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Luther, Baptism, and the Church Today

David P. Scaer

Baptism: Does It Matter?

The Lutheran Church has a liturgy, but may not be liturgical. It has sacraments, but may not be a sacramental church. To pass the test sacraments must inform not only our theology but our practice in a consistent and meaningful way. A sacramental church integrates them into every level of theology and does not confine them to one locus. In turn, public practice and private piety express the confidence believers find in the sacraments. Church theology and the common practice inform and reflect each other. One can hardly claim to be sacramental in practice if, although baptized as an infant, he later makes a decision for Christ, or if he defends the real presence, but does not receive the sacrament.

Some years ago a lay person wrote a letter questioning the propriety of a font standing in the middle of the aisle of Kramer Chapel. Assumably it had been there since the chapel was constructed in the 1950s and had probably attracted only the attention of the maintenance staff. Because the chapel was not constituted as a place for congregational worship, the font was out of place, so the letter claimed. It might become a receptacle for holy water.

The font had been waterless. It was just there and stirred up no nostalgia. For the sake of peace it was removed to a storeroom for non-functioning sacramental vessels. Perhaps a small amount of sacramental integrity would have given us the courage to resist this Reformed intrusion and to insist that the font remain exactly where it was, peace or no peace. Luther defined the church by baptism.¹ The font appropriately belonged in the chapel to remind us of our origins in Christ.² If

¹Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, Studies in Christian Thought 56 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 197.

²*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H.

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the font has no place in a chapel, neither does an altar or a pulpit. The chapel might as well be a Quaker meeting house, where the deadening silence is occasionally broken by devotional readings. A church defined by individual faith requires no sacramental reminders. Such a church, however, is not Luther's church, where believers become God's people through baptism and eucharist.³ *Et tamen nascuntur per hoc verbum, baptismum, communionem etc. filii regis.*

Just as one eucharistic assembly is the manifestation of the *una sancta*, so one baptism envelops all baptisms, and, accordingly, one font encompasses all fonts. Baptism is more than an entry level sacrament. For Luther it is what being a Christian is. baptism is as much present and future tense as it is past tense, and it continually calls for the baptized to respond in faith.⁴ We do not have to look at the font where we were baptized to find this salvation; we could have found it in the one that stood in our chapel. Baptism and the Holy Communion are the *porta dei* through which the Holy Spirit leads us into the church.⁵ We acceded to the font's removal for simple peace, but in retrospect it was a capitulation to a Protestantism that pretends to be Lutheran.⁶

Faith or Baptism?

Infant baptism is the most commonly practiced form of baptism and controversy over this form first disrupted the Reformation. Luther discussed the Lord's Supper with Zwingli

T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 22:197: "Similarly, we have two classes of Christians today. All of us who are baptized and are reborn through Baptism are indeed called Christian, but we do not all remain true to Baptism." Subsequent references to volumes in this series will be abbreviated *LW*.

³LW 3:110.

⁴Trigg, 196.

⁵LW 8:264.

⁶During the 1997-1998 academic year the absence of a baptismal font was corrected by placing a new stone one at entrance to the nave in the center aisle. This writer would like to believe that the delivery of this essay provided the Dean of the Chapel with the motivation for undertaking this task, though this cannot be confirmed by the Dean's memory.

(1529), but made no attempt to negotiate with the Anabaptists. On the surface, infant baptism seemed to contradict Luther's doctrine of justification *sola fide*. Justifying faith was *fides explicita* and not the church's or anyone else's, a *fides aliena*. Faith does not belong to Luther's definition of baptism, but relying on baptism without faith creates false confidence.⁷ A problem of relating faith to baptism emerges with infants when faith is denied or redefined so that it is not really the New Testament faith. Since the Enlightenment, theologians have attempted to coordinate the practice of infant baptism with the *sola fide* principle.

On the borders of the nineteenth century confessional movement was the Erlangen School, which accommodated a sacramental baptism of infants with Schleiermacher's principle of God consciousness. Schleiermacher created a theological synthesis out of the Pietism of his parental home and the critical Rationalism of his university education. Even if he may not have believed in a personal God, his emphasis on the community and consciousness showed that the Pietism of his youth set the character of his theology. Historical Pietism (circa 1675-1760) did not question infant baptism, but more and more saw faith as self-reflection whose progress could be measured. These Pietists were at odds with Luther, who held that the one who finds himself in despair has a greater faith than the one who thinks he believes.⁸ Lutherans, who have often adopted Pietism's aberrant view of faith as a substance or quality, have had to explain the absence of a qualifying faith in baptizing infants. Rationalism substituted reason, of which infants were found to be incapable, in place of Pietism's emotional self-absorption. Accordingly, faith was impossible for them. Infant baptism could be practiced as an apostolic custom but was neither divinely mandated nor necessary. Original sin and baptism's regenerating grace were denied. Infant baptism could be practiced as a voluntary custom symbolizing entrance into

⁷LW 22:197.

⁸LW 40:241.

the community where Christian virtues were accessible to the child.⁹

Schleiermacher followed suit, defining faith as a highly developed God consciousness. This excluded children, who were not even capable of rudimentary consciousness, but their baptism could serve as an entrance rite into the Christian community where their God consciousness could develop.¹⁰ Both the Rationalists and Schleiermacher attached regeneration not to baptism but to the community where ethical behavior or sanctification was spawned. Sponsors were replaced by parents who pledged to provide ethical upbringing for the child. It became more of a family rite than a churchly one. Our own liturgy contains pledges concerning the child's upbringing which were not part of Luther's rite.¹¹ The Erlangen theologians looked for a middle ground between the revived confessional Lutheranism, with its deep concern for the sacraments, and Schleiermacher's definition of faith as a matured consciousness. Infants were regenerated by baptism, but without faith.¹² Some scholars have claimed support in Luther for separating faith from baptism.¹³ Barth, for all his dislike of Rationalism and Schleiermacher, followed them in finding no biblical reason for infant baptism. He actually went further by calling for its abolition, but did not require it of those baptized as infants.¹⁴ He was an Anabaptist in theology but not practice, and thus more closely resembled Zwingli. Some German Lutheran pastors

⁹J. A. L. Wegscheider, *Institutiones Theologiae Christianae Dogmaticae*, third edition (Halle: Gebauer, 1817), 364-367.

¹⁰*Der Christliche Glaube*, third edition, three volumes (Berlin: Reimer, 1836), 2:280-284.

¹¹*Lutheran Worship* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1982), 200.

¹²Franz Frank, *System der Christlichen Wahrheit*, third edition, (Erlangen: Deichert, 1894), 285. One may also see Paul Althaus, Sr., *Die Heilsbedeutung der Taufe im Neuen Testament* (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1897), 296. He could speak of baptismal regeneration without faith.

¹³One may see Karl Brinkel, *Die Lehre Luthers von der fides infantium bei der Kindertaufe* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958), 11-12.

¹⁴Karl Barth, *Christian Dogmatics*, four volumes, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), 4/4:182.

adopted Barth's arguments, but they rarely put them into practice among the churches practicing infant baptism.¹⁵

Infant baptism provided an incontestable unity for Reformed, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, as well as a national and cultural bond in Europe. Barth's opposition to infant baptism was based on his definition of faith as encounter, which is as impossible for children as Schleiermacher's God consciousness. Barth claimed that Luther had sacrificed the *sola fide* principle in his defense of infant baptism.¹⁶ Anabaptists, Zwingli, Calvin, Enlightenment theologians, Schleiermacher, and Barth had profound differences on baptism. Yet all concurred it was an act of faith and agreed, against Luther, that infants did not believe. For Luther, baptism was constituted not by faith, but by God, who was actually present in the water.

Infant baptism takes us to the heart of Luther's theology. The sacraments are God's masks where faith can find Him. At issue is how Luther resolved his *sola fide* principle with his practice of infant baptism, since this correlation has been problematic.¹⁷ Baptism cannot replace justification by faith and Christology as the core of Luther's theology, but it does focus on how he understood them. Salvation is given in baptism, though not because of faith. Finding the certainty of salvation in faith is the devil's work and is as useless as the medieval demand to rely on confession for forgiveness. If baptism were given on the basis of faith, we could baptize no one, including adults.¹⁸ Denying

¹⁵One may see Gottfried Hoffmann, "The Baptism and Faith of Infants," in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*, 79-85, edited by Kurt E. Marquart, John Stephenson, and Bjarne Teigen (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985).

¹⁶In order to maintain infant baptism Barth asks whether it is an integral part of the theological system. He finds that for Luther it is not. One may see *Christian Dogmatics* 4/4, 166-169.

¹⁷James Atkinson (*Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism* [London, 1968], 168) writes: "There is no satisfactory way of reconciling Luther's clear teaching on justification by faith alone with his views on baptismal regeneration. His contemporaries saw this chink in his armour, and so have many radicals who succeeded them." We have provided an historical sketch of the problem from Pietism to Barth.

¹⁸LW 40:240.

baptism especially to infants was, for Luther, a rejection of Christianity.¹⁹

An often used route out of the quagmire of apparent contradictions in Luther's thought is dividing the younger Reformer from the more mature one. This technique tends to destroy the unity of his thought, but it has merit in providing categories for tracing his historical development. Luther did not see all things in one moment of theological brilliance. No one ever does. Events over which the Reformer did not have direct control shaped his views or caused them to be expressed in different ways. The typical caricature is that the younger *persona* was the vibrant protestant whose battle cry of *sola fide* was his theological engine against Rome. True! The older version suffered from a sacramental clogging of the theological arteries. Luther's immunity against a latent medieval virus broke down, and a degenerative, sclerotic catholicism surged forth. Remove the hyperbole and this is also true. In the Large Catechism, Luther shows no mercy to those who boast of their faith apart from the sacraments.²⁰ Important as *sola fide* was for Luther, baptism was God's act, whose definition was not dependent on faith. Barth saw this as the triumph of Rome's *ex opere operato* in Luther!²¹

Bifurcating Luther into green (Protestant) and ripe (Catholic) periods is attractive for those who want to give faith a secondary role in baptism or eliminate it by delay. Walther's and Pieper's opponents in the Erlangen school did just that: baptize now, believe later.²² In baptism, *sola gratia* is given place of honor and faith is deferred to adolescence. Erlangen

¹⁹Large Catechism IV, 31: "Hence it follows whoever rejects Baptism rejects God's Word, faith, and Christ, who directs and binds us to Baptism."

²⁰Large Catechism IV, 28-29.

²¹*Christian Dogmatics* 4/4,172.

²²Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, four volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1950-1957), 3:267: "Many recent Lutherans . . . teach that Baptism communicates psychic (or 'psychophysical') powers and gifts which the baptized do not receive with the hand of faith. This is the Romanizing element in their teaching." Pieper notes the aberration in this theology, but it may have had its origin in the German philosophy of that day and not Rome.

supported its position with Luther's claim that infant baptism is valid, even without faith.²³ This is but one of several hypothetical arguments Luther offered in his arguments for infant baptism. It may appear that Luther contradicts himself. If one is absolutely certain that the candidate does not believe, he should not baptize him. Again, even if we are uncertain whether children believe, we should still baptize them. Even the Anabaptists have no certain knowledge of this. These hypotheses may or may not be true and cannot be extracted as autonomous truths.

If Luther's tower experience (1512/1519[?]) marks his awareness of justification by faith, a later date marks the movement of the sacraments to the center of his theology.²⁴ This later date rivals the earlier one in importance and can be placed about 1527/8 with his *Concerning Rebaptism*.²⁵ In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), an earlier, Protestant Luther has no use for sacraments added by Rome.²⁶ Even here, however, Luther does not make baptism's power dependent on the faith of the baptizer or the baptized.²⁷ This Luther was already Catholic—at least in the eyes of his opponents, from the Anabaptists to Barth! He carried his polemic over into the Large Catechism (1529) against the Anabaptists who claimed an immediate experience of the Spirit and the unprofitable character of external things.

²³For an overview of this problem in the nineteenth century with a bibliography, one may see Brinkel, 104-105, n.2. The solution that the grace given in baptism could be received by faith later in life was popular, because it kept the grace of baptism and faith as mature decision intact. Problematic is that logical priority of *sola gratia* over the *sola fide* becomes a temporal separation, which is not Luther's teaching and endangers his *sola fide* principle.

²⁴Fran Posset, "'Deification' in the German Spirituality of the Late Middle Ages and in Luther: An Ecumenical Historical Perspective," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 84 (1993):115: "The debate over the data of the Reformer's theological breakthrough appears to be endless."

²⁵LW 40:229-262.

²⁶LW 36:81-126.

²⁷LW 36:64.

Luther addressed his *The Adoration of the Sacrament* (1523) to the Bohemian Brethren, whose refusal to adore the sacrament suggested to some they were with Carlstadt.²⁸ He was also disturbed that baptism was administered on the basis of future faith.²⁹ If it is certain that children do not have faith (a point which Luther does not grant), it would be better not to baptize them, a position he took in his treatise *Concerning Baptism* (1527/8).³⁰ These Anabaptist "know-it-alls" and "leaders of the blind" have taken the *sola* in Luther's *sola fide* to develop a "monofideism," which makes the sacraments unnecessary externals.³¹ "Therefore only presumptuous, stupid persons draw the conclusion that where there is no true faith, there also can be no true baptism."³² This may not be a sacramental *ex opere operato* of Roman Catholicism, but for Luther baptism clearly has an objective reality apart from faith.³³ For Luther the pope is the Antichrist who sits in God's temple where there is faith,

²⁸LW 36:271.

²⁹Calvin took the position of baptizing on the basis of future faith in later editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (translated by Henry Beveridge, two volumes [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company], 4.16.20), and this position found its way into the Enlightenment. In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* Calvin held that infants had the same faith as adults and that without faith election was impossible (Translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles [Grand Rapids: The H. H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies/Eerdmans, 1975], 4.23). Luther's response was (LW 36:300-301): "But I am much concerned because you baptize young children on the basis of future faith, which they are supposed to learn when they come to understanding, and not on the basis of present faith." All references to the *Institutes* will be to the Beveridge edition, unless otherwise noted.

³⁰LW 40:254.

³¹Large Catechism IV, 28-29.

³²Large Catechism IV, 58.

³³LW 13:303: "You can see the water of baptism as you can see the dew . . . but you cannot see or hear or understand the Spirit, or what He accomplishes thereby: that a human being is cleansed in baptism and becomes a saint in the hands of the priest so that from a child of hell he is changed into a child of God. Nevertheless this is truly and actually accomplished. One has to say, in view of the power which attends it, that the Holy Spirit was present at the event and was making believers by means of water and the word."

Christ, sacraments, and gospels, among others.³⁴ The Anabaptists, in attacking the pope, desecrate the church by removing its sacraments.³⁵ The pope still baptizes and is within the church's boundaries.

An earlier Luther said if you are absolutely certain that the candidate for baptism does not believe, then baptism should not be administered to child or adult. A later Luther notes that even if the Bible makes no explicit reference to children or adults being baptized because of their faith, it would be absurd to cease baptizing.³⁶ "Neither the baptizer nor the baptized can base baptism on a certain faith."³⁷ Luther saw that in the Anabaptist requirement for rebaptism was a claim for special merit for their own baptism. Water administered by the Anabaptists was superior to that used by other Christians! This was sectarian and hardly different from the *ex opere operato* of Rome.³⁸

Luther's Christology is bound up with his doctrine of baptism, which provides the basis for justification and sanctification. Faith finds God in baptism where He has bound Himself. To reject baptism is to repudiate Christ.³⁹ A Christological understanding of baptism does not mutilate Luther's trinitarian doctrine by denying the Spirit's role in salvation. The Spirit is always connected to the water of baptism and Christ's blood, so that together they form one thing.⁴⁰ Baptism is a trinitarian act

³⁴LW 40:231: "The Christendom that now is under the papacy is truly the body of Christ and a member of it. If it is his body, then it has the true spirit [*sic!* (Spirit)], gospel, faith, baptism, sacrament, keys, the office of the ministry, prayer, holy Scripture, and everything that pertains to Christendom. So we are all still under the papacy and therefrom have received our Christian treasures."

³⁵LW 40:232-233.

³⁶LW 40:254.

³⁷LW 40:241.

³⁸LW 28:233. Luther's argument is not that Anabaptist baptism is inherently invalid. Since they hold that the word is not in the water, they are showing contempt for the word. They are ascribing to the water of their baptism a special efficacy. One may see Trigg, 78, n.71.

³⁹Large Catechism IV,31.

⁴⁰LW 30:316: "In Baptism there is the blood and the Spirit. If you are baptized with water, the blood is sprinkled through the Word."

in which all three persons are actually present, a position that the moderating Calvin could hardly take. Luther's radical opponents detached the Spirit's working from Christ and the sacraments, and so robbed the people both of the Spirit and Christ. This Rome did not do.

Baptism and the Sacramental God of the Old Testament

For Calvin, Old and New Testament rituals differ only in audience and form. Both are void of grace, the Holy Spirit, and Christ.⁴¹ Even the word holds forth – but does not give – Christ and the Spirit, the latter of whom comes as God's inward work in the believer.⁴² Circumcision and baptism are divinely commanded, but regeneration is no more dependent on one ceremony than the other: each can be safely omitted, except for the sake of order. For Calvin, Zipporah's circumcising her son is as unacceptable as lay emergency baptism.⁴³ Sacraments are signs without content.

Ulrich Asendorf has alerted us to the importance of Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, which began after May 31, 1535 and covered ten years, taking him near his life's end. The Anabaptists and then Zwingli had impacted Luther by then. Luther suffers from none of Calvin's abhorrence for sacraments as substantive means of grace and therefore approaches the Old Testament with a Christological and sacramental vigor. For Luther, Old

⁴¹*Institutes* 4.16.15. One may see Ford Lewis Battles, *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1980), 366-367: "The core of circumcision and Baptism are the same. Only the externals are different. Calvin holds that the New and Old Testaments are 'in reality and substance . . . altogether one and the same: still the administration is different'" (2.10.2).

⁴²*Institutes* 4.14. Calvin, unlike Zwingli, admits to a simultaneous action (4.15.10-13).

⁴³*Institutes* 4.14.17: "Wherefore, let it be a fixed point, that the office of the sacraments differs not from the word of God; and this is to hold forth and offer Christ to us, and, in him, the treasures of heavenly grace. They confer nothing, and avail nothing, if not received in faith, just as wine and oil, or any other liquor, however large the quantity which you pour out, will run away and perish unless there be an open vessel to receive it. When the vessel is not open, though it may be sprinkled all over, it will nevertheless remain entirely empty."

Testament signs are the occasion of an actual presence of God. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther finds a God who uses a variety of external objects: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the rainbow, circumcision, the pillars of fire and cloud, the altars and sacrifices. All are means of grace.⁴⁴ They are reminders or teaching devices for Calvin, but not sacraments in which God is present giving grace.⁴⁵ The hermeneutics of the two reformers are worlds apart.

Luther's exegesis of the Old Testament was not always so sacramentally profligate. As late as his *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525) he walks by open sacramental "doors."⁴⁶ The Anabaptists and Zwingli had yet to bring the Reformer to his sacramental boiling point. Never would he again be so sacramentally meager. The sacramental ardor of his *Concerning Rebaptism* (1527/8) resurfaces in the Large Catechism (1529) and is sustained into his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-1545). Here Luther is, as P. D. Pahl notes, the theologian of the means of grace.⁴⁷ He completes his life in sacramental indulgence.

Luther's sacramental hermeneutic, which he applies equally to both testaments, counters both the Reformed view, which finds only signs in either testament; and a mediating position, which finds sacraments in the New Testament (Lutheran) but only signs in the Old (Reformed). If sacraments must be New Testament rites, then only baptism and the Lord's Supper qualify. By this definition the Old Testament knows of no

⁴⁴In his lecture on Genesis 28:7, Luther uses Jacob's ladder to explain how baptism is the gate of God (*LW* 5:247): "This is how faith speaks: 'I am going to the place where the word is taught, where the sacrament is offered and baptism is administered.'"

⁴⁵*Institutes* 4.14.21: "Circumcision was a sign by which the Jews were reminded that whatever comes of the seed of man—in other words, the whole nature of man—is corrupt, and requires to be cut off; moreover, it was a proof and a memorial to confirm them in the promise made to Abraham, of a see in whom all the nations of the earth should be blessed, and from whom they themselves were to look for a blessing."

⁴⁶*LW* 9:110-111. Luther does not take advantage of a reference to circumcision for a discourse on baptism.

⁴⁷P. D. Pahl, "Baptism in Luther's Lectures on Genesis," *Lutheran Theological Journal* (1967): 26-34.

sacraments. This latter view is not without theological problems. God would come in word and sacrament in the New Testament, but only in the word in the Old.⁴⁸ Extravagant theophanies and secret whisperings with the prophets are the extent of divine involvement with Israel. Christology is limited to officially-designated predictions and (anti-)types. The first testament, in this view, knows of no sacraments in the sense that God is really present in particular rites, actions, and historical events. Such a truncated Old Testament hermeneutic better fits Marcion than Luther!

For Luther, baptism does not erupt suddenly, *ex nihilo* as it were, in the New Testament. It comes to a people who were prepared by Old Testament sacramental institutions and events. For Luther, Israel's existence was sacramentally permeated. Israel, like the church, was never without outward signs in which God was really present. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was, for Adam, pulpit and altar.⁴⁹ The word of God was attached to the tree, even if it was a threat. Luther equates Adam's disobedience with the sectarian refusal to acknowledge the washing of regeneration in baptism.⁵⁰ If the fanatics are condemned for finding God without externals, the papists are condemned for setting up their own places where God can be found. Abraham sacrifices to God only where God commands.⁵¹ Jeroboam broke God's word attached to Jerusalem by choosing Bethel as a place of worship. That believers are to

⁴⁸Calvin does not grant such a mediating position, since neither word nor sacrament in either testament bestow the Spirit and forgiveness.

⁴⁹LW1:95. I have not found that Luther develops his sacramental thought in connection with the tree of life, though the correlation with the New Testament rites would appear obvious. Calvin sees this tree as a guarantee of immortality (*Institutes* 4.14.18): "The term sacrament, in the view we have hitherto taken of it, includes, generally, all the signs which God ever commanded men to use, that he might make them sure and confident of the truth of his promises. These he was pleased sometimes to place in natural objects—sometimes exhibit in miracles. Of the former class we have an example, in his giving the tree of life to Adam and Eve, as an earnest of immortality, that they might feel confident of the promise as often as they ate of the fruit."

⁵⁰LW1:94.

⁵¹LW4:179.

seek God where He wants to be found is fundamental to Luther's sacramental thought.

While Lutherans traditionally speak about two or three sacraments at the most, Jonathan Trigg notes that "Luther's approach [to the text of Genesis] militates against too closed a group of the means of grace."⁵² To avoid confusion, it might be better to speak about the means of grace rather than sacraments, but Luther calls any number of rites sacraments! Whatever form the word takes becomes a means of grace or sacrament. Regardless of terminology God is in the rite or the event and it becomes a Sacrament. While Luther in his *Babylonian Captivity* is adamantly opposed to the sacraments added by Rome, he knows of no sacramental exclusivity in his *Lectures on Genesis*.⁵³ With this wider interpretation of the means of grace or the sacraments, the space between Luther's and Melanchthon's views on the sacraments narrows. Luther is generally seen as favoring two sacraments, to which Melanchthon adds penance and several more by expanding the definition.⁵⁴ In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther goes well beyond Melanchthon. Israel was the sacramental community for Luther and the sacraments were under ("in, with, under") every biblical bush and under each stone. Genesis was his sacramental paradise. In baptism God speaks and deals with us as He did with Abraham. "Thus in the Old Testament the faces of the Lord were the pillar of fire, the cloud, and the mercy seat; in the New Testament, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the ministry of the word, and the like. By means of these God shows us, as by a visible sign, that He is with us, takes care of us, and is favorably inclined toward us."⁵⁵

Several conclusions follow from Luther's perspective. First, God is present and shows He is favorably inclined to us within both Old and New Testament phenomena. Second, Luther places the ministry (keys) on the same plain as baptism and the Supper. In other places, Luther speaks of marriage as a

⁵²Trigg, 20.

⁵³LW 36:81-136; LW 21:151.

⁵⁴Augsburg Confession and Apology XIII. In the *Babylonian Captivity* (1520) Luther speaks of three sacraments (LW 36:18).

⁵⁵LW 1:309.

sacrament and sees confession and absolution as marks of the church.⁵⁶ Luther's extravagantly rich sacramental and Christological approach to the Old Testament puts him at odds with medieval tradition, which downgraded the Old Testament's promises to the level of the carnal, an approach that appears also in Calvin. It is a secular history with material rewards for those who keep the law.⁵⁷ Its spiritual purpose was confined to its being a source book of types and a collection of messianic predictions. In the end, though, it is primarily law.⁵⁸ For Luther, God was actually present in these rites and events. They were as much means of grace as the New Testament's sacraments. Circumcision, no less than baptism, is "also a sacrament, that is, a sign of the divine will and therefore a sign of eternal salvation for those who believed."⁵⁹ In both the Old and New Testament, saints found Christ in the sacraments and shared the same sufferings.⁶⁰ Luther has a lavish array of sacraments or signs in which God is present to show His good will.⁶¹ Luther's limited sacramental range in his *Babylonian Captivity* (1520) is expanded in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535).

⁵⁶LW 53:115.

⁵⁷*Institutes* 2.11.1-7. The Old Testament puts a higher value on this life, typified Christ under the ceremonies, and was literal. In contrast the New Testament is spiritual. "The Old Testament is literal, because promulgated without the efficacy of the Spirit; the New spiritual, because the Lord has engraven it on the heart. . . . The Old is deadly, because it can do nothing but involve the whole human race in a curse; the New is the instrument of life, because those who are freed from the curse it restores to favour with God. The former is the ministry of condemnation, because it charges the whole sons of Adam with transgression; the latter the ministry of righteousness, because it unfolds the mercy of God, by which we are justified."

⁵⁸Trigg, 54-55; Samuel Freus, *From Shadow to Promise, Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to Luther* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1969), 155-156.

⁵⁹LW 3:110.

⁶⁰Trigg, 51.

⁶¹LW 1:252. Calvin, who can do theology without sacraments, not unexpectedly warns against "The Five Other Ceremonies: Falsely Termed Sacraments" (*Institutes* 4.19).

Sacraments

While Luther did not value one means of grace over another in offering forgiveness, he did make distinctions. Baptism was not simply a ceremony, it initiated the Christian life and it established the church's boundaries. It not only gave entrance into the covenant, it was itself the covenant.⁶² Being in baptism is equivalent to being in Christ. Recent discussions over Luther's doctrines on the eucharist, church and ministry overlook the greater role which baptism had for him. His oath as a doctor of theology provided him with the legitimacy of his Reformation, but in the face of trials his response was not past faith, holiness or spiritual achievement, but *baptisatus sum*.

Indeed if I had the matter under my control, I would not want God to speak to me from heaven or appear to me; but this I would want – and my daily prayers are directed to this end – that I might have proper respect and true appreciation for the gift of Baptism, that I have been baptized (*sum baptisatus*).⁶³

Thus baptism required faith for justification, but baptism and not faith provided the certainty of salvation. A faith that is *incurvatus se* is both useless and self-destructive. Such a self-reflecting faith was the heart of the monasticism from which he fled and that reappeared among the Anabaptists, who saw baptism as no more than a confession of that faith.⁶⁴ Because of man's weakness, preaching, and eucharist were added, but baptism remains the Christian's refuge in Luther's thought.⁶⁵

For Luther, God was masked in the incarnation as the most important sacrament and the source of the others.⁶⁶ Sacraments

⁶²LW 1:228. The Reformed use of the word covenant as a mutually made agreement has limited use among Lutherans. Here again much is surrendered to the Reformed hermeneutic. Circumcision or the sacraments as covenant are arrangements of grace established by God which calls for faith, but does not depend on faith for its definition.

⁶³LW 3:165.

⁶⁴LW 40:240.

⁶⁵LW 3:124.

⁶⁶LW 36:18: "Yet, if I were to speak according to the usage of the Scriptures, I should have only one single sacrament, but with three sacramental

were neither isolated or disconnected ordinances, nor empty signs. Following Augustine's interpretation of John 19:34, Luther saw baptism and the eucharist flowing from Christ's side.⁶⁷ The principle of the word coming to the element to make the sacrament is applicable to the incarnation.⁶⁸ Without the word, Christ's human nature is as useless as the elements in the sacraments.⁶⁹ Each sacrament had its own institution, but Christ's death was their common source, the word their common essence and forgiveness their common purpose. As with the commandment honoring parents, God has attached a promise, but baptism actually brings Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰ Circumcision was a mortification of the flesh.⁷¹ Baptism was a death by drowning and a rebirth, patterned after the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁷² Still the sign or the outward form did not exhaust the meaning of the sacrament but pointed to God as the greater reality hidden within it. For Calvin, reality and symbol are joined by divine command, but with Luther there is an actual *perichoresis*, so that one is in and with the other in an organic unity. God is really in the water and no place else and without the sign there is no salvation.⁷³ Those without the symbols, such as Thomas Müntzer, were without the reality.⁷⁴

signs . . . " Luther depends on 1 Timothy 3:16 for his view (*LW*36:93). Note that Luther has three sacraments here!

⁶⁷*LW*8:258: "Among the papists this word has remained: 'The sacraments flowed out of the side of Christ.' For the sacraments have their efficacy from the wounds and blood of Christ. Therefore this is a good and godly saying."

⁶⁸*LW*29:83: "If we had been able to enter heaven without an outward thing, there would be no necessity for God to send [Christ]. But God did place Him in the flesh and in the manger. Then when He had abolished sin and death, God presented Him through His word in baptism and in the sacrament, so that we might thus be assured of the certainty of His Spirit through His word."

⁶⁹*LW*29:82: "If the humanity of Christ were without the Word, it would be a vain thing."

⁷⁰LC IV, 38-42.

⁷¹*LW*3:135-136.

⁷²LC IV, 65.

⁷³*LW*3:143-144.

⁷⁴*LW*29:82-83.

Since the Reformed work from a general concept of the sacraments, or means of grace, as symbols without internal content, the question arises whether one or the other "sacrament" could be safely omitted in favor of the other or explaining one would suffice.⁷⁵ Barth took the Reformed position to its logical conclusion by making a second sacrament redundant. He himself says that his discourse on baptism is applicable to the Supper.⁷⁶ Symbols are as disposable as they are exchangeable.

Barth's position would be impossible for Luther, who recognized levels of importance among the sacraments. New Testament sacraments have a permanency and value, but Old Testament rites are no less sacraments and their meaning is not exhausted by their symbolical value. While God's appearances to the patriarchs were only crumbs and droplets compared to what Christians have in the sacraments, this hardly means that God was not really present in the Old Testament theophanies. He was. But the Christian receives more in the sacraments than Abraham did in the theophanies.⁷⁷ *Apparet tibi in Baptismo, et ipse te baptisat, te alloquitur ipse.*⁷⁸

God is present everywhere in the act. Jacob's dream of the ladder and his wrestling with God at Jabbok has baptismal meaning for Luther. In these appearances, as in baptism, God meets the believer: *ipse Deus revera adest, baptisat et absolvit.*⁷⁹ Just as God was unseen but present as the angel so He is unseen and present in baptism not only in the water but in the one who is

⁷⁵*Institutes* 4.14.1: "Akin to the preaching of the gospel, we have another help to our faith in the sacraments, . . . First, we must attend to what a sacrament is. It seems to me, then, a simple and appropriate definition to say, that it is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety toward him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men. We may also define more briefly by calling it a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards Him."

⁷⁶*Christian Dogmatics*, 4/4:130.

⁷⁷LW 3:155.

⁷⁸WA 43:443.

⁷⁹WA 42:658,31, 23. LW 3,220.

baptizing. God is present everywhere in the act. Baptism, the Supper, the minister in giving the absolution, and ordination are all veils or masks behind which God stands and performs His gracious work. Though the minister administers the rite, God Himself baptizes and is present everywhere in the action. Genuflecting is proper both at the baptism and the Supper.⁸⁰

Luther's linking of God to the sacraments as masks behind which He works raises the question of their necessity. Not unexpectedly, Luther says that God can save without baptism, but distancing himself from a Zwinglian position adds, "but in the church we must judge and teach, in accordance with God's ordered power, that without that outward baptism no one is saved."⁸¹ Simply because one finds these masks unsatisfactory or repugnant, one is not free to search for God in other places, such as pilgrim sites, devotions and prayers.⁸² Setting up the golden calf in Bethel is an idolatrous example of contempt for God.⁸³

Luther sees in John's baptizing Jesus the form of all baptisms in which the Trinity speaks the word: *in Baptismo sonat vox Trinitatis*.⁸⁴ God speaks the word, is the word and is present in

⁸⁰LW 8:145: "[God] baptizes me; He absolves me and gives me His body and blood through the tongue and the hand of the minister. For God works salvation in Baptism. And this is the presence or form and epiphany of God in these means." One may also see LW 5:249 where Luther says that faith "must see the water, the hand [of the minister], the Word of God and God in the water." He places ordination on the same level of baptism as an activity in which God works. "Thus the imposition of the hands is not a tradition of men, but God makes and ordains ministers. Nor is it the pastor who absolves you, but the mouth and hand of God." In the eastern churches the usual formula is not "I baptize you . . ." but "Let John be baptized in the name of . . ." The eastern formula makes it clearer that God is doing the baptizing.

⁸¹LW 3:274.

⁸²LW 29:82-83: "Do not seek the Spirit through solitude or through prayer, but read Scripture."

⁸³LW 5:241.

⁸⁴LW 8:145: "In Baptism, . . . our eyes and hearts should always be directed to the manifest appearance in the Jordan, where the voice of the Father is heard from heaven, the flesh of the Son is seen, and the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove. . . . In Baptism the voice of the Trinity is heard . . ."

the water. Baptism is not merely past tense, but is a present reality in which salvation is found. He consistently uses Augustine's formula *accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum* not only in regard to baptism but also the visible external signs of the Old Testament, for example, circumcision and the sacrificial cult. Luther's concept of the word is neither simple nor magical. The divine word is masked and hidden in human words and thus the word is one mask along side of the other masks of God. This word in baptism creates a tension by forgiving sins but without completely removing them. Forgiven Christians still struggle with the sin they find in themselves. Like Jacob, they fight for what is theirs by promise.⁸⁵ The paradox between what baptism gives and what Christians experience creates the tension in which faith lives. *Adhuc enim expectamus, nondum videmus.*⁸⁶ Baptism and circumcision are entry sacraments. Repeating circumcision is impossible; repeating baptism is sinful.⁸⁷ Baptism's work, though complete, is not so deficient that it has to be supplemented by other sources of grace. In both the medieval and the contemporary Roman Church, confirmation, penance and extreme unction supplement baptism to form a cohesive sacramental system through which the believer obtains salvation. Luther recognizes the possibility of these sacraments, but not in the sense they have God's command.⁸⁸

Baptism possesses such an objective reality, that it seems to take on an *ex opere operato* character. In his post-baptismal prayer, Luther speaks of the God who "regenerates through the water and the Holy Spirit and forgives all sins."⁸⁹ It establishes boundaries in which the true and false churches, which began with Cain and Abel, exist side by side.⁹⁰ God's people under the covenants of baptism and circumcision are justified by faith. From this Luther deduces the *fides infantium*, even for those who are uncircumcised or unbaptized. Children in both the Old and

⁸⁵LW 5:208.

⁸⁶LW 8:186.

⁸⁷LW 3:101.

⁸⁸LW 36:91.

⁸⁹LW 53:109.

⁹⁰LW 1:243.

New Testament believe and are justified by their faith. Thus no child can be baptized without faith, but the worth of baptism does not depend on anyone's faith.⁹¹ Baptized and unbaptized adults who deprive infants of faith by not baptizing them are not saved.⁹²

Of practical significance is reconciling Luther's insistence that apart from baptism there is no salvation and the problem of unbaptized children. Luther's thought here is complex, but his conclusions are consistent with his principles. Luther does not devalue baptism, as his opponents have, or pretend the problem does not exist. Essential to his position is that where the signs are not present or despised, grace is not present. (Luther has the Anabaptists in mind.) Still Luther holds that in Israel girls and boys dying before the eighth day and unbaptized children born within the church are saved because they have not sinned against the covenants established by circumcision and baptism. They are safe in Abraham's bosom.⁹³ Believing Gentiles are saved without circumcision, but those Jews who refuse it are damned. For them, and not the Gentiles, circumcision is the means of grace.

Luther identifies the false church by its despising baptism and the places in which God has chosen to reveal Himself. They claim to find God in more glamorous places. If Luther defines the true church by baptism, then the false church is recognized by the lack of faith. The false church, which belongs to the flesh, lives with the true church. The false church presumes upon baptism and claims salvation without true faith. Baptism sets the boundaries for the covenant and the true church, but within the covenant and the church are those who live according to the flesh who cannot be regarded as God's children. Luther places Cain, Ishmael, and Esau in this false church; however, Ishmael repented and returned to the true church. Boundaries between

⁹¹LC IV, 54.

⁹²LW3:110.

⁹³LW3:103: "Nevertheless, since the girls are Abraham's descendants, they are not excluded from Abraham's righteousness; they attain it through faith. But those adults who despised circumcision or who despise Baptism are surely damned."

the true and false church are porous and members of each pass from one to another.

That leaves us only with a few loose ends regarding infant baptism. First, Luther argues for infant baptism from the existence of the church, which has existed for over a thousand years and produced such great saints as Bernard, Gerson and Hus.⁹⁴ If it were not a true baptism giving the Holy Spirit, there would be no church. To say the church did not exist would be absurd. His argument is drawn not from Scriptures but from church as tradition. Practice informs theology. Second, Luther also knows of a *fides aliena*, but this should not be confused with the Roman *fides vicaria* where the faith of the sponsors or the church is substituted for the child's faith. Rather the *fides aliena* believes God's promise that children believe and prays God would give the child faith. Prayer and the word do not stand in juxtaposition to one another, so that if we had the word we could not pray. If this were the case, we would have to eliminate the Lord's Prayer and the traditional collects and only pray for what God has not promised.⁹⁵ Prayer could be entirely eliminated! Third, the Anabaptists rejected Luther's idea of the *fides infantium* and thus found reason to forbid baptizing them. While Luther connects, he does not limit *fides infantium* to their baptism. For his defense of the *fides infantium*, Luther includes the innocent blood of children slaughtered to idols, the slaughter of the holy innocents, and the leaping of John in his mother's womb. Christ, who is present in baptism, is the same Christ who spoke to John and created faith. To these arguments, Luther adds the words of Jesus that children belong to the kingdom of God. Their faith is more certain than that of adults who can lie. Luther presents the example of Judas.⁹⁶ Not only can the Anabaptists not prove that children do not have faith, but these examples prove they can. Finally, Luther sees the entire ritual or act of baptism as a totality, which is not limited to this or that word. He can say that the exorcism provides the word by which the child believes and on that account the

⁹⁴LC IV, 49-50.

⁹⁵One may see Brinkel, 85-88.

⁹⁶LW 40:242-44.

sponsors are confessing a faith which is already present, but this "word," by which God works faith, is tied to baptism.⁹⁷

I hope enough reasons from Luther have been presented to search the subterranean caverns of this campus for the lost baptismal font and return it to its place of honor. Its removal was a very un-Luther-like act. In the font we have died and risen with Christ and experience and anticipate the reality of our burial and resurrection.

⁹⁷Brinkel, 82. WA 17 II 84, 10-12.