

Luther and Baptism

- I. Luther's high view of baptism
 - A. "In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to do to firmly believe what baptism promises and brings – victory over death and the devil, the forgiveness of sins, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts" (1529 *Large Catechism*, IV, 41-42).
 - B. "Ah, dear Christian, let us not value or treat this unspeakable gift so half-heartedly. For baptism is our only comfort and the doorway to all of God's possessions and to the communion of saints. To this end may God help us" (Baptismal Booklet, 1529).
 - C. The "honorable sacrament of Holy Baptism" is to be "well-known and rightly honored" by Christians "as their greatest treasure on earth" (Sermon on Holy Baptism, January 6, 1535).
- II. The understanding of baptism in Luther's day
 - A. Commanded by Christ
 - B. Total purification of the soul from all sin
 - C. Unable to forgive sins committed after baptism

This idea that baptism could be lost or "wrecked," led to the rise of the sacrament of penance, which was called the "second plank." Popularized by St. Jerome (347-420), this is still the teaching of Roman Catholicism today:

Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace...It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as "the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1446).

- III. Luther rejects this because of Christ's institution and promise. Baptism isn't just an initiation into the church, or an historical moment in our lives. It is our ongoing status before God. This is where He declares our salvation for the sake of Christ. Thus we constantly live in and flee to this!
- IV. The Anabaptists
 - A. Anabaptism ("baptize again") arose in the 1520s and spread through lay preachers who rejected infant baptism, because they understood baptism as our act of commitment to God after a public declaration of faith.
 - B. Also rejected all civil authority. Refused to take oaths, serve in government, or the military.

V. Luther's Response (done through his catechisms and sermons)

A. Baptism actually does something!

1. Baptism not only signifies, but rather is, "a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth of the Holy Spirit" (SC IV, 3). "It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this..." (SC IV, 2).
2. St. Paul writes "He saved us through the washing of the new birth in 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. This is a trustworthy saying" (Titus 3:5-8).
3. We are actually "buried with [Christ] 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" (Rom 6:4).

B. Because it is **God** who does it!

1. Christ's institution and promise (Matt 28; Mk 16). It is not made up or invented by men, but instituted by God.
2. "What God institutes and commands cannot be an empty thing. It must be a most precious thing, even though it looked like it had less value than a straw" (LC IV, 8).
3. "To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore, although it is performed by human hands, it is still truly God's own work" (LC IV, 10).
4. "It is not mere ordinary water, but water comprehended in God's Word and command and sanctified by them (Eph 5:26-27). So it is nothing other than a divine water. Not that the water in itself is nobler than other water, but that God's Word and command are added to it...[So] how dare you interfere with God's order? How dare you tear away the most precious treasure with which God has connected and enclosed Baptism, and that He will not allow to be separated? For the kernel in the water is God's Word or command and God's name. His name is a treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth" (LC IV, 14-16).

C. Faith receives this Word of promise

(the equation of faith: Word + Water + Command = Certainty)

1. "That is, faith alone makes the person worthy to receive profitably the saving, divine water. Since these blessings are presented here and promised through the words in and with the water, they cannot be received in any other way than by believing them with the heart (Rom 10:9). Without faith it profits nothing, even though Baptism is in itself a divine overwhelming treasure. Therefore, this single phrase, "Whoever believes," does so much. It excludes and repels all the

works that we can do, when we suppose that we gain and merit salvation by our works. For it is determined that whatever is not faith does nothing or receives nothing" (Heb 11:6).

2. This is also for infants!

- a. Christ commands Baptism for "all nations," and we are told the apostles baptized entire households with no exclusions.
- b. "faith does not make Baptism, but receives it."
- c. God is perfectly capable of giving faith to infants (St. John the Baptist in his mother's womb).

"We must think this way about Baptism and make it profitable for ourselves. So when our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say, "Nevertheless, I am baptized. And if I am baptized, it is promised to me that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body" (*LC IV*, 44).

"For this reason let everyone value his Baptism as a daily dress (Gal 3:27) in which he is to walk constantly. Then he may ever be found in the faith and its fruit, so that he may suppress the old man and grow up in the new. For if we would be Christians, we must do the work by which we are Christians. But if anyone falls away from the Christian life, let him again come into it. For just as Christ, the Mercy Seat (Rom 3:25), does not draw back from us or forbid us to come to Him again, even though we do sin, so all His treasure and gifts also remain. Therefore, if we have received the forgiveness of sin once in Baptism, it will remain every day, as long as we live (*LC IV*, 84-86).