



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Lord God our Father, maker of heaven and earth,
we thank you that you have been pleased
to give us new birth by your Holy Spirit,
to adopt us as your own, and
to receive us into the fellowship of your Church.

Being buried with Christ in his baptism,
may we die to sin,
walk in newness of life, and
be united with Christ in his resurrection.

May we grow in the faith into which we have been baptized, and
may all things belonging to the Spirit live and grow in us.

Amen

--Book of Common Prayer, Public Baptism of Adults

Week #5a: Luther on Baptism

Summary of Luther's Position on Baptism

Baptism as a sign that by immersion (or other means) signifies

- a dying unto sin (the death of the old man who is in Adam [Rom. 5:12,15,17-19], which is a sinful nature that attaches to us from birth; see Gen. 8:21b; Ps. 51:5; 58:3; etc.) and
- a new birth (the resurrection of the new man who is in Christ and righteous and guiltless in God's sight),

God's work of redemption is thus to be thought of as a spiritual operation of mortification (the putting to death of the old) that begins at baptism and extends over the course of this earthly life (but is not fulfilled completely until death and the Last Judgment), by and in which God extends comfort and consolation through his promise of grace. Cf. Rom. 6:4: "We were buried with Christ by baptism into death" (sins as drowned and put to death in baptism; compare also 1 Pet. 3:20-21).

Faith in this promise that God makes to his people must constantly be exercised if we are to avoid a return to self-reliance and to live lives faithful to God in the midst of the various adversities and suffering that we face over the course of this life.

Within baptism is included a pledge to continue in the desire to die to sin, which God accepts and which we must exercise over the course of our lives, during which God sends us various opportunities to put off sin and die to sin in accordance with the baptism we

have received (“and so fulfill your baptism”). In these opportunities, we are tested and suffer. If we did not, the evil nature would readily gain the upper hand and we would fall away from the grace set forth in baptism and into sin.

Yet, when we look in faith to the grace which God has extended to us in Christ through baptism, our sins are not imputed to us and we are free from condemnation, even when we sin and fail.

True, the evil inclination remains within our old nature throughout this life, but when we are in Christ through faith, our faults are covered by Christ’s righteousness and, by recalling that we have been baptized into Christ, we may know that God has pledged to slay and abolish our sin. (To remain in sin, persist in it and leave off striving against it would be a departure from faith in God and His promises; it would, in effect, be to deny God and call Him a liar.)

Baptism, received in accordance with Christ’s command and to which faith is added, is the basis of our common priesthood and sets forth our common task of putting off sin in view of our common hope (in which sin will be finally and wholly defeated).

Baptism’s value comes from its connection with the divine command, for God is present and active in doing what he promises. The water of baptism is therefore sanctified by the Word and becomes a divine and holy thing; by its connection with the Word of promise, the water of baptism stimulates our faith and is thus an aid to our salvation (“it saves those who believe”).

We see the outworking of such faith (by the power of the Spirit) even in those baptized as infants. Situations such as these remind us that we do not receive the inward working of the Spirit or the outward mark of baptism as a result of our prior faith. Instead, we find that where water and Word are present in accordance with Christ’s command, Christ himself is present, the Spirit is active and faith arises and is strengthened.

Baptism bears witness to the work of God, i.e. our new birth and the corresponding defeat of sin. Therefore we do not believe mere human witnesses, not even ourselves, but rather God.

God helping us, we can come to know that the promises of God are for us.

What we cannot do (as the Anabaptists claim) is to know with certainty that someone else has indeed come to faith.

It is thus inappropriate to speak of “believer’s baptism” (because we can never be certain if the other person actually has faith); the most we could really say is that it is “confessor’s baptism.”

- In this sense, it is pointless and futile to try to wait for a certain perception of faith and then to base baptism upon this supposed faith. Even the person who is being rebaptized cannot, in and of himself, be wholly certain that he has faith and is not deceived.
- For the same reason, it makes no sense to deny that children cannot believe because they have not yet come to the age of reason. How could one be certain of

that? Furthermore, since faith is not the clever and virtuous reasoning of an autonomous mind, but something more basic, i.e. dependence upon another, children are not thereby disbarred from believing.

Therefore let us trust the Word which Christ speaks through the one who baptizes and believe that this baptism, though performed upon unremarkable persons, may be the beginning of a remarkable faith, which the person believes as Christ requires. Faith is therefore added to baptism, so why should rebaptism be necessary?

If rebaptism is supposed to be necessary in order to take account of our lapses and fall after the first baptism, then we would need to be rebaptized not once but many times over the course of our lives.

The problem, then, is not in one's baptism but rather in our faith, which has grown so weak it scarcely can trust God, but is too easily moved to despair. Instead, we should see the reality of baptism being extended over the course of this life but made perfect only after death.

To reject our baptism and seek a new one would only show how really weak our faith was, i.e. not trusting that Christ's Spirit could create the faith to which baptism points.

- It is this weak faith that makes one look for a work to do, to try to fill in where Christ (it is supposed) cannot.
- Our faith, Luther responds, is not in ourselves or in anything we can do (i.e. we do not have faith in our faith), but our faith is instead in Christ, in whom all things are possible. Where Christ's Word (the command and the promise) is spoken, the sign is not given in vain.

Significance of Luther's Position on Baptism

Luther thus reclaims a significance for baptism that had been lost and replaced by penance and admission to the Eucharist (spiritual significance of baptism, not *ex opere operato* and only to wash away original sin, but connected with faith and extended over the course of one's earthly life and linked to mortification and daily repentance).

- Baptism is the sacramental sign that effects what it signifies, so that through faith we put on Christ in all his righteousness and with all his virtues.
- The word of promise always precedes faith; it awakens/engenders and nourishes faith and trust and by this means brings us into a new relation to God.
- As basis for priesthood, baptism also levels the field by rejecting the idea of the priesthood as a distinct order with different, indelible character that set them apart from the laity.