

# The Church Encounters Attacks on Holy Baptism

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[Presented at the WLS Symposium on Holy Baptism, Mequon, WI, September 24, 2002]

## Introduction

Practically no one in Christianity would confess to being “against” baptism. Even the Quakers and the Salvation Army, who have dropped the practice, don’t oppose baptism so much as they simply neglect it. In fact, the great vats of ink that have been spilled making a case for why a church baptizes, how a church baptizes, and whom a church baptizes through thousands of years of controversies emphasize how passionately Christians have felt about the ritual since the time of the Early Church.

For this reason, some today might question the value, even the propriety, of the study that follows. In order to describe attacks on Holy Baptism, we ourselves must “attack” certain doctrines propounded about baptism as false and dangerous. This is parallel to the “*negativa*” or “*antitheses*” in the confessions of our church. As confessional Christians, confessional *Lutheran* Christians, we not only confess the positive truths that we believe, but we also expose the falsehoods which we reject. In doing so we are not being merely negative. We are sharpening and clarifying our confession of faith. We are closing the door to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. We are making sure that the truth, especially the truth of the gospel, prevails and that deception and ignorance are defeated.

Exposing and condemning false ideas about the nature and use of baptism serves its evangelical purpose faithfully, for defending the right teaching about baptism is defending the gospel. What Hermann Sasse says about Luther’s great discovery in regard to the Lord’s Supper could be applied to our understanding of baptism as well: “This Sacrament is the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Baptism is good news, as we have seen in the preceding papers. When churches and churchmen fail to confess this clearly, God’s people no longer receive the evangelical, faith-strengthening comfort our Lord intended baptism to bring. Even Lutheran Christians living in an Evangelical and Catholic dominated world begin to wonder why Luther could find such comfort in a simple “*Baptizatus sum!*” For the sake of the gospel, we expose the attacks that the Church has encountered against Holy Baptism.

Where do we begin our defense of the Scriptural understanding that baptism is a lifegiving, faith-imparting means of grace intended for all? Many of the controversial writings of other theologians throughout the centuries have revolved around the proper mode of baptism (“How do we get the water on the candidate?”) and the proper objects of baptism (“Whom should we allow to be baptized?”). While these are important questions for us to consider, the questions themselves arise from more fundamental understandings of what baptism does and where it gets the power to do that. This priority is evident in Luther’s Small Catechism, where Luther, after defining what baptism is, teaches us the answers to these foundational questions: “What does baptism give or profit?” and “How can water do such great things?” These issues concern us most also in regard to attacks on the Biblical doctrine of baptism.

## How the Early Church Understood the Purpose of Baptism

The answer of the early church fathers to these questions confessed a simple confidence that baptism forgives the sins and regenerates the spirits of those who receive it. In chapter LXI of his *First Apology*, Justin Martyr (110-165 A.D.) explained baptism in this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977) 328.

As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water.<sup>2</sup>

In the same chapter he continues:

...in order that we may ...obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; he who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone.<sup>3</sup>

When Justin says that in baptism we obtain “the remission of sins formerly committed,” however, he introduces a phraseology that would trouble the church ever afterwards. Since he does not elaborate further on the point, we can’t say with certainty to what extent he meant to limit the promise of baptism to the sins committed before the rite is performed, or whether he is simply not looking beyond the time when the sacrament is performed. When one receives absolution, and baptism is a form in which absolution comes, it is natural to think of that absolution in connection with the sins that have been committed up until that point in time. God’s promise of forgiveness in any form, however, is not limited to a single point in time.

Later leaders of the Early Church further promoted and developed the idea that baptism’s promise of forgiveness only extends to those sins which have been committed previous to being baptized, and this was the cause of unhealthy mutations in baptismal practice. Tertullian (145-220 A.D.), one of the earliest opponents of infant baptism, seemed to be laboring under this misconception of baptism (together with an ignorance of original sin) when he discouraged the people of Carthage from bringing their children to be baptized. In fact, it led him to suggest that in general, “the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children.”<sup>4</sup> The absurd extremes to which this was taken in various parts of the Early Church over a century later can be seen in the fact that such prominent churchmen as Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Augustine (all born between 329 and 354 A.D.), though they were born into Christian families, delayed baptism until they were in their twenties and thirties, and prominent converts like the emperor Constantine were known to delay baptism until they were lying on their death beds so that they could maximize baptism’s sin-remitting powers.<sup>5</sup> Some of these same men, notably Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine, helped to root out this practice and return the church to the practice of baptism soon after conversion or soon after birth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, “The First Apology of Justin Martyr,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994) 183.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, “On Baptism,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994) 678. Tertullian’s later statement in the same context, “Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the ‘remission of sins’?” reveals that he does not take original sin into account and suggests that baptism would have value only if there were previously committed sinful acts to be forgiven.

<sup>5</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

## Baptism's Purpose in Medieval and Modern Catholicism

Unfortunately, theologians did not stop tinkering with theories that there was something incomplete about the gifts God gave through baptism. The scholastic systematician Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) could say of baptism, "Every sin is taken away by baptism."<sup>7</sup> Yet the medieval sacramental system which he explained and promoted seems to limit its benefits to the time of baptism in some ways. Baptism is conceived of as being something incomplete in itself, and needs confirmation to "perfect" it.<sup>8</sup> Here Aquinas is not thinking of the spiritual training in God's word that our own baptismal service confesses to be a necessary part of the Christian growth process after baptism, but some mystical power granted in the confirmation rite itself. Likewise, "Penance (is necessary for salvation) in the case of mortal sin committed after Baptism,"<sup>9</sup> and while he acknowledges that it is possible for such sin to be forgiven through the *virtue* of penance, something akin to a person in contrition turning to God for forgiveness (which is really a return to our baptism), a still greater effect is claimed for penance as a sacrament:

The forgiveness of sins is the effect of Penance, chiefly by the power of the keys, which is vested in the ministers, who furnish the formal part of the sacrament, as stated above, and secondarily by *the instrumentality of those acts of the penitent* which pertain to the virtue of penance, but only in so far as such acts are, in some way, subordinate to the keys of the Church. Accordingly it is evident that the forgiveness of sin is the effect of penance as a virtue, but *still more of Penance as a sacrament* (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>

In making the acts of the penitent one of the instruments which effect forgiveness, Aquinas is clearly mixing law and gospel, grace and works, and contradicting God's promise of forgiveness in general, not just in baptism. While we might favor a return to an evangelical practice of private confession and absolution between pastor and parishioner, which could actually serve to strengthen the appreciation our people have for baptism, the relationship between the Roman sacrament of penance and baptism suggested by *Summa Theologica* actually obscures baptism's promise of forgiveness.<sup>11</sup>

Before we leave the Thirteenth Century, we take exception to one more notable teaching of Aquinas concerning baptism's purpose. In explaining why baptism is not to be repeated, he states, "Baptism is conferred principally as a remedy against original sin. Wherefore, just as original sin is not renewed, so neither is Baptism reiterated..."<sup>12</sup> These words clearly imply that baptism does not only bring us forgiveness for the guilt of original sin, but also eradicates the presence of original sin altogether. Once disposed of, "original sin is not renewed." When the *Augsburg Confession* was presented a couple of hundred years later, the Church of Rome took exception to Article II, *Of Original Sin*, on the basis of this concept. In the *Confutation of the Augsburg Confession* we read:

Also rejected is their teaching that inherited or original sin is concupiscence, if they mean that concupiscence is a sin that remains in children after their Baptism. The apostolic see has already

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Question 69, Article 1. Vol. 5. *The Master Christian Library*. CD-ROM, 2 disks. Vers. 8 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997) 960.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, III, Question 65, Article 4, 883; and Question 72, Article 5, 1008.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, III, Question 86, Article 6, 1299.

<sup>11</sup> Luther draws the strong connection between an evangelical understanding of "repentance" as a third sacrament and baptism in the Large Catechism: "Baptism, both in its power and signification, comprehends also the third Sacrament, which has been called repentance, as it is really nothing else than Baptism... Therefore if you live in repentance, you wal in Baptism..."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, III, Question 66, Article 9, 908.

condemned two articles by Martin Luther where he taught that sin remains in infants after Baptism and the “fomes” of sin hinders the soul’s entrance into heaven.<sup>13</sup>

On June 17, 1546, the Fifth Session of the Council of Trent established this position as official Roman doctrine, reasoning in its decree that “in those who are born again, there is nothing that God hates.”<sup>14</sup>

While this teaching appears to claim something wonderful for baptism, it actually attacks the true nature of the sacrament. It suggests that forgiveness is conferred upon the recipient not only because of God’s gracious disposition for the sake of Christ, but also because of an actual change within us. Like the teaching of *gratia infusa*, this leads us to look to something inside ourselves for our comfort and assurance of salvation, and looking in quickly undermines all assurance. The honest Christian is well aware that the sinful nature he inherited is present and actively opposing the new creature of faith which God has implanted in the believer. Like Paul in Romans 7, we struggle with the sinful nature constantly.<sup>15</sup> If baptism indeed removes all vestiges of original sin, then experience tells me that something is seriously amiss with my baptism. Certainty of God’s grace has been lost.

Modern Catholic teaching continues to hold onto this myth. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, erases original sin and turns a man back toward God...”<sup>16</sup> An Internet site devoted to the defense of Roman Catholic doctrines says of baptism, “Ours is no juridical imputation of righteousness; rather, we are literally remade into a new creation.”<sup>17</sup> Again, by shifting the focus from the objective love and forgiveness of God and making a change in us the basis for our justification, the true comfort of baptism is lost.

### **Pietist Attacks on Baptism: The Anabaptists, Baptists, and Lutheran Pietists**

While Luther, the conservative reformer, was laboring to restore the simple understanding of baptism as a means by which God applies forgiveness to his people and regenerates their hearts by faith, a new front developed in the battle for this sacrament. Sometimes very subtle in its attacks, it denied that any real power was present in baptism at all, or at least took away the certainty of that power working. In doing so, it naturally developed different ideas about God’s purpose in giving baptism to his Church.

The more radical and obvious attack upon baptism as a means of grace came from the Anabaptist movement, which was led by men like Conrad Grebel, Balthasar Huebmaier, Simon Stump, Felix Manz and Menno Simons. As the name by which they became known suggests, it appears that the main issue with the Anabaptists was their denial of the practice of infant baptism, and insistence upon the rebaptism of those baptized in infancy. As we would expect, however, this practice grew out of their theological understanding of baptism’s purpose.

In order to understand Anabaptist convictions about baptism’s purpose, we need to understand the beliefs which led to their separation from the mainline Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. One leader of the movement made this statement to a colloquy at Berne in 1538:

<sup>13</sup> “The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession,” trans. Mark Tranvik, *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 107.

<sup>14</sup> “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” trans. Rev. J. Waterworth, *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books: 1996) 87.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Chemnitz uses just this point to show how unscriptural the position of Trent is in his refutation of this decree. “Paul is therefore very silly to complain so womanishly in Rom. 7 if the remission of sin so roots out the very fibers of sin that not even a trace of it remains. Paul certainly says very clearly that sin still dwells in his flesh after remission.” *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer, Part 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971) 371.

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) 102.

<sup>17</sup> Father Joseph Jenkins, *Baptism and Born Again: Can You Risk Not Knowing the Truth?* rev. April 30, 1998, 29 July 2002 <<http://members.tripod.com/~frjoe/davbapt.htm>>

While yet in the national church, we obtained much instruction from the writings of Luther, Zwingli, and others .... I waited and hoped for a year or two, since the minister had much to say of amendment of life, of giving to the poor, loving one another, and abstaining from evil. But I could not close my eyes to the fact that the doctrine which was preached and which was based on the Word of God, was not carried out. No beginning was made toward true Christian living, and there was no unison in the teaching concerning the things that were necessary.<sup>18</sup>

Commenting on this statement, Harold Bender concludes:

It is evident ...that the Anabaptists were concerned most of all about “a true Christian life,” that is, a life patterned after the teaching and example of Christ .... The Reformation emphasis on faith was good but inadequate, for without newness of life, they held, faith is hypocritical .... They proceeded to organize a church composed solely of earnest Christians, and actually found the people for it.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that for the Anabaptists, sanctification took precedence over justification. Here were pragmatic people who weren't satisfied to live by faith, but demanded to see empirical evidence of God's work in the lives of believers. They became impatient with the gospel and reached for other means to produce the kind of “pure” and “earnest” church they desired.

It is not surprising in this context that if baptism was to be retained for use, it would be invested with new meaning and purpose. If so many thousands baptized as infants grew up to live lives of questionable morals, how could the claim that baptism regenerates be true, and how could it be proper that any promise of forgiveness had been applied to them? In order to follow the course they wanted to pursue for the church, the Anabaptists had to point baptism itself in a new direction.

The true test of the Christian, they held, is discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptists was not “faith” as it was with the reformers, but “following” (*nachfolge Christi*). And baptism, the greatest of Christian symbols, was accordingly to be for them the “covenant of a good conscience toward God” (1 Peter 3:21), the pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ, and not primarily the symbol of a past experience.<sup>20</sup>

It is on account of this understanding of baptism's purpose that infant baptism had to go:

How could infants give a commitment based upon a knowledge of what true Christianity means? They might conceivably passively experience the grace of God (though Anabaptists would question this), but they could not respond in pledging their lives to Christ. Such infant baptism would not only be meaningless, but would in fact become a serious obstacle to a true understanding of the nature of Christianity and membership in the church. Only adult baptism could signify an intelligent life commitment.<sup>21</sup>

All of this finds expression in the Schleitheim Confession, which was adopted by the Swiss Brethren Conference in 1527:

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<sup>18</sup> Harold Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” Reprinted from *Church History*, March 1944, 10 August 2002  
<<http://w3.ime.net/~wchesley/anabaptist/anavis.html>>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* It is interesting to note how this contrived distinction between “faith” and “following,” “believers” and “disciples” is still such a favored concept among American Evangelicals and drives their teaching and practice.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him and to all those who with this significance request it (baptism) of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the pope.<sup>22</sup>

Note the emphasis on the Christian and his life throughout this statement on baptism: "...amendment of life ...believe truly ...walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ ...wish to be buried..." While mention of Christ's saving work is mentioned as the object of the recipient's faith, bestowing its benefits is no longer the domain of the sacrament.

Properly speaking, today's Mennonites are the heirs of the Anabaptist movement in Germany and Switzerland and continue to practice "believer's baptism" in their churches. Theologically, however, the same reasoning that led the Anabaptists to discard infant baptism—the desire for a "pure" church made up of only "truly converted" and "truly committed" Christians, and an emphasis on visible evidence of such conversion in the lives of believers—stands behind the practice of a variety of denominations throughout the subsequent centuries. Among these groups baptism is no longer perceived as God's gracious offer of forgiveness to the believer and power for faith. Now it is seen as merely a human statement of commitment to follow Christ.

The Baptist Churches are the first ones to come to mind in this connection, and the churches which have done more than any other to popularize the idea of "believer's baptism." The first English Baptist churches began in the early 1600's as part of the Separatist Movement. While the Puritans had hoped to reform the Church of England from within, the Separatists, "like the Anabaptists on the Continent, believed in 'gathered' churches, not made up of all the inhabitants of a particular area, but only of those who were consciously Christian."<sup>23</sup> The first English Baptist congregation was founded by John Smyth, the pastor of a group of Separatists who had moved to Holland to escape persecution. In Holland his congregation came into contact with Mennonites, and the practice of believer's baptism was adopted. In 1611, Thomas Helwys led a group from this church back to London to establish a Baptist congregation on English soil. Less than forty years later seven Baptist churches produced the first *London Baptist Confession of Faith*, which, while attempting to distance these congregations from the Anabaptists in many ways, states in its 39<sup>th</sup> article:

Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed upon persons professing faith, or that are made disciples; who upon profession of faith, ought to be baptized, and to partake of the Lord's Supper.<sup>24</sup>

It probably doesn't have to be pointed out that every subsequent Baptist confession of faith to this day contains a similar description of baptism.<sup>25</sup> What interests us here is that the same concerns and misunderstandings that led the Anabaptists to reject infant baptism—a failure to note the difference between the visible and invisible church, a demand for congregations made up only of people who could positively demonstrate that they had been converted, and an impatience with lack of sanctification exhibited by members of the established churches—also occupied the thoughts of the Baptist founders at the time that they adopted their understanding of the purpose and practice of the ordinance. Clearly, in the mind of the Baptist, baptism had ceased to be God's statement, promising and bestowing grace and forgiveness, assuring me that I am God's

<sup>22</sup> *The Schleithem Confession*, (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, Inc., 1985) Sixth Printing. 10 August 2002 <[www.anabaptists.org/history/schleith.html](http://www.anabaptists.org/history/schleith.html)>

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc. 1975) Vol. 2. 815.

<sup>24</sup> *London Baptist Confession of Faith A.D. 1644* <<http://www.gty.org/~phil/creeds/bc1644.htm>>

<sup>25</sup> For examples, see *The 1689 London Baptist Confession*; *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession, 1833; 1925, 1963, or 2000 Baptist Faith and Message Statement of the Southern Baptist Convention*.

child. Baptism was merely man's statement, publicly expressing my commitment to the one who has saved me and promising my obedience to him.

Offense taken at the lack of sanctification in my neighbor's life, an emphasis on Christian commitment over the objective grace of God, impatience with the church for not producing reform and renewal quickly enough—conservative Lutherans recognize in these attitudes the makings of Pietism. When Lutheranism began to face its own Pietistic struggles, the doctrine of baptism also came under attack in a number of ways. In his *The Complete Timotheus Verinus*, orthodox pastor and professor Valentin Loescher (1673-1749) expressed concern with Pietism that “under the pretext of seeking piety, they (the sacraments) are depreciated in doctrine and practice lower than they ought to be, and than the constant doctrine and practice of our church up to this time allows.”<sup>26</sup> He goes on to catalogue examples of men who were denying the Scriptural doctrine of baptism, Lutheran men who were protected and defended by the Pietistic faculty at the University of Halle:

It is well known how the coarse despiser of Holy Baptism, Jo. Friedr. Klein of Strassburg, was protected at the orphanage in Halle; he publicly called baptism a sacrament of the antichrist, and in letters he called it a mark of the prostitute.... It is still more scandalous that the Waldeck Pietist, Anton Wilhelm Böhme, taught, according to the declaration of public acts, that he did not know whether or not baptism was a powerful means of rebirth, and that he found no convincing reasons for this. He also taught that water baptism leads only as an external thing to contemplation, although he did not at all see how it could have such a great working.... Some Württemberg Pietists have even publicly rejected infant baptism, as has C.G. Schmoller...<sup>27</sup>

Later on Loescher takes issue with a false distinction the Pietists drew up between the “external” and the “internal” baptism and the Lord's Supper. Some Pietists condemned the understanding of the sacraments held by most people in the Lutheran Church, “since they sought Christianity in the external things; the true Baptism and Lord's Supper are not in the external things, but in the internal things, *viz.*, the exercise of true piety.”<sup>28</sup> This “spiritualizing” of the sacraments amounted to a denial that the actual external performance of the sacraments were necessary for a Christian to be “baptized,” or to “receive the Lord's Supper.”

In a concluding list of attacks on the means of grace by the Pietists, Loescher adds to the complaints above, “They have taught that true Christians are free from the sacraments.”<sup>29</sup> One wonders how the Lutheran Church held on to the practice of baptism at all, much less infant baptism or baptism as a means of grace, after reading the struggles the orthodox Lutherans had to wage against Pietism.

One answer to the question may be found in the fact that Lutheranism had held onto the practice of confirmation, though it no longer regarded it as a sacrament. Rather than abandoning the practice of baptism altogether, many Pietists emphasized confirmation as a “renewal of the Baptism covenant.”<sup>30</sup> While such an idea still represents a major degrading of baptism, since it is not our covenant to renew but God's unending promise of grace, this practice did provide the Pietists with the public demonstration of commitment to Christ that they sought.

Whether coming from Anabaptist, Baptist, or Lutheran Pietist sources, the idea that baptism is something less than a powerful means of grace through which the Holy Spirit works on human hearts—moving it from the category of “gospel” to that of “law”—naturally leads to less respect for the sacrament, less concern for a

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<sup>26</sup> Valentin Ernst Loescher, *The Complete Timotheus Verinus*, trans. by James Langebartels and Robert Koester, Part 1 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998) 83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> E.C. Fredrich, “After Three Centuries – The Legacy of Pietism,” Read to the Southeastern Wisconsin District Pastor-Teacher Conference, June 11, 1985. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essays On-line 30 July 2002  
<<http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/F/FredrichPietism/FredrichPietism.pdf>>

Scriptural understanding of it, and less emphasis upon it in the life of the Christian. At first it may seem as though the Anabaptists and Baptists make more of baptism than anyone else with their insistence upon baptizing only those who can profess their Christian faith and requirement for baptism by immersion. But eventually baptism itself is perceived as a “minor” doctrine in the church over which Christians ought not fuss too much. For example, in his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem introduces his discussion of baptism by saying, “The position advocated in this book is that baptism is not a ‘major’ doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians, but it is nonetheless a matter of importance for ordinary church life, and it is appropriate that we give it full consideration.”<sup>31</sup> When the sacraments are robbed of their gospel content, they no longer inspire the same passions among those to whom they have been given.

### **The Holiness Movement and “Spirit Baptism”**

This doctrine of “believer’s baptism” which grew out of these Pietist movements led to a general devaluing of baptism in much of Christendom. The focus of many believers turned less and less to the objective promises of God in word and sacrament, and more and more to the subjective evidence of God’s work in the life of the believer. Among the Anabaptists and the Pietists, the original concern had more to do with the scandal of impious and even unbelieving church members. The issues were ecclesiastical in nature. The question was, “How can we be sure that our churches are made up of people who have all been converted?” Since the answer was not sought in the means of grace, but in the lives of the members, this naturally led to a more subjective focus in Christianity.

Out of this subjectivity it is not surprising that the question would then be asked, “How can I be sure that I have been converted?” The answer provided by many in the Holiness Movement and Pentecostalism led to further confusion about the true nature of baptism.

In order to understand the Holiness Movement and its offspring, the Pentecostal Movement, we need to look at its spiritual father, John Wesley. Although Wesley (1703-1791) grew up in the family of an Anglican pastor, received careful Christian instruction from his pious mother Susanna, and himself was ordained as a deacon in 1725, he was plagued by doubts regarding his faith throughout nearly the first half of his life. He read extensively to find the answers he was looking for: meditative writers like Thomas a’ Kempis, Lutheran and Calvinist writings, medieval mystics. In 1738, after two years of mission work in Georgia, where he first had contact with the Moravians, he reflected in his journal on the voyage back to London:

It is upwards of two years since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgia Indians the nature of Christianity; but what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I least of all suspected), that I, who went to America to convert others, was never converted myself.<sup>32</sup>

In London, Wesley continued to meet with the Moravians. He found the peace he was looking for on May 24, 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994) 967.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in Henry Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 4 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1988) 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.

Following this “conversion experience” Wesley confessed a belief in justification by faith alone, but it appears as though he also confused the strong emotions created by faith with faith itself. Wesley was concerned less with objective truth and more with subjective experience. As a result an emphasis on the evidence of faith in the Christian’s life (we have heard this before) took precedence in his Methodist system.

We see this in his doctrine of perfection. In a tract entitled *The Principles of a Methodist* he outlines his understanding of the perfection a Christian could achieve in this life. The “perfection” described here could mean perfection only to someone determined to create a new definition for the word. After acknowledging that no one in this life is so perfect that he is delivered from every mistake, temptation, or weakness, he defines the perfection he believes can be achieved like this:

...his soul is all love, filled with ‘bowels of mercies, kindness, meekness, gentleness, and long-suffering .... This it is to be a ‘perfect man,’ to be sanctified through out: Even ‘to have a heart so all-flaming with the love of God,’ to use Archbishop Usher’s words, ‘as continually to offer up every thought, word, and work, as a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God through Christ.’ In every thought of our hearts, in every word of our tongues, in every work of our hands, to ‘show forth his praise, who hath called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.’<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that Wesley’s concept of “perfection” has more to do with an ongoing religious experience of warmth toward God than the end of all sin in the life of a believer. The achievement of this perfection was something for the Christian to seek to attain throughout his life, but he expected that it could be achieved. In a letter he wrote to the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson in 1785 he urged:

Let none of them rest in being half-Christians. Whatever they do, let them do it with their might; and it will be well, as soon as any of them find peace with God, to exhort them to “go on to perfection.” The more explicitly and strongly you press all believers to aspire after full sanctification, as attainable now by simple faith, the more the whole work of God will prosper.<sup>35</sup>

We have taken this foray into Wesley’s life not because of any direct influence which he had upon the doctrine of baptism. It appears that Wesley was happy to maintain baptism as he had learned it from the Church of England, referred to it as a means of grace, and even wrote a treatise in defense of infant baptism.<sup>36</sup> Rather, his emphasis on experience of faith and “full sanctification” or perfection lays the groundwork for the Holiness Movements’ distortion of “Baptism with (of, by, or in) the Holy Spirit.”

We are all familiar with John the Baptist’s promise to the people of his day, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). It is true that the word “baptize” is used for two different, though closely related, things in this passage. On the one hand, it is used for the application of water connected with God’s promise of forgiveness—the rite or sacrament. On the other hand, it is used for Christ’s bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon his people. Acts 1:5 makes clear that John’s words were fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.

Scripture directs those who desire the Holy Spirit in their lives to the word and sacraments. In Ephesians 5 the apostle Paul urges Christians to be “filled with the Spirit.” Then he tells them how: “*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord...*” (vs. 19). Jesus proclaimed in the Bread of Life discourse, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. *The words I have*

<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 8, *The Master Christian Library*. CD-ROM, 2 disks. Vers. 8 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997) 405.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 13. 99.

<sup>36</sup> R. David Rightmire, *Sacraments and the Salvation Army: Pneumatological Foundations* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1990) 31-34.

*spoken to you are Spirit and they are life*” (John 6:63). On Pentecost Day the Apostle Peter exhorted the people before him, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). Jesus himself received the Holy Spirit when he was baptized by John. Even when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples on Pentecost Day, it appears that they were gathered around the word for worship (Acts 2:1).

Since the Anabaptists, Baptists, and Pietists did not believe that God works with regenerating power through baptism, they had already latched on to the phrase “...baptize with the Spirit...” as a description of God working faith apart from the means of grace. For them, “Spirit baptism” was practically an equivalent for “true conversion.”

The heirs of Wesley’s theology of perfection in the Holiness Movement took this a step further. As Wesleyan revival spread across the United States in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, Wesley’s doctrine of full sanctification began to evolve into a “theology of holiness.” In 1837 Phoebe Palmer took over a woman’s prayer meeting being held by her sister in their home. Under Phoebe’s direction, it became known as the “Tuesday meeting for the Promotion of Holiness,” and for the next 37 years thousands, including men and women, were led to profess that they had experienced a second work of God on their hearts called “entire sanctification” in her parlor.<sup>37</sup> Palmer, it appears, was the first person to draw a connection between the experience of perfection taught by Wesley and the event of Pentecost in Scripture. “This connection was so definite that ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’ and other expressions of Pentecostal language became the theological equivalent of entire sanctification.”<sup>38</sup> She also insisted that perfection was immediately available to believers as an instantaneous experience.

The famous revivalist Charles Grandison Finney added another twist to this experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit. In his view, known as “Oberlin Perfectionism,” the emphasis of this spiritual experience of the Holy Spirit no longer had to do with the cleansing of sin from the heart. Rather, it was power for victorious living and effective witness that came with this second experience of grace.<sup>39</sup> Finney’s doctrine was another step toward the Pentecostalism so prominent today.

Charles Fox Parham was the man who moved holiness teaching all the way into Pentecostalism. Parham, a Methodist, was a little like his forefather Wesley in that he was deeply dissatisfied with his relationship with the Lord. He desired to find a way to “truly feel his presence.”<sup>40</sup> Why?

The thing which Parham wanted to uncover was *evidence* that there was a genuine filling of the Holy Spirit. How can a person really be sure he has been baptized by the Holy Spirit? Parham was convinced that every converted and sanctified believer ought to receive such a “baptism.”<sup>41</sup>

At the Bible college Parham ran in Topeka, Kansas, he assigned his students to read the book of Acts and to determine what evidence Scripture gives that a person has received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Three days later, all 40 had come to the conclusion that speaking in tongues was the evidence they sought. On December 31, 1900, after praying through the day, one of the students predictably began speaking in tongues, reportedly Chinese. (How they knew this is something of a mystery, since none of the others spoke Chinese.)

The Holiness Movement has had disastrous affects upon the appreciation and practice of Baptism. With such grand spiritual power and empirical evidence of God’s working to be had in the personal reception of “Spirit baptism,” water baptism becomes something of a museum piece relegated to the back room of church life,

<sup>37</sup> Mark Eckart, *A Presentation of Perfection*, 1993, *The Master Christian Library*, CD-ROM, 2 disks. Vers. 8 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997) 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Deborah Kovach Caldwell, “Glory Days,” *The Dallas Morning News* 16 Aug. 1997: 3G.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur J. Clement, *Pentecost or Pretense? An Examination of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981) 49.

little more than a family heirloom to borrow Harold Senkbeil's analogy.<sup>42</sup> Its sole value seems to be its antiquity. Baptism is still practiced out of deference to Christ's command, but little is made of it after that.

Or perhaps it isn't even practiced at all. Another branch on the holiness family tree saw so little use for baptism that it discarded it altogether. The revival spirit that put such a heavy emphasis upon the personal experience of conversion and the demonstration of that conversion with a changed life was very pragmatic in finding ways to attain its goals. If church practices weren't actively contributing features of the campaign to win souls, then their retention or nonretention was a valid topic for consideration, regardless of their source. This sort of pragmatism infected the thinking of William Booth (1829-1912), the founder of the Salvation Army. Baptism became a victim of Booth's pragmatism.

According to Bramwell Booth, William's son, his father's decision stemmed directly from a continuing dialogue with the following questions: "Will it help to our great end? If it will not help, will it hinder?" Gradually, in response to these questions, Booth concluded that not only were the sacraments not necessary for salvation, but were indeed injurious toward accomplishing the goals of salvation warfare.<sup>43</sup> Such an idea must seem incredible to anyone who believes in a "means of grace" theology. Booth's reasoning went something like this:

Instead of trusting in God they (Christians) rely on their Bibles, their prayers, their ceremonies or some other religious forms. Such people convert means that may be good in themselves into a positive curse by putting them in the place of God.... God has arranged to save men from time and eternity by the use of means.... So go on providing means, and make them as practical and effective as you possibly can.<sup>44</sup>

The Salvation Army did have "means of grace" then, means of their own making. In place of baptism and the Lord's Supper were the sacraments of brass bands playing non-religious tunes, army uniforms, flower shows, and public displays of charity. There are lessons for us here about the danger to the gospel if we begin to adopt "the end justifies the means" attitudes about our own outreach efforts.

Other churches which share the heritage of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements simply have no serious theology of baptism today, especially the independent "Bible" or "Community" churches. Recognizing that the meaning and practice of baptism have been divisive throughout Christian history, some choose to have no official statement on baptism in order to appeal to the widest possible audience. Consider this incident related by Pastor Bill Brassow when he served in San Antonio, TX:

One former member of our congregation...and her family now belong to an ICM (Independent Church Movement) church. Her three children weren't baptized, so I talked to her about that. I told her, I didn't want to work behind her pastor's back but encouraged her to study what the Scripture says about Baptism. She did and came to the conclusion again (as she had learned in our adult doctrine class) that all, even children, are to be baptized. Her church, however, didn't baptize babies. So she talked to her pastor about her concerns. She found out that he had baptized his children, even though that was not the church's teachings. So, when she and her husband (formerly Catholic) were rebaptized in that church some time later, the woman held up her baby to be baptized too(sic). The pastor just rolled his eyes and baptized the baby.<sup>45</sup>

Or consider this treatment from a Charlotte, North Carolina news article:

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<sup>42</sup> Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989) 149.

<sup>43</sup> Rightmire, *op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>45</sup> William R. Brassow, "The Independent Church Movement," Paper presented at Christ the Lord Lutheran Church, Houston, TX, Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference, January 29, 1993, 4.

On October 11, volunteer firefighters baptized a crowd of about 2000 with fire hoses. Apostle C.B. Gibson, of the United House of Prayer for All People, organized the event. He said the fire hoses have “no connection whatsoever with demonstrations when Blacks were hose down by Whites in Mississippi and Alabama.” He described the event as “A hallelujah, salvation, spiritual, Holy Ghost time,” with people “shouting, speaking in tongues, thanking God, thanking Jesus.”<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps these incidents represent the fringe. Most independent Evangelical churches I have known do include a very Baptist sounding description of “believer’s baptism” in their statements of faith. Their pastors are trained by seminaries that still teach a very Baptist sort of theology of the sacraments.<sup>47</sup> Still, examples like these reflect the general devaluation of the sacrament as people have learned to look elsewhere for a life-changing connection to God. I hear people from the Pentecostal churches referring to “Spirit Baptism” as the “real” baptism or as the “important” baptism. The irony is that the assurance men like Wesley and Parham were seeking is best found in baptism with water and the objective promises God has attached to it. The manufactured “Spirit Baptism” of the Holiness Movement can never provide the solid assurance people seek. It puts them on a roller coaster ride of spiritual emotions. It leads to the development of increasingly bizarre “proofs” of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the Christian’s life: barking like dogs, being slain in the spirit, holy laughter. It keeps people from finding God where he has promised to be found.

### **The Calvinist Approach to Baptism and its Purpose**

There was another front in the attack on baptism that began at the time of the Reformation, but one that is not so easy to discern at first. When one reads John Calvin’s (1509-1564) *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on baptism, he hears many descriptions which sound familiar and comfortable to Lutheran ears. In the very first sentence he speaks of Baptism as the sign “by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, that being engrafted into Christ, we may be accounted children of God.”<sup>48</sup> Does that not sound at first as though something is actually happening in baptism, that we are somehow being connected to Christ *by the sacrament*? He goes on to describe it as “a kind of sealed instrument by which he assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed.”<sup>49</sup> Who of us would object to that? He states, “We are promised, first, the free pardon of sins and imputation of righteousness; and, secondly, the grace of the Holy Spirit, to form us again to newness of life.”<sup>50</sup> He urges, “Wherefore, as often as we fall, we must recall the remembrance of our baptism, and thus fortify our minds, so as to feel certain and secure of the remission of sins.”<sup>51</sup> This is not the language of a Baptist!

When Calvin uses words like “sign,” “seal,” or “promise,” however, he means something different than a Lutheran. In explaining the Apostle Peter’s words, “Baptism now saves you also,” Calvin claims, “...nor does he mean that it is the cause of salvation, but only that the knowledge and certainty of such gifts are *perceived* in this sacrament (emphasis added).”<sup>52</sup> In other words, baptism doesn’t actually save you. It merely shows you that you have been saved. It makes the gifts of God possible for you to recognize or *perceive*. It does not necessarily make the gifts of God possible for you to *receive*. Later on he explains:

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<sup>46</sup> “Baptism By Fire Hose,” <<http://www.ifas.org/fw/9811/baptism.html>>

<sup>47</sup> For example, Charles Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary, in his book *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), describes baptism as an ordinance which is a symbol with “no inherent power to change those observing it, though God may use it to minister to them.” He sees baptism as “an act of association or identification with someone, some group, some message, or some event.” He seems to equivocate on infant baptism and accepts pouring as a possible mode, though immersion is preferred. see pages 421-425.

<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book 4. *The Master Christian Library*, CD-ROM, 2 disks. Vers. 8 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997) 1327.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1329.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1328.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1327.

For this analogy or similitude furnishes the surest rule in the sacraments- viz. that in corporeal things we are to see the spiritual, just as if they were actually exhibited to our eye, since the Lord has been pleased to represent them by such figures; *not that such graces are included and bound in the sacrament, so as to be conferred by its efficacy*, but only that by this badge the Lord declares to us that he is pleased to bestow all these things upon us (emphasis added).<sup>53</sup>

For Calvin, then, the “sign,” “seal,” or “promise” provided by baptism can demonstrate God’s grace to us. They put it on display for us to see, but they cannot actually apply that grace to us. This he had explained about the sacraments in general in the previous chapter:

They do not themselves bestow any grace, but they announce and manifest it.... The Holy Spirit, whom the sacraments do not bring promiscuously to all, but whom the Lord specially confers on his people, brings the gifts of God along with him.... Meanwhile, we get rid of that fiction by which the cause of justification and the power of the Holy Spirit are included in the elements as vessels and vehicles...<sup>54</sup>

This is not the language of a Lutheran, either!

American disciples of Calvin, such as Charles Hodge (1797-1878), speak much the same way about baptism and the sacraments. On the one hand, Hodge can write words as fine as these:

Baptism, however, is not only a sign and seal; it is also a means of grace because in it the blessings which it signifies are conveyed, and the promises of which it is the seal are assured to or fulfilled in those who are baptized.... And, therefore, to baptism may be properly attributed all that in the Scriptures is attributed to faith. Baptism washes away sin (Acts 22:16); it unites to Christ and makes us the sons of God (Gal. 3:26-27); we are therein buried with Christ (Rom. 6:3); it is (according to one interpretation of Titus 3:5) the washing of regeneration.... Such being the case, it is plain that baptism is as truly a means of grace as is the Word.<sup>55</sup>

Or is it? As Calvin had earlier explained, the power of the Holy Spirit is not included in the sacrament as though the sacrament was a vehicle used by the Spirit. Rather, he chooses to come to people at the same time as the baptism is being performed, in parallel with its use, when it pleases him to do so. We may hope that the Spirit will attend our baptism similar to the way that members of our church or family may attend our baptisms as witnesses and guests. If he does, we may expect that he will go about his saving, faith-giving work. But he may not, in fact does not, always wish to do so:

It should be remembered, however, that the Spirit does not always cooperate with the truth as heard to make it a means of grace, neither does He always attend the administration of baptism with his sanctifying and saving power.<sup>56</sup>

Just above we heard Calvin urge us to “recall the remembrance of our baptism, and thus fortify our minds, so as to feel certain and secure of the remission of sins.” But it would appear that those assurances are available only so long as we feel no great need of them. If someone suffers from a crisis of faith, does not that

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 1335.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 1316.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Abridge Edition*, ed. Edward N. Gross (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1988) 493.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 492.

very crisis give him a basis for wondering whether the Spirit intended to bring him God's grace at the time of his baptism, whether the gifts of forgiveness and life displayed in baptism were ever actually intended for him? It seems that the orthodox Calvinist wants baptism to be a means of grace. But the emphasis of this system on the sovereignty of God; leading to a falsely rational view of double election; leading to the conclusion that the Spirit does not work through the word and sacraments, only next to them, and only sometimes, takes back the assurances the sacraments want to give.

### **“How Can Water Do Such Great Things?”**

We have seen the answer the churches have given to Luther's second great question about baptism, “What does Baptism do for us?” Now we want to briefly survey their answers to the third: “How can water do such great things?”

For the Anabaptist, the Baptist, or the Pentecostal, the answer is short: “Baptism with water doesn't do great things, so there is little need to talk about its power.” If Baptism is the time when a believer “witnesses to a belief in what Christ has done in his life... , commits to live in union with Christ, and commits to being part of the church, the people of God,”<sup>57</sup> the only power that is required is the power of the believer to make and keep these promises. The heart has been cut out of the sacrament. Little is left but a hollow shell.

The Calvinist Churches want to make more of the sacrament, to see it more as something God gives to man than as something man does for God. They can speak grandly of the grace of God which the sacrament signifies. But the words of the *Second Helvetic Confession* proclaim in bold letters: THE THING SIGNIFIED IS NEITHER INCLUDED IN OR BOUND TO THE SACRAMENTS.<sup>58</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* agrees, “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them.”<sup>59</sup> The gracious power of the Holy Spirit may be working at the same time as the sacrament, right next to the sacrament, or all around the sacrament. It just isn't working in and through the sacrament, and, depending upon one's election, it may not be working at all.

That leaves the Catholic Church and our own as those that believe that baptism works powerfully upon those who receive it. At the time of the Reformation, Luther expressed concern that the church of his day failed to recognize that the connection of the earthly elements with the Word gave baptism its power to forgive and regenerate. In Part III of the Smalcald Articles, Article V, Luther writes:

Baptism is nothing else than the Word of God in the water, commanded by his institution, or, as Paul says, a washing in the Word.... And for this reason we do not hold with Thomas and the monastic preachers [or Dominicans] who forget the Word (God's institution) and say that God has imparted to water a spiritual power, which through the water washes away sin. Nor [do we agree] with Scotus and the Barefooted monks [Minorites or Franciscan monks], who teach that, by the assistance of the divine will, Baptism washes away sins, and that this ablution occurs only through the will of God, and by no means through the Word or water.<sup>60</sup>

Such a separation between the water and the Word likely contributed to or reinforced some of the superstitious beliefs and practices that grew up around the water which had been left over from a baptism. In modern times, however, the Catholic Church has regained an appreciation for this connection between water and Word. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads:

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<sup>57</sup> Roy Edgemon, *The Doctrines Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1988) 118.

<sup>58</sup> *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part 1, Book of Confessions (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1983) 5.182.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.151.

<sup>60</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) 491-493.

Baptism is a bath of water in which the “imperishable seed” of the Word of God produces its life-giving effect. St. Augustine says of Baptism: “The word is brought to the material element, and it becomes a sacrament.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Conclusion: Baptism’s Future with Confessional Lutherans**

As Martin Luther fought to restore and preserve the Scriptural and evangelical understanding of baptism during the Reformation, “Luther’s way was the lonely way between Rome and the Enthusiasts,” Hermann Sasse reminds us several times in his 1949 letter to Lutheran pastors on Holy Baptism.<sup>62</sup> For Twenty-first Century Lutherans living in an Evangelical and Roman Catholic world, the way may still seem just as lonely. Our challenge is to hold onto an appreciation of baptism in the fullness of its grace and power.

That task is still a challenge because our own church has never fully put to rest the issues raised by Pietism. In the anti-sacramental environment of Nineteenth Century American Revivalism, Samuel Schmucker could mount a campaign for an American Recension of the Augsburg Confession that removed the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration.<sup>63</sup> Within the Synodical Conference, the Pietist understanding of Confirmation as a renewal of the baptismal vow found its way into the Rite of Confirmation published in *The Lutheran Agenda*.<sup>64</sup> Professor E. Fredrich warned of a possible controversy over infant baptism within our own circles as late as 1985.<sup>65</sup> In other quarters of modern Lutheranism, ecumenical discussions about the sacraments have become so watered down that one participant could say of the different understandings, “...we quickly came to realize these differences are basically in terms of nuance.”<sup>66</sup> (See also John Brug’s comments in the Summer 2002 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, pages 222-223.) Every day both we and our people are surrounded by Evangelicals with more Pietist roots than our own who half question our Christianity for baptizing our children. Developing a sacramental piety is a challenge for both Lutheran pastor and parishioner living in 2002.

The answer to that challenge, at least in part, lies in the Catechism’s fourth part of baptism: “What does this baptizing with water signify?” Of all the attacks that have been made against Holy Baptism, perhaps the most insidious is my own neglect of the sacrament as I pass through each day. Why do I entertain my sinful thoughts and defend my unloving deeds instead of drowning them in repentance and reckoning myself dead to sin? Why don’t I consider that I am not just a sinful man, but God has claimed me as his child, cleansed me of my sins, dressed me in dazzling robes, and declared me a saint in spite of what I or others see? These are the hidden realities that suddenly burst into existence on February 21, 1965, in my grandmother’s living room when the pastor poured water on my head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. There was a corpse and a holy, heavenly creature created on that day. Letting the corpse revive and leaving the holy creature in 1965 works against the cause.

Mounting a counter attack to defend and promote the true grace and glory of baptism begins with a return to our own baptisms. When we can reclaim the joy, peace, and power of professing, “I am baptized,” victory will be ours.

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<sup>61</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) 315.

<sup>62</sup> Hermann Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*, trans. Norman Nagel, vol. 2 of the *We Confess* series (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985) 44.

<sup>63</sup> Richard C. Wold, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1966) 44.

<sup>64</sup> *The Lutheran Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) 23.

<sup>65</sup> Fredrich, *loc. cit.*

<sup>66</sup> ELCA News Service, “Lutheran-United Methodist Dialogue Discusses Sacraments,” February 19, 2002. 19 August 2002. <<http://listserv.elca.org/cgi-bin/wa.exe?A2=ind0202&L=elcanews&D=1&H=1&O=D&F=&S=&P=1983>>

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### Study Questions for “The Church Encounters Attacks on Holy Baptism”

1. A few years ago a Lutheran radio show host took issue with a WELS pastor for stating that “Baptism is the Gospel.” What sort of understanding of this phrase do you suppose led this man to object? What do we mean by it? Does speaking this way about baptism lend itself to misunderstanding? (Reference: Introduction, paragraph 3)
2. Many churches seem to be most concerned about the proper mode of baptism. Usually such churches insist on immersion, but some have even insisted that sprinkling or pouring is the “right” way (see Hughey, *The Scriptural Mode of Christian Baptism*). What does such an obsession with the mode of baptism likely reveal about a church’s understanding of baptism? (Reference: Introduction, paragraph 4)
3. The early church fathers exhibited a simple faith in baptism’s promise of forgiveness. Does everyone who is baptized receive forgiveness? How does our understanding of objective and subjective justification help us come to an answer that neither robs baptism of its power nor claims more for baptism than is true? (Reference: How the Early Church Understood the Purpose of Baptism, paragraph 1 [second quote])
4. The early church required a lengthy instruction on the part of converts before they could be baptized. Accounts of baptisms in the Bible seem to follow conversion more or less immediately. Was the practice of the early church incorrect? How long should we wait before baptizing converts? (Reference: How the Early Church Understood the Purpose of Baptism, paragraph 3 [final])
5. When we repent of our sins and apprehend forgiveness in faith, “we walk in Baptism,” as Luther says. Why does a return to baptism in repentance naturally lead the Christian also to the Lord’s table in communion? (Reference: Baptism’s Purpose in Medieval and Modern Catholicism, paragraph 1 [footnote 11])
6. One Catholic apologist said of the Roman view of baptism, “Ours is no juridical imputation of righteousness; rather we are literally remade into a new creation.” Would we agree in any way with the last part of that statement? Does baptism actually change us? From our point of view, what is the writer confusing? (Reference: Baptism’s Purpose in Medieval and Modern Catholicism, last paragraph)
7. Their historical context led the Anabaptists and Baptists to redefine baptism, and to reinterpret the Biblical information, in order to address the problems which they perceived in the church of their day. Why is this a dangerous way to approach Scripture? Do we face any similar temptations today? How can the “Wauwatosa Gospel” of our WELS forefathers help us avoid this pitfall? (Reference: Pietist Attacks on Baptism, several paragraphs)
8. The various Pietist groups tended to see Baptism more as a law to be fulfilled than a vehicle for grace. Can you think of other “gospel” things we may be tempted to turn into “laws”? Why does this hold such appeal for some? What is the likely effect of making gospel institutions more a matter of legislation? (Reference: Pietist Attacks on Baptism, last paragraph)
9. Men like Wesley and Parham wanted proof that the Spirit was working in their lives. They wanted to *feel* it. How is the demand for such subjective proof of conversion and the Spirit’s presence really a refusal to live by faith? (Reference: The Holiness Movement and Spirit Baptism)
10. The Salvation Army was willing to stop using the sacraments for the sake of more effective evangelism. Why does such an “end justifies the means” (or “end justifies changing the means”) approach make so little sense

for mission work? Where is the Church most tempted to abandon the Biblical means of grace today? (Reference: The Holiness Movement and Spirit Baptism)

11. Calvinism is fond of referring to Baptism as a “sign.” Agree or Disagree? Baptism is an external sign of God’s grace to us. (Reference: The Calvinist Approach to Baptism and its Purpose, paragraph 2)
12. Since some of those who are baptized do not remain (or become) believers, Calvinism separates the Spirit from the sacrament and assumes that God must not be working at every baptism. Catholicism believes that God is powerfully placing upon the baptized a “mark” or “character” in baptism, whether or not the person ever comes to faith. How do we Lutherans harmonize our belief that the Holy Spirit is powerfully active to give faith at every baptism with the fact that not all the baptized believe? (Reference: The Calvinist Approach to Baptism and its Purpose)
13. The difference between Calvinism and Lutheranism is often traced back to a different emphasis in each: Calvinism on God’s sovereignty and Lutheranism on his grace. However, when we see the effects of Calvinism’s emphasis on sovereignty upon its doctrine of baptism—the separation of the Spirit from baptism since not all are converted— is this difference in emphasis merely a matter of emphasis? Or does it reflect an actual different understanding of what sovereignty and grace are? (Reference: The Calvinist Approach to Baptism and its Purpose, last paragraph)
14. Baptist Roy Edgemon said that baptism is the time when a believer “ witnesses to a belief in what Christ has done in his life..., commits to life in union with Christ, and commits to being part of the church, the people of God.” Is there anything here with which a Lutheran would agree? (Reference: “How Can Water Do Such Great Things?”, paragraph 2)
15. According to an article in the May, 1995, *The Lutheran*, some ELCA churches make the water left from a baptism available for their members to use in making the sign of the cross when they enter church much like the Catholic custom. Can this tradition serve a truly evangelical purpose in our day, or is it so tainted by superstition as to place it beyond redemption for Lutheran churches? (Reference: “How Can Water Do Such Great Things?”, last paragraph)
16. Agree or Disagree? The most serious attack against baptism comes from my personal failure to live in it daily through repentance and faith. (Reference: Conclusion)