

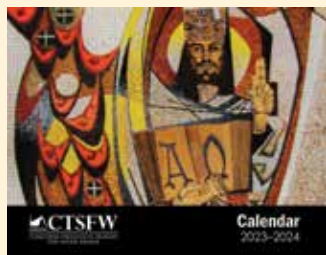
# CONTENTS

Volume Twenty-Seven, Number Four

## CTSFW Wall Calendars

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Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), mailed its 2024 wall calendar to CTSFW alumni and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at the end of November. A limited number of additional copies are available to individuals and congregations.



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## For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

## FEATURES

### 4 Luther's Order of Baptism, 1523

**Cameron A. MacKenzie**

Martin Luther rejoiced that God had preserved baptism through all the preceding centuries and by it had offered salvation to countless numbers of people. The problem was, however, that few of them knew it. Luther's little baptism book of 1523 was his first effort at putting the rite of baptism—the words and prayers by which a pastor baptizes somebody—into German, the language of his people. It was a giant step forward in teaching them about the importance of baptism.

### 7 The Formula Missae: Amputating the Dragon's Tail

**Jon S. Bruss**

As a meritorious sacrifice from human to God, the mass was, according to Martin Luther, the very dragon's tail [*Trachenschwanz*] that had swept Christendom clean of Christ's gifts and left nothing but a trail of poison. Reform of the mass required teaching—through the Word, not by force—and good, patient teaching takes time.

### 10 Let Me Sing You a Song

**Paul J. Grime**

More than five years before publishing the Small Catechism, Martin Luther recognized that music combined with words would work admirably to implant his Reformation insights into the hearts of God's people. And what better way to do so than by borrowing the methods of the Meistersingers and writing ballads that told the news of God's love in Christ Jesus?

### Also in this Issue:

<b>Presidential Search Underway</b> . . . . .	<b>13</b>
<b>Faculty News</b> . . . . .	<b>14</b>
<b>Faculty Profile: Robert Roethemeyer</b> . . . . .	<b>16</b>
<b>Christ Academy Anniversary Tour</b> . . . . .	<b>20</b>
<b>Seminary Snapshots</b> . . . . .	<b>22</b>
<b>Heeding the Call: Let Down Your Nets</b> . . . . .	<b>26</b>
<b>Events Schedule</b> . . . . .	<b>28</b>
<b>Bible Study: Faith of the Martyrs</b> . . . . .	<b>30</b>

# Luther's *Order of Baptism* 1523

Cameron A. MacKenzie



Although the Reformation began in the fall of 1517, not much reforming took place before 1523. Until the Diet of Worms, there was hope that the authorities in church and state would make the changes needed to bring church practice into line with the Biblical doctrine that Luther was teaching. But those hopes came to an end along with the diet in May 1521. Not only had the pope excommunicated Luther in January, but now the emperor declared him an outlaw. Then, to keep him safe and out of the way, his protector, Elector Frederick the Wise, had Luther hidden away in the Wartburg castle, where he stayed until March 1522.

While Luther was absent, others in Wittenberg, notably Andreas Karlstadt, Luther's colleague at the university, tried to make changes but did so in such a rapid and radical fashion that he confused and frightened the people. The elector was alarmed, and riots broke out. When Luther returned, his first order of business was to restore peace largely by going back to the ways people were used to. But he continued to preach and teach God's Word, and by 1523, he was ready to start changing things. One of his first efforts was a new order of baptism.

Already in 1520, Luther had subjected the medieval sacramental system to a thorough review on the basis of Scripture. Luther's criticism was severe. In addition to the two sacraments that God had established, the institutional church had invented others and corrupted all of them at the expense of the Gospel. This was the heart and soul of the Christian religion: the forgiveness of sins freely offered to all on account of the saving work of Jesus and received through faith alone. But it was hard to find in the rites and ceremonies of the medieval church.

Luther rejoiced that God had preserved baptism through all the preceding centuries and by it had offered salvation to countless numbers of people. The problem was, however, that few of them knew it. They had been told that baptism was just the beginning. They had to do a lot more if they wanted to be saved. No, Luther thundered, Jesus

had promised, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). That was God's Word. It was true not just when you were a baby, but through all of life, including its very end. Baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21). That you can believe.

But first you have to know it. Luther's little baptism book of 1523 was his first effort at putting the rite of baptism—the words and prayers by which a pastor baptizes somebody—into German, the language of his people. It was a giant step forward in teaching them about the importance of baptism.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, Luther's *Order of Baptism* is quite conservative in its contents. With one notable exception, it is simply a translation of a medieval rite in use at that time (the *Magdeburg Agenda* of 1497). This means that it includes extraneous ceremonies from the Middle Ages that Luther would later remove as unnecessary and misleading. These included blowing three times under the child's eyes at the beginning of the rite; putting salt into his mouth while calling it "the salt of wisdom," an aid to eternal life; and anointing him with oil before and after the baptism. By retaining all the medieval elements in his first attempt at reforming the sacrament, Luther was making sure that people would still accept it as authentic. The officiating clergyman dressed the same and performed all the actions they were used to. It was a real baptism.

On the other hand, people were now hearing the words that accompanied



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the actions in their own language. They could now understand the baptism as well as see it. It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of this change. In the Middle Ages, priests performed the sacraments in Latin. Their language as well as their vestments and their actions separated them from people. It was almost as if they were sacred magicians who employed unknown words and unusual gestures to produce supernatural effects for the participants in their rites.

But Luther changed all this. By using the language of the people, the Reformer made it possible for them to understand what was going on as well as to comprehend the prayers the pastor was saying. It was no longer magic but communication—God to them in His Word and they to Him in their prayers.

Besides translating the medieval service, Luther did modify a few things. He even added a prayer of his own composition, the “Flood Prayer.” It takes its name from its opening lines that recall Noah’s Flood, a terrifying act of judgment upon the unbelieving world but also a comforting demonstration of God’s mercy upon believing Noah and his family, saved from destruction in the ark. Luther also refers to Israel’s passage through the Red Sea, like the Flood connected to baptism in the New Testament (see 1 Cor. 10:1–2 and 1 Peter 3:20–21). The baptism of Jesus, when our Lord stood with sinners and showed his willingness to take away the sin of the world, was for Luther a reason for confidence in our own baptism. That’s in the prayer too. On account of Jesus’ Word and work, baptism washes away sin and brings new life. Hence the petition for the one being baptized that his sins would be drowned, that he would remain secure in the ark of Christendom, and that he would with all believers at all times serve God with enthusiasm and joy.

The Anglicans borrowed Luther’s Flood Prayer for their *Book of Common*

*Prayer* in 1549, as did the Swiss Reformers in modified form for their first efforts at reforming baptism in 1523. It is still a part of the Order of Holy Baptism in the *Lutheran Service Book*<sup>2</sup> that we use today.

Many other elements of Luther’s 1523 *Order of Baptism* also remain in our contemporary service. Besides the general order and shape of the baptismal liturgy and much of what was said in Luther’s rite, worshippers today would also recognize: 1) the sign of the cross upon forehead and heart; 2) the Lord’s Prayer; 3) the reading of Mark 10:13–16; 4) godparents; 5) the interrogatory form of the baptismal vows and creed; and 6) the presentation of a baptismal candle. Of course, as previously indicated, Luther was using elements from the medieval baptismal liturgy. But it’s also worth remembering that Luther never used something merely because it was old, but only if it could serve the Gospel.

Luther included an epilogue in his “Baptismal Booklet” that explained how to use the new liturgy and why. He also reminded his readers of what was so important about baptism in the first place, “God himself calls baptism a new birth by which we are being freed from all the devil’s tyranny, loosed from sin, death, and hell, and become children of life, heirs of all the gifts of God, God’s own children, and brethren of Christ,”<sup>3</sup> and that is still true 500 years later! 🏰

- 1 See *Luther’s Works*, v. 53: *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Phil.: Fortress Press, 1965), 96–103.
- 2 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Service Book* (CPH, 2006), 268–69.
- 3 LW 53:103.

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