

# March

## Baptism (Book of Concord, pp. 456-67)

Introduction By Paul R. Hinlicky, Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies, Roanoke College & Docent,  
Evanjelicka Bohoslovecka Fakulta, Univerzita Komenskeho, Bratislava, Slovakia.

Baptism is the sacrament of reception into the community of Christ. As with the Lord's Prayer, Luther stresses that Baptism is God's Word, neither law nor promise but gospel imperative, the new creative command. As such it is not a self-invented rite or religious practice, but revealed from above on the banks of the river Jordan when the Lord emerged from the waters. The theophany there of the Father above speaking His beloved Son on whom He sends His Spirit for battle with the unholy spirits inaugurates the reign of God. With Jesus' Easter victory, baptism is henceforth performed in the Triune name to "snatch" believers from the "jaws of hell" and deliver them safely into the kingdom of Christ. Baptism thus comes to us as the frontline of the reign of God; it happens to us as dying with Christ and in Him rising to newness of life. It a specific form with a specific function of God's "external" word that comes to the self from outside of the self to transform the self by uniting with Christ and endowing with His Spirit.

Luther's polemic is aimed accordingly against the new "sects" and "sectarians" who reject sacramental baptism as an "external thing," a mere ceremony that washes the body but cannot reach and touch the desires of the heart. Luther, however, surely agrees that the "heart" is the place in the world where the change of regeneration has to occur, if a child of fallen humanity is truly to be converted from the seat of her desires into a Christian. The Spirit imparts *fides ex corde*, faith from the heart, faith that transforms desire by re-focusing it on the one, true God, the only eternal good. The baptized, consequently, seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. They prayer to their heavenly Father, Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done! They learn to have no others gods.

To illustrate this penetration from the outside into the heart of human desire, Luther employed some images which can become misleading if taken too far. One that became famous (if not notorious) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the image of the "kernel and the husk," so that the exterior wrapper, the "husk," could be removed and discarded in order to get at the nut-meat. Luther's point is that God hides Himself in His revelation, in bread and wine and water and words of human witness, just as in the humanity of Jesus Christ. God hides Himself in this way to approach humanity body to body, embodied, to "be there for us" as one of us in space and time is *there* for another, somewhere *in particular*. Hence for Luther, the *kernel and the husk cannot be separated*; they come together as a "package deal," so to say, holistically acquiring in turn the baptized, "body and soul."

That God hides Himself in this way to gain us body-to-soul, has for Luther two further implications. First, faith must have an object to which to cling and, second, faith remains faith, not sight, in just this reliance on a worldly object that promises extraordinary things. To say that I am

elect or chosen may be true, but it has no objective form like saying, “I am baptized.” In the latter case, something happened visibly, something tangibly occurred in the world. This something that was done cannot be undone. It bears facticity. Yet living by faith in the word of promise that came by way of an ordinary human act in the world, until the glory of the Lord is revealed on the last day, purges desire. Idols are exposed. False faith is disillusioned. Righteousness increases. Love grows. All this in the sense of the purification of the self, attested in Luther’s familiar words: “Take they goods, fame, fortune, child and spouse, they yet have nothing won. The Kingdom ours remaineth.”

Baptism is divinely commanded, then, to effect deliverance from sin, death and the devil. It is the bath of rebirth, or regeneration that does what it says and says what it does. Luther stresses this performative nature of the regenerating Word, “I baptize you in the Name...,” against the “sectarians” who have turned Luther’s own teaching of “faith alone” against the external Word of the sacraments. The abuse of the kernel and husk image in 19<sup>th</sup> century had its precedent in those contemporaries of Luther who regarded him as still half-mired in papist error for retaining sacraments as an external prop over against a purely mental Word taken by faith alone.

In Slovakia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, some *au courant* Lutheran pastors would baptize by dipping their thumb in water and making a damp sign of the cross on the infant’s forehead. In this way, they dramatized their anti-Catholic point that it is the Word ALONE that effects anything, that the water is a next-to-incident addition to the Word. Luther hardly thinks this way. Careful reading of his exposition in this part of the Large Catechism shows that the sign of water for him is *immersion*. *Drowning* the old Adam/Eve, as Romans 6 teaches, is the very thing signified in the sacramental action or visible Word, which is the specific form that the gospel command takes in inaugurating anyone into the battle of the reign of God.

What does that say about contemporary practices of sprinkling? Luther quotes Augustine’s dictum that the Word is added to the element and thus a sacrament is made. Surely, “sprinkling” or “dipping” are “valid” applications of an element, water, if we want to get legalistic about it. But do they properly signify as immersion (“dunking”) signifies: death, drowning, being crucified with Christ? Or do we shy from even wishing to signify that?

But Luther says this water has become an “eternal water” by virtue of its sacramental union with the living and eternal Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, incarnate for us as the Lamb who was slain. Thus this sacramental water for spiritual drowning is capable of being grasped by the senses as something that comes upon one from outside the self, available not to introspection but rather, so to speak, to “extraspection.” Faith depends on this objectivity that the Word acquires in the bath, which addresses its promise to the baptized personally: you who here die with Christ will likewise rise with Him. Thus the certainty of faith rests on an historical event: *Baptizatus sum!* “I am baptized,” i.e. obtained, won, claimed by Christ and sealed by His Spirit, dead to sin but alive to God.

Luther adds an excursus on the practice of baptizing infants. The basic thought here is the old dictum, *Abusus non tollit usum*. Abuse does not disqualify right use. But what is right use? Let us well note that Luther concedes that baptism is abused in the indiscriminate, not to say promiscuous baptism of infants who are presented for the sacrament for the wrong reasons and/or motives (see his lament about this in the Baptismal Booklet in the Small Catechism, pp. 371-375). Why else would he innovate in the catechetical tradition by adding section on baptism, if not to instruct and thus properly prepare? It would be a great advance for us today if we could come even this far to acknowledge that baptism is abused in the indiscriminate practice common among us. Pastors who baptize infants of parents without taking the time and the care to instruct them in what they are doing, in the hope of “drawing them in,” are trafficking with the Word of God.

In his own day, Luther justified infant baptism because the Holy Spirit had confirmed this practice for a thousand years by making Christians out of these baptized infants. In this way, Luther once again indicates that he does not understand himself to be rejecting Catholicism but rather reforming it. Even more central to his theology, however, is the thought that faith does not create baptism, but receives it. Baptism creates and forms faith. Thus, even if an unbaptized adult comes to faith, the faith to which this person comes is faith ordered to baptism, i.e. to the public act of reception into the ecclesia by dying in Christ to sin to rise to His newness of life as signified in sacrament.

Because this is what baptism properly signifies, Luther rightly infers, re-baptizing is not permitted, inasmuch as it effectively declares the original baptism false, along with the ministry that performed it and the church that sponsors it. Rebaptism is thus the ultimately schismatic act. I would go so far as to suggest that Luther would have tolerated a practice of adult baptism, provided there was no rebaptism. But in his time the two notions of restricting baptism to adults and rebaptism (of those “falsely” baptized as infants) were wrapped together in a single knot. Positively expressed, his view was that the church as a community brings the child to the bath in the trust that the Spirit will work faith, and so we are to preach and teach the child’s baptism to it so that the Spirit can so work through this word of personal address. In this way, we retain the substance, the treasure, the kernel in the husk.

Luther concludes his defense of infant baptism by considering some objections. Daily return to baptism is precisely how real progress in the Christian life occurs. Luther expects growth in the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love throughout life. So what if the old creature predominates and this progress does not occur, or is not visible? That may mean several differing things: the battle is fierce, or baptism is being resisted, or we do not see all that is going on. Thus the mutual consolation and conversation of the sisters and brothers is needed. A good pastor or fellow Christian will discern and counsel wisely. They will call out resistance, noting that the power to repent of one’s resistance to baptism, moreover, is nothing but return to baptism. For baptism is not only the Spirit’s announcement of one’s new identity in Christ but the Spirit’s endowment of power to live this way with gifts for enriching the community of Christ.

Baptism remains forever; it is the rock of personal certitude in faith. The idea that baptism is good only for remitting the sins committed up to that point in life, going back to Jerome, makes baptism

next to useless for life after post-baptismal sin. Baptism made useless, Jerome had to invent another sacrament, penance, as the emergency lifeboat available after the wreck of the ship. From this all the “slaughter of conscience” followed that was mandatory confession and prescribed works of penance – for Luther, a pastoral disaster. But the entire life of the believer is one of repentance, turning to the returning Lord, a turning that begins with and ever returns to sacramental baptism until the sign is fulfilled in the resurrection of the body.

###

### **Martin Luther’s Large Catechism Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism**

We have now finished with the three chief parts of common Christian teaching. We must still say something about our two sacraments, instituted by Christ. For every Christian ought to have at least some brief, elementary instruction about them, because without them no one can be a Christian, although unfortunately nothing was taught about them in the past. First we shall take up baptism, through which we are initially received into the Christian community. In order that it may be readily understood, we shall treat it in a systematic way and limit ourselves to that which is necessary for us to know. How it is to be maintained and defended against heretics and sectarians we shall leave to the scholars.

In the first place, we must above all be familiar with the words upon which baptism is founded and to which everything is related that is to be said on the subject, namely, where the Lord Christ says in the last chapter of Matthew [28:19\*]:

“Go into all the world, teach all the heathen, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Likewise, in the last chapter of Mark [16:16\*]:

“The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”

Observe, first, that these words contain God’s commandment and institution, so that no one may doubt that baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by human beings. As truly as I can say that the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer were not spun out of anyone’s imagination but are revealed and given by God himself, so I can boast that 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, so that we are not to regard it as an indifferent matter, 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 is now full of sects who scream 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 that have instituted, established, and confirmed baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. Rather, it is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it

may not be worth a straw. If people used to consider it a great thing when the pope dispensed indulgences with his letters and bulls and confirmed 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. 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 human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human 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 human being or saint. For what human work can possibly be greater than God’s work?

But here the devil sets to work to blind us with false appearances and to lead us away from God’s work to our own. It makes a much more splendid appearance when a Carthusian does many great and difficult works, and we all attach greater importance to our own achievements and merits. But the Scriptures teach that if we piled together all the works of all the monks in a heap, no matter how precious and dazzling they might appear, they would still not be as noble and good as if God were to pick up a straw. Why? Because the person performing the act is nobler and better. Here one must evaluate not the person according to the works, but the works according to the person, from whom they must derive their worth. But mad reason rushes forth and, because baptism is not dazzling like the works that we do, regards it as worthless.

Now you can understand how to formulate a proper answer to the question, What is baptism? Namely, that it is not simply plain water, but water placed in the setting of God’s Word and commandment and made holy by them. It is nothing else than God’s water, not that the water itself is nobler than other water but that God’s Word and commandment are added to it.

Therefore it is sheer wickedness and devilish blasphemy that now, in order to blaspheme baptism, our new spirits set aside God’s Word and ordinance, consider nothing but the water drawn from the well, and then babble, “How can a handful of water help the soul?” Yes, my friend! Who does not know that water is water, if it is considered separately? But how dare you tamper thus with God’s ordinance and rip out his most precious jewel, in which God has fastened and enclosed his ordinance and from which he does not wish it to be separated? For the real significance of the water lies in God’s Word or commandment and God’s name, and this treasure is greater and nobler than heaven and earth.

Note the distinction, then: Baptism is a very different thing from all other water, not by virtue of the natural substance but because here something nobler is added, for God himself stakes his honor, his power, and his might on it. Therefore it is not simply a natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water—praise it in any other terms you can—all by virtue of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word that no one can sufficiently extol, for it contains and conveys all that is God’s. This, too, is where it derives its nature so that it is called a sacrament, as St. Augustine taught, “Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum,” which means that “when the Word is added to the element or the natural substance, it becomes a sacrament,” that is, a holy, divine thing and sign.

Therefore, we constantly teach that we should see the sacraments and all external things ordained and instituted by God not according to the crude, external mask (as we see the shell of a nut) but as that in which God's Word is enclosed. In the same way we speak about fatherhood and motherhood and governmental authority. If we regard these people with reference to their noses, eyes, skin, and hair, flesh and bones, they look no different from Turks and heathen, and someone might come and ask, "Why should I think more of this person than of others?" But because the commandment is added, "You shall honor father and mother," I see another person, adorned and clothed with the majesty and glory of God. The commandment, I say, is the golden chain around the neck, yes, the crown on the head, which shows me how and why I should honor this particular flesh and blood.

In the same manner, and to an even greater extent, you should give honor and glory to baptism on account of the Word, for God himself has honored it by both words and deeds and has confirmed it by miracles from heaven. Do you think it was a joke that the heavens opened when Christ was baptized, that the Holy Spirit descended visibly, and that the divine glory and majesty were manifested everywhere?

I therefore admonish you again that these two, the Word and the water, must by no means be separated from each other. For where the Word is separated from the water, the water is no different from the water that the maid uses for cooking and could indeed be called a bath-keeper's baptism. But when the Word is with it according to God's ordinance, baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ's baptism. This is the first point to be emphasized: the nature and dignity of the holy sacrament.

In the second place, because we now know what baptism is and how it is to be regarded, we must also learn why and for what purpose it has been instituted, that is, what benefits, gifts, and effects it brings. Nor can we better understand this than from the words of Christ quoted above, "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved." This is the simplest way to put it: the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. For no one is baptized in order to become a prince, but, as the words say, "to be saved." To be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever.

Here again you see how baptism is to be regarded as precious and important, for in it we obtain such an inexpressible treasure. This indicates that it cannot be simple, ordinary water, for ordinary water could not have such an effect. But the Word does it, and this shows also, as we said above, that God's name is in it. And where God's name is, there must also be life and salvation. Thus it is well described as a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water, for it is through the Word that it receives the power to become the "washing of regeneration," as St. Paul calls it in Titus 3[:5\*].

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, claim that faith alone saves and that works and external things add nothing to it. 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 bestowed and implanted his Word in baptism and has offered us this external thing within which we can grasp this treasure?

Now, these people are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and secured, all on the grounds that the object is something external. Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart, just as the entire gospel is an external, oral proclamation. In short, whatever God does and effects in us he desires to accomplish through such an external ordinance. No matter where he speaks—indeed, no matter for what purpose or through what means he speaks—there faith must look and to it faith must hold on. We have here the words, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved.” To what do they refer if not to baptism, that is, the water placed in the setting of God's ordinance? Hence it follows that whoever rejects baptism rejects God's Word, faith, and Christ, who directs and binds us to baptism.

In the third place, having learned the great benefit and power of baptism, let us observe further who the person is who receives these gifts and benefits of baptism. This again is most beautifully and clearly expressed in these same words, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved,” that is, faith alone makes the person worthy to receive the saving, divine water profitably. Because such blessings are offered and promised in the words that accompany the water, they cannot be received unless we believe them from the heart. Without faith baptism is of no use, although in itself it is an infinite, divine treasure. So this single expression, “The one who believes,” is so powerful that it excludes and drives out all works that we may do with the intention of gaining and meriting salvation through them. For it is certain that whatever is not faith contributes nothing toward salvation and receives nothing.

But some are accustomed to ask, “If baptism is itself a work and you say that works are of no use for salvation, what place is there for faith?” Answer: Yes, it is true that our works are of no use for salvation. Baptism, however, is not our work, but Godwork (for, as was said, you must distinguish Christ's baptism quite clearly from a bathkeeper's baptism). God's works are salutary and necessary for salvation, and they do not exclude but rather demand faith, for without faith one cannot grasp them. Just by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive or retain baptism in such a manner that it does you any good. But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God's command and ordinance, so that, baptized in God's name, you may receive in the water the promised salvation. Neither the hand nor the body can do this, but rather the heart must believe it.

Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the LORD Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith. Therefore, those who cry out against us as if we were preaching against faith do commit violence against us. Actually, we insist on faith alone as so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed.

Thus we have considered the three things that must be known about this sacrament, especially that it is God's ordinance and is to be held in all honor. This alone would be enough, even if baptism were an entirely external thing. Similarly the commandment, "You shall honor father and mother," refers only to human flesh and blood, yet we look not at the flesh and blood but at God's commandment in which it is set and on account of which this flesh is called father and mother. In the same way, even if we had nothing more than these words, "Go and baptize," etc., we would still have to accept it as God's ordinance and perform it. But here we have not only God's commandment and injunction, but the promise as well. Therefore it is far more glorious than anything else God has commanded and ordained; in short, it is so full of comfort and grace that heaven and earth cannot comprehend it. However, a special knack belongs here: that each person believe it. For it is not the treasure that is lacking; rather, what is lacking is that it should be grasped and held firmly.

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

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: "But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body." This is the reason why these two things are done in baptism; the body has water poured over it, because all it can receive is the water, and in addition the Word is spoken so that the soul may receive it. Because the water and the Word together constitute one baptism, both body and soul shall be saved and live forever: the soul through the Word in which it believes, the body because it is united with the soul and apprehends baptism in the only way it can. No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.

Let this suffice concerning the nature, benefits, and use of baptism as serves the present purpose.