word? In order to come to faith and to love God's Word, don't you have to shut off and scoff at your reason, die to it, and become as a fool without reason or intellect, as a little child? . . . How often does Christ not say that we must become children and fools and renounce our reason? Where is the reason of the little children Jesus takes into His arms and blesses, bestowing on them the kingdom of heaven? Aren't they without reason also? Why does He command them to be brought to Him, and why does He bless them? And where do they acquire the faith which makes them children of the kingdom of heaven? Just because they are without reason and intellect, they are better suited to believe than adults whose reason often gets in the way because it will not let its big head pass through the narrow gate. When it is a question of faith and the works of God, we cannot look to reason and its works. Here it is God alone who works. Reason is dead and blind.⁴³

From this Luther concludes that children are much better suited for true Christian faith than adults with their reason and their arguments, their objections and their doubts.

The Scriptures say that children can believe. Let us, however, take care not to go beyond what is revealed. It is therefore not possible for us to speculate about the faith of children. As the Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper writes: "We cannot describe a

⁴³Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany; W², XI, 493 f.

child's faith in detail. However, on the basis of Scripture, we must hold fast unreservedly that we speak of a faith which validly embraces Christ. Cf. Matthew 18:6: 'one of these little ones who believe in me' (Matthew 18:6)."⁴⁴ In dogmatics a distinction is made between faith which is (a condition) and faith in action. This distinction is important, for in effect, even though a Christian always has faith, he may not always be conscious of it. One would have reason to despair if faith ceased to exist the moment we ceased to be conscious of it. Yet it is not enough to define the faith of a child as a state of faith or as faith in action. Christian faith indeed embraces Christ even if it is unaware of this fact. When Jesus says: "'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it'" (Luke 18:16-17), He means to affirm that children can actually receive the kingdom of God. In Biblical language "to receive" means "to believe." When the Gentiles received the Word of God they believed in Jesus (Acts 11:1). One receives a gift by extending the hand. Faith is the hand which we extend to God and by which we receive forgiveness and salvation. Jesus confounds the wisdom of man when He says that not even the holiest of us can be saved unless he receives the kingdom of God as did the little children who were brought to Him. He holds them up as models for the adults, who must have faith like theirs if they want to go to heaven. How could the children be models and examples of faith if they could not believe? If children are incapable of believing, would not Jesus have had to say the exact opposite of what He did?

⁴⁴Christliche Dogmatik, II, 538.

Would He not have said: "If you would find grace and be saved, you must become wholly unlike children, for they do not receive the kingdom of God. It is all up to you, if you value your salvation"?

Further objections are raised that a child cannot have a valid faith because it cannot produce the fruits of faith. The Scriptures assert the contrary, however. In quoting Psalm 8, Jesus tells those around Him who take offense at the anthems of praise the children ring out upon His entry into Jerusalem: "'...Have you never read, 'from the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"' How could they praise a Lord in whom they could not believe? If Jesus beholds in these children the fruits of faith, dare we question His judgment? It is not for us to appeal to reason in defining the fruits of faith, for these can be unseen and can elude our perception. What matters is that the Lord does behold them.

2. The historical justification for infant baptism

Did the early church baptize children? If so, can this practice be traced back to the apostles? Kuen attempts to show in his book that the apostles did not baptize children but that the practice was introduced later as the logical conclusion to a new concept of baptism. He accuses the apostolic fathers, the theologians who succeeded the apostles, of falsifying their doctrine of baptism by making of this sacrament more than a symbol, an act by which God effectively works regeneration, forgiveness and salvation.⁴⁵ We will attempt to show that this argument is invalid by focusing upon two questions:

1. What was done when adult converts requested baptism? Did their children receive it along with them?

2. What about children born into a home already Christian? Were they baptized?

a. Did the early church (including the apostolic church) baptize children when their parents were converted and baptized?

The New Testament developed out of a missionary situation. Understandably, then, it tells us first and foremost of the conversion and baptism of adults. They were the ones who took that first big step. Their children were in a sense hidden within the family ranks and did not receive the same attention. Shall we conclude, then, that they were not baptized? We think not.

The New Testament speaks in several places of the baptism of "households":

(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) -- St. Paul

— I Corinthians 1:16⁴⁶

When she [Lydia] and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.

— Acts 16:15a

[Paul and Silas] replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved -- you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

— Acts 16:31-33

⁴⁶

"Other examples of households being baptized are those of Cornelius (Ac 10:24,48), Lydia (Ac 16:15) and the Philippian jailer (Ac 16:33-34). The term may include family members, servants or anyone who lived in the house." -- Explanatory footnote to I Corinthians 1:16 in the Concordia Self-Study Bible, p. 1747; added by translator.

Although the texts do not say so, is it not highly probable that there were children in these households? The term house or household encompasses all who live under one roof: the father and head of the family; the mother; the children; and finally, the grandparents and servants. In his letter to the church at Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch (d. 117) writes: "I salute the households of my brothers, with their wives and their children" (13:1). When Saul threatens Ahimelech with the words: "'You will surely die, Ahimelech, you and your father's whole family'" the children, too, are included and they are all put to death (v. 19). Pharaoh allows the brothers of Joseph to go and fetch their father and "their households" and places his chariots at their disposal for the women and those unable to march: the aged, the infirm, and the children (Genesis 45:18-19). House or household, then, did include the children then. Taking into consideration all we have said about baptism and the necessity of baptizing the children, it is not up to us to prove that there were children in the households baptized by the apostles. It is rather up to the opponents of infant and child baptism to show that none were there!

Furthermore, a connection exists between children's baptism in the Christian church and the baptism of proselytes, i.e., the baptism imposed by the Jews upon Gentiles who converted to Judaism. Joachim Jeremias, in his work on infant baptism,⁴⁷ explains how the Jews toward the end of the first century B.C. came to attribute a personal impurity to Gentiles, undoubtedly to provide a hedge against a flood of mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles and thus to discourage such marriages. This Gentile impurity is cited

⁴⁷ Die Kindertaufe; Kreiss quotes from the French translation, Le baptême des enfants, Editions Xavier Mappus, 1967. -- Tr.

here and there in the New Testament (Matthew 8:7, John 18:28, Acts 10:28 and 11:12, I Corinthians 7:14, and Galatians 2:12). It was decided, therefore, to impose a rite of purification upon Gentile converts to Judaism, a kind of baptism called "the baptism of proselytes." An apocryphal work, The Sibylline Oracles, instructs such Gentile converts: "Bathe your entire body in the rivers with continuously flowing water and raise your hands toward heaven, imploring pardon for the sins you have committed" (IV, 162 f.). From all we know of this custom it is evident that such a baptism also was administered to the children of pagan converts. This is the case with a very young Gentile child whose father was dead: "By decision of the tribunal they had him undergo a washing of purification."⁴⁸ Note also the following details: "Should a non-Israelite woman become a proselyte during her pregnancy, her child shall not require the washing of purification."⁴⁹ They considered that when she received the washing of regeneration her child in her womb would be purified along with her. This enables us to understand that if a child was born before its mother's conversion and baptism, it was baptized along with her.

We shall proceed no further with the parallel between proselyte and Christian baptism. The latter is a divine institution, the former a manmade custom originating in a decadent Judaism. We particularly do not wish to base infant or child baptism in the apostolic church upon the Jewish baptism of proselytes. We merely intend to show

⁴⁸ Talmud de Babylone, Ket 11a.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Yeb 78a.

that it was not considered out of order to baptize infants. For the Jews who converted to Christianity, it was a practice which had been known in their ancient religion. H. Gressman has ventured to suggest that the New Testament should contain a prohibition of infant baptism if the Christian church of that day had not practised it, since it had been a very common practice in the Jewish community.⁵⁰ Oscar Cullmann infers from these facts the conviction that even John the Baptist baptized the children of parents who came out to him in the wilderness to be baptized: "We have absolutely no reason to suppose that John acted contrary to the practice of baptizing proselytes by excluding children whom repentant parents would have taken along with them to be admitted to the messianic community through baptism."⁵¹

b. Did the apostolic church baptize children born into Christian families?

We have to admit that there is no indication of this in the New Testament. We are not told that the apostles baptized children born into families which had joined the church. On the other hand -- and this is just as characteristic -- the New Testament does not bear witness that the children of Christians were baptized when they reached adulthood.

I Corinthians 7:14 is often cited against the baptism of children, as we have shown. It is, as we have shown, wrongly referred to because it tells us nothing about how baptism was administered. Joachim Jeremias concludes his examination of this text by saying:

⁵⁰ "Ein Ja zur Kindertaufe," Kirchliche Zeitfragen, Heft XIII (1944), 14.
⁵¹ (NEXT PAGE)

"In all probability the statement, 'Your children are sanctified,' no more excludes infant baptism on the eighth day in place of circumcision than the statement, 'Your pagan spouse is sanctified' in v. 14 excludes his or her subsequent baptism."⁵²

If we turn now to the post-apostolic church, we find a superb array of witnesses in favor of infant baptism. A. Kuen, as we have seen, has concluded that the Christian church quickly became unfaithful to the apostolic teaching and practice. How, then, do we explain that in the Christian literature of that period we have found no reference to the introduction of any custom at variance with the practice inherited from the apostles? If infant baptism was introduced into the Christian church in the course of the 2nd Century, as is sometimes maintained, would not the church fathers, according to their personal point of view, either have urged Christians to baptize their children or else have fought against such a new trend? Yet they do neither. Is this not evidence that infant baptism was universally accepted and practised?

Here are further witnesses whom it is difficult to challenge:

1. In The Martyrdom of Polycarp (18:3) Polycarp of Smyrna, one of the great martyrs of the period of c. 82-168 A.D., declares: "Eighty and six years I have served the Christ, and He has never done me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" Polycarp thereby indicates his approximate age, 86 years. In declaring that he has served the Lord during all this time, he indirectly attests

⁵¹"Le Baptême des Enfants," Cahiers Théologiques de l'Actualité Protestante, XIX-XX (1948), 54.

⁵²

Loc. cit., p. 67.

that he had been baptized as an infant, and that infants therefore were baptized at the time he was born -- toward the end of the first Christian century.

2. Polycrates of Ephesus writes in a similar vein in a letter to Rome around 190 A.D.: "Brothers, I am now 65 years in the Lord. I have conferred with the brothers throughout the world and have studied all of the sacred Scriptures. I am not at all alarmed by these things with which I am threatened."⁵³

3. The Acts of the martyrs Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice (between 160 and 180) contains, among other things, the transcript of an interrogation during which the accused, Papyrus of Thyatira, declares: "I have served God since my youth, and I have never sacrificed to idols, because I am a Christian." This individual also declares himself a disciple of Christ since his youth, and it is quite valid to see in his declaration a reference to his baptism.

4. The witness of Origen (185-254) is of highest importance. Three times in his works he mentions the baptism of children as being the practice of the Church. He specifically mentions it in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (II, 9) as going back to the apostles: "For this reason the church has received from the apostles the tradition of administering the baptism also to parvuli [Latin for small children] . For the men to whom the secrets of the divine mysteries have been transferred knew that all things truly had been stained by sin, which had to be removed by water and by the Spirit." Elsewhere he writes: "In this connection I want to say a

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Eusebius, Church History, V, 24, 7. Cf. the English translation in the Baker Book House reprint, 6th printing (1973), p. 209.

word about a question frequently raised by the brethren: The paidia [Greek word for children] have been baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Of what sins? When have they sinned? In fact, never. And yet 'no one is ever free of uncleanness' even if he is only a day old (cf. Job 14:4 f.). It is this uncleanness which is removed through the mystery of baptism. This is the reason, then, for the baptizing of the paidia" (Homilies on Luke 14:5 and 2:22a).

In his Homilies on Leviticus 8:3 he writes: "The question is asked why the baptism of the church which is given for the remission of sins is also administered, according to the custom of the church, to small children; for if nothing in them makes forgiveness necessary, the baptismal grace would appear to be superfluous." Thus Origen (who has not written only good things!) has well understood the bond that exists between original sin and baptism. Yet what is even more important here is his testimony that the baptism of children goes back to the apostles!

5. In the western church:

(a) Justin Martyr, who died c. 166, mentions in his Apology addressed to the emperor that "many men and women 60 and 70 years of age have been disciples of Christ since their childhood" (I, 15, 6). Does not this indirectly demonstrate that the western church of the 2nd Century baptized infants?

(b) Irenaeus of Lyons, the most famous theologian of the 2nd Century, born between 130 and 140, writes: "Jesus has come, indeed, to save all men through Himself: all those, I say, who through Him have been returned to God, infants, toddlers, children, the young and the aged" (Adversus Haereseis, II, 22, 4).

(c) The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome (between approximately 160-235) specifies: "You will first baptize the little ones. All those who are able to speak for themselves will do so, but for those unable to speak, their parents or someone in their family will speak for them" (16:4 f.).

6. Finally, we have a certain number of burial inscriptions dating back to the 3rd Century which indicate clearly that infants were baptized:

(a) A pagan father had a stone erected for his young son with the following inscription: "To the divine manes, Florentius has made this inscription for his son, Apronianus, to his noble son who passed away at 1 yr. 9 mo. 15 da. Because he was deeply loved by his grandmother, who saw that he was going to die, she requested of the church that he might leave this world after having become a disciple." This last sentence bears witness that the believing grandmother of this little child asked the church to baptize him before he died.

(b) Another inscription reads: "A believer born of believers, Zosime, here I rest, having attained to the age of 2 yr. 1 mo. 25 da." Since Zosime was a believer, a Christian and born of Christians, we may rightly conclude that she had been baptized.

(c) Again: "To Eutychianus, most beloved son, Eutychus his father has dedicated this stone. He attained 1 yr. 2 mo. 4 da., a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ the Son of God, Savior."

"Here lies Kyriakos, slave of Christ, holy child. In memory of this most precious child his parents, Dionysius and Zosime, have erected this stone."

"The sweet Tyche lived 1 yr. 10 mo. 15 da. She received

baptism on the eighth day before calends [first day of each month in the ancient Roman calendar--Tr.] and expired on the same day."

"Irene, who passed away with her parents at 11 mo. 6 da., received baptism on the seventh day of the ides of April and expired on the ides of April," i.e., around April 13.

"Pastor, Titiana, Marciana and Chrestè erect this stone to Marcianus, noble son in Christ the Lord, who passed away at 12 yrs. 12 mo. days, who received the grace of our Lord [Note: baptism is clearly referred to here] on the 12th day before the calends of October, Marinianus and Paternus being consuls for the second time, and expired on the 11th day before calends. May you live among the saints for all eternity."

These inscriptions were found in the catacombs of Rome. All of them date from the 3rd Century and show that the children mentioned were baptized at an early age. Some of them received emergency baptism, especially in the case of those inscriptions which indicate that someone died very shortly after receiving the sacrament.

To this consensus from the ancient church there is one exception: Tertullian, church father in Africa, born about 150 (d. between 220-240). Tertullian was strongly opposed to infant baptism. He writes: "Depending upon the condition, the disposition and even the age of each, it is preferable to defer baptism, especially where very young children are involved" (On Baptism, 18:3-19:1). He thought it was too heavy a responsibility for the sponsors: "Is it necessary, other than in extreme circumstances, to expose the sponsors to the risk of falling short in their promises, e.g. in case of death, or to/abuse of their promises in case the children develop some inclination to evil?" The argument is twofold. First, the sponsors could die before the

child reached the age of reason. Tertullian lived in an age of great persecutions when such cases apparently occurred often. Second, the sponsors could be deceived, discovering that they had godchildren who were disobedient and rebellious. Tertullian does not have the children in mind, but their sponsors, in urging the postponement of baptism, judging the sponsors' responsibility to be too burdensome for them. One thing is certain: by taking this position Tertullian takes the opposite view of his contemporaries. If he had been able actually to reproach the church of his day for introducing some innovation, some novel custom, he would have shaped his argument in an altogether different fashion. He would have presented himself as a champion of the old custom in the church so that his argument would win the day. He would have shown the church that she did not have the right to baptize young children since the apostles had not done it. But he could not express himself in this fashion. Consequently, the church of his day not only everywhere baptized infants~~and~~ children but did so with the conviction that she was in conformity to apostolic practice. Infant baptism was no innovation of that day; while the position of the great theologian of Carthage was the exception. Tertullian did not contest the legitimacy of infant baptism; he questioned its expediency. On the other hand, he convinced nobody. At a church council which was convened in ~~251~~-253 in Carthage, at the very place where Tertullian had expressed his opinion, it was decreed not only that infants and young children were to be baptized but also that it was not advisable to wait until the eighth day, but rather it should be performed intra secundum vel tertium diem, "between the second and the third day."⁵⁴

We recapitulate what we set out to show by quoting Joachim Jeremias, from whom we have borrowed the essential elements of our documentation:

Everywhere, except in Syria Orientalis, we encounter in the 2nd Century the baptism of infants as an old and well established practice in the church at large. East and West are unanimous in tracing this practice back to the apostles. The evidence affects children born both to Christian and to pagan parents. The latter, as a general rule, were baptized with their parents at Easter, while the former were baptized as infants -- more precisely, during the first days after their birth. As far as we know, only Tertullian raised objections to the baptism of small children, but without success. We can well understand his position in view of his conversion to Montanism around 203 A.D. Aside from Tertullian there exists not the slightest indication that the baptism of infants was ever delayed prior to the 4th Century.⁵⁵

This last sentence of Jeremias calls for some explanation since the situation did change in the course of the 4th Century. The trend arose, as a matter of fact, not only to refuse to baptize children but also to postpone one's own baptism until the eve of death. This was the case with the Emperor Constantine, who surely had been converted to Christianity long before his death. (In any event he did become the great champion of Christianity, although it is quite valid to question the genuineness of his conversion!) How could this be? Because he wanted to die in albis, in a white robe, with the certainty of salvation. Most of the great theologians of that time let their adolescence and a good portion of their adult lives go by before receiving baptism. This was true of Basil the

Great, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Rufinus, Paulin de Nole, Augustine, and Gregory of Nazianzen, to name only the most famous who were all born toward the middle of the 4th Century. Some of them waited until just before death to be baptized. Those who received baptism as dying persons were called neophytes. This deplorable custom was justified by the error which consisted of believing that baptism conveyed forgiveness only for sins committed prior to baptism. The conclusion was that baptism should be put off as long as possible without the risk of dying beforehand. This error, which we cannot take up in detail in this study, was perpetuated in the Catholic Church when it declared another sacrament, a "second plank of salvation," to be required for sins committed after baptism -- the sacrament of penance. (This sacrament did not exist at that time but became a troublesome practice from then on.) The 16th council of Carthage in 418 put an end to it by pronouncing the anathema upon anyone "who says that infants and young children who have just come into this world should not be baptized" (Canon II).

Thus, church history confirms that infant baptism, far from being an innovation of an early church which had become unfaithful to apostolic doctrine and practice, was at all times practised throughout the first centuries of the Christian era. When it ceased for a time because of a grave error concerning the efficacy of this sacrament, the church was obliged to react vigorously.

We believe, accordingly, that we have justified infant and child baptism both theologically and historically. Yet we cannot conclude this work without stating what such baptism involves. This

will be our

C O N C L U S I O N

When God blesses Christian parents with children, parents -- in keeping with the sound doctrine of baptism -- should arrange for their baptism as soon as possible. In so doing, they must choose with care the church in which the children are to be baptized, providing for them sponsors who confess the Biblical doctrine of baptism and who are prepared to assume their responsibilities.

Those churches which reject the baptism of children are fond of maintaining -- and for this one cannot fault them -- that this mode of baptism favors the so-called pluralistic churches in which one becomes a member through baptism in childhood even though this may not translate into a true Christian commitment. It must be admitted that too many pastors in these churches see the children of their parishes only on their day of baptism, during their years in religious instruction, and (often for the last time) on the Sunday of their confirmation. Many parents who never go to church because all available evidence indicates that they have ceased to be committed, living believers nevertheless want their children to be baptized in order to adhere to a family custom that must be upheld lest one grieve the grandparents and displease the pastor. Or they may say that if baptism does the children no good, it cannot hurt them either. It is truly a sad spectacle, but abusus non tollit usum -- the abuse of a practice does not nullify it. It is not because many such parents in Christendom abuse the baptism of their young children that such baptism really has no reason for being. In particular, it is fitting not to ascribe to children's baptism that which is the sole responsibility of the parents and of the church.

We have seen how baptism is a constant motivation for the sanctification of the believer. The education of children is one of the obligations God lays upon Christian parents. As the psalmist says: "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him" (127:3). A human being is worth more than all earthly treasures. In God's eyes man is so precious that He sacrificed His only Son for our salvation. A child is a great gift of God. Accordingly, a great responsibility is laid upon the parents. The Lord's will is for us to entrust to Him the children He has given to us. They surely belong to Him in any case, for are they not His creation? Yet since they are born in iniquity and conceived in sin, they are under the curse of the Law and are the slaves of sin, death, and the devil. There must be some means whereby they can become children of God and heirs of salvation. Merely being born of Christian parents does not make them children of the heavenly Father or redeem them and save them from sin. The new birth or regeneration, faith, and adoption as children of God are not passed along through procreation as original or hereditary sin is.

A Christian knows what treasures of grace God has opened up to him through baptism. His most ardent desire is to see that they are conveyed to his children also. "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off -- for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). Our children have as great a right as we do to salvation in Jesus Christ. What, then, is more necessary and natural than to present them for baptism according to the Lord's own will and ~~the~~ promise, to bring them into His covenant of grace to be invested with their Savior?

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder

them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

--Mark 10:13-16

I realize that this text says not a word about baptism even though it is included in the baptismal rite. On the other hand it does say, loudly and clearly, that we are to bring our children to Christ. "Yes," someone will interject, "through prayer." Undoubtedly! But also and above all through the sacrament which God has instituted for the salvation of mankind, and which is our only way to bring our children to Jesus in such a manner that they will find grace, forgiveness and salvation and Christ can bless them, not in some vague general fashion but in order to give them all He came to obtain for us sinners. It is through baptism alone that Jesus can become the personal Savior of our children.

If it is through baptism that our children become members of the Savior's invisible church, they also thereby enter into a visible community of faith. Parents have to choose one church from among many, and such a choice is never easy. It is the duty of Christian parents to let their children become members of a church which they know confesses and proclaims the truth, the marvelous doctrines of Holy Scripture, particularly that of baptism. If no such church is close by, it is better for the parents to baptize their children themselves than to allow an unfaithful pastor to do it. False teaching, as small as it may appear, is a poison from which we should protect our children. Man is so constituted as to refuse often to leave the church in which he has been baptized even though he may be aware of errors that are taught in it. Now, to belong to a church is to make common cause

with it, to approve its teaching and to make it one's own. This is called unionism.

Moreover, Christian parents need to choose sponsors for their children with great care. This is a human arrangement which goes back to a time of persecutions when children might be deprived of their parents at any moment. Parents provided godparents for their children who could be counted upon to take care of them and, above all, to instruct them in the Christian faith. This is a beautiful institution, the real significance of which has been lost sight of by the majority of Christians. Sponsors are not merely witnesses to a baptism (Matthew 18:16). There would be witnesses enough among those attending the celebration of the sacrament. Sponsors are responsible before God and the church for the Christian upbringing of their godchildren, above all in the event that it should please God to take their parents. Moreover, sponsors have a duty to pray for these children. How could one expect this of unbelievers? Do we expect a mechanic to bake good bread, or a baker to repair motors? How then can anyone pray for his godchildren when he never even prays for himself? How can anyone bring children up in the faith when he himself lives in unbelief? Can we expect those who remain ^{or become} /unfaithful before God to admonish their godchildren to remain faithful to their baptismal covenant? Yet all too often sponsorship is seen as a favor to be conferred upon a spinster aunt whose heart is brimming over with affection, or a dear uncle or kind neighbor. We should never sacrifice to mere custom something to which we ought to attach more importance for the welfare and salvation of the child, the reactions of relatives and good friends notwithstanding.

Nor is it enough that the sponsors be Christians. Without doubt

that is the first requirement. But can one expect of sponsors who who may be sincere believers yet members of a church which professes error that, particularly in the event of the parents' death, that they will teach their godchildren what they themselves do not regard as the truth? Should parents who know, confess, and believe the marvelous Biblical teachings about baptism allow their children to grow up in a doctrine which they know to be contrary to Holy Scripture? No matter how sincere, pious, or consecrated they might be in other ways, how can we expect them to assume such a responsibility?

Finally, the true doctrine of baptism moves Christian parents to consider the children they bring to the sacrament as being above all the property of God, and to instruct them in such a way that they will serve the Lord and come to eternal salvation.

It is not enough that our children have entered into the baptismal covenant of grace. It is also necessary that they persevere in it and remain forever children of God and inheritors of salvation. More than anything else -- more than their children's honor and success, a fine career, happiness and prosperity here on earth -- Christian parents desire that their children shall be saved. Everything in the education they will give them should be directed toward this glorious goal.

For this reason they must also avoid all that would cause their children to stumble. What Christ says of adults in general applies all the more to parents:

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. . . . See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

--Matthew 18:6,10

Fathers, do not exasperate your children;
instead, bring them up in the training and
instruction of the Lord.

--Ephesians 6:4

If our children are this precious in the eyes of God, how can we neglect their education, be a stumbling block for them, or give them an example of a lukewarm and disobedient Christianity? God gives us children to bring them up for His glory as citizens of heaven. Yet how many parents pave the way to hell for their children and bring them up to become one day what they themselves are: unfaithful, apostate "Christians" -- in a word, indifferent, lukewarm, and without any living faith!

It is well and good not to cause our children to stumble or to teach them by our bad example. Yet even that by itself is not enough. Our children's souls require nurture. They need to hear the Gospel, to learn to know the Christ they put on in baptism. Note the Apostle Paul's words above (Ephesians 6:4). God says of Abraham:

"For I have chosen him, so that he will direct
his children and his household after him to keep
the way of the Lord by doing what is right and
just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham
what he has promised him."

--Genesis 18:19

Abraham knew that the Lord's promises were not just for him but were intended for his posterity as well. The Christian similarly knows that the promises of the Gospel are equally for the children the Lord grants him, and with all his heart he desires to share these promises with them. Moreover, he does everything to plant the Word of God in their hearts so that they will grow in that saving knowledge of Christ, learn to pray, and become armed to fight the good fight of the Christian so as to obtain the crown of eternal life. It is especially

important to tell them about the marvelous work which Jesus has accomplished for the salvation of the world and the benefits He has conferred upon them in baptism, so that in faith they will draw from their baptism the assurance that they are children of God and inheritors of salvation. If need be, he will reprove and correct them with gentleness yet with firmness, so that they may avoid going astray and may turn away from the many dangers which imperil them. This is the grace which had been given to Timothy so that Paul could write to him:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

--II Timothy 3:14-17

Christian parents have the same duty which God prescribed for the children of Israel in the desert:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

--Deuteronomy 6:6-7

There are many things we could mention as to how to put this commandment into practice: to speak to our children about God and His Word; to read the Bible with them; to tell them Bible stories; to show them by example that a Christian goes to hear the Word of God as often as possible; to instruct them in the Catechism and see

to it that they learn their lessons; to pray with them and for them --all in order that these things may all bear fruits. These are all elements of a Christian education; I am sure I have forgotten some others I might have added.

Christian parents may die in peace and with a clear conscience if they know that their children believe in God, love Him, and through faith in Christ are saved and redeemed sinners, even though they may not leave them much in the way of property and worldly goods. This is far easier than it would be for those parents who have left their children all they desired, leaving them prosperously situated in life, having set aside for them a goodly heritage, yet have failed to bring them up in the Lord and to a large extent have thereby caused their children to lose the salvation which God has conferred upon them in baptism. What will such parents have to answer for when they stand before the throne of God and hear Him asking: "Where are the children I entrusted to you, for you to bring up in faith for their salvation?"

It is true that no father and no mother can believe for a child. Parents never have been able to save their children through their own personal faith. However, we do have the choice of doing what our Lord commanded us to do for our children, or of not doing it, knowing full well in any case that one day we shall have to render an accounting of our work. It is true that our children will have to stand on their own two feet, confess their own faith, and fight their own struggle to remain faithful. Yet we can choose whether to equip them for such hard yet salutary combat or let them go out into life as defenseless as the children of unbelievers. Every one of us needs to know that, if each individual must one day render an accounting unto God, in the event we have not done our job as Christian parents God will put the

first question to us before He turns to our children. If, on the contrary, we have done all it was in our power to do, in faith and in the spirit of prayer, He will witness on our behalf that we have been faithful and will reward us in His grace. The greatest reward will nevertheless be this: that we will see our children with us in heaven!

As Luther writes in his Baptismal Formula:⁵⁶

What is important is to be present at the baptism with a true faith, to give heed to the Word of God and to attend seriously to prayer. For when the pastor says, "Let us pray to God!" he is really exhorting you to pray with him. The sponsors and all others who are present must intercede with Him to God, praying the words from the depths of their hearts. That is why the pastor ought to pronounce these prayers especially distinctly and slowly, in order that the sponsors may hear and understand that they are praying from the heart with the pastor and are laying before God in the most solemn fashion the wretchedness of the little child, wrestling with all their might on his behalf against the devil and showing by their attitude how seriously they regard the baptism which is no mere trifle for the devil himself. . . . It is fitting that parents and sponsors should have good manners and deportment, i.e., that they should be responsible and pious. It is fitting that one be assured that they will do seriously and with a true faith what it is they have to do, so that they do not expose this venerable sacrament to the mockery of the devil and dishonor God, who has poured/^{out} upon us the superabundant and inexhaustible riches of His grace. He Himself calls baptism a "new birth" through which we are set free from Satan's tyranny and delivered from sin, death, and hell and become children of Life and heirs of all the treasures of God -- better still, children of God and brothers of Christ. Oh, dear Christians! Do not treat such an ineffable gift with gross negligence! For baptism is our sole consolation,

and it affords us access to all of the divine good and to the communion with all the saints. May God help us! Amen.

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Taufbüchlein, 1523; W², X, 2138 f.

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