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# Luther's Catechisms-450 Years

Essays Commemorating the Small and  
Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther

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Concordia Theological Seminary

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# **Luther's Catechisms — 450 Years**

## **Essays Commemorating the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther**

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# Baptism and Faith according to Luther's Catechisms and other teachings

*by Uuras Saarnivaara*

In studying Luther's teachings on baptism and faith we have to pay attention particularly to three things:

I. The essence of baptism, or baptism as divine ordinance.

II. The blessings of baptism, and how one becomes a partaker of them.

III. The after-care of the baptized, or what the Church should do in order that the meaning and purpose of baptism would come true in the baptized.

I. Lutheran says in his Small Catechism: "Baptism is not merely water, but it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's word." This command of God and His word is particularly Christ's statement in Mt. 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." But His words in Mk. 16:15f. also belong here: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that

believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."

The cited statement of the Small Catechism is explained more fully in Luther's Large Catechism: "Baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by men . . . What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. It is a most precious thing . . . To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by men but by God himself. Although it is performed by men's hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act." In this sacrament, the "central thing . . . is God's word and commandment and God's name." True, it is an external ordinance and act, but so it must be, for "the entire Gospel is an external, oral proclamation . . . whatever God works in us he does it through such external ordinances." As a Christ-instituted sacred act baptism is valid in itself, when administered according to the command of Christ. This is the first and basic thing.

II. The second thing is the purpose and blessing of baptism. On the first Christian Pentecost, Peter said to people who were pricked

in their hearts and asked what they should do: "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38). The gift of baptism is the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit accompanies it. The new covenant salvation is twofold, forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works faith in the heart, renews man and works in him sanctification and good fruits. The Nicene Creed, which is included in the Book of Concord, states: "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins."

Luther says in his Small Catechism: Baptism "effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the word and promise of God declare", "as Christ said 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.'" But "it is not the water that produces these effects, but the word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the word of God connected with the water. For without the word of God the water is merely water and not baptism. But when connected with the word of God it is a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit . . ."

The basic difference between the Baptistic (or, Anabaptistic, as it was called in the 16th century) and Lutheran views of baptism has been stated briefly and concisely thus: Those who hold the Baptistic view baptize because the person believes, and those who hold the Lutheran view baptize in order that the person would believe.

Of course, it may happen in the sphere of Lutheran work that a person first comes to faith and is baptized afterwards (as was the case of the members of the household of Cornelius, Acts 10:44ff.), but the general rule is that a person is baptized in order that he would come to faith. Luther says in his Large Catechism: "We bring the child with the purpose and hope that he may believe, and we pray God to grant him faith. But we do not baptize him on that account, but solely on the command of God."

Luther means: We do not baptize a child because he believes, on the basis of his faith, but with the purpose and prayer that he would believe, or come to faith. Even if a person, child or adult, would not believe when he is baptized, his baptism remains valid. Luther appeals here to the old principle: "Misuse does not destroy the substance, but confirms it." "When the word accompanies the water, baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking . . . Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received and used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the word."

The validity of baptism does not depend on faith, but its effect, or the blessing that it brings depends on faith. This is seen from Luther's words in his Small Catechism, already quoted: Baptism "effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the word and promise of God declare." In his Large Catechism Luther says:

" . . . let us observe . . . who receives these gifts and benefits of baptism. This is . . . clearly expressed in these . . . words: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved,' that is, . . . without faith baptism is of no use, although in itself it is an infinite, divine treasure. . . . God's works . . . are salutary and necessary for salvation, but they . . . demand faith, for without faith they cannot be grasped. Just by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive baptism in such a manner that it does you any good . . . the heart must believe it. Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work which we do, but it is a treasure which God gives you and faith grasps . . . we insist on faith . . . as so necessary, that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed."

This means: Baptism does not make us part-takers of salvation by its mere performance, ex opere operato, but a personal faith in the Gospel is necessary.

The Augsburg Confession (though not written by Luther, but approved by him) states on baptism:

"It is taught among us that baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. Children, too, should be baptized, for in baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him" (Art. 9.)

The necessity of baptism to infants is based on the fact that they are sinful through the original sin and therefore need the redemption and salvation prepared by Christ. As a proof that infant baptism is pleasing to God Luther points to the fact that God has given faith and Holy Spirit to many who have been baptized in their infancy.

In dealing with baptism and faith, Paul illustrates this matter in Romans by grafting. There are two phases in it: First, a branch or bud is attached and bound to a stock according to definite methods. Second, the branch or bud grows together with the stock (stem) and begins to live by the nourishment that flows into it from the stem. However, it happens time and again that the grafted branch or bud does not grow together with the stem but withers and dies.

In baptism a person is, so to speak, grafted to the true vine (or olive tree), Christ and His Church. But the purpose of this grafting is realized and comes true only when the baptized person grows together with Christ, or is united with Him to live by His grace in a personal faith. Paul writes in Rom. 6:3ff: ". . . as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death . . . For if we have grown together (KJV has here falsely "planted together", the Greek symphytoi is derived from syn = together, and phyein =grow) in the likeness of his death, we shall also of his resurrection." A baptized person must grow together with Christ through a personal repentance and faith. When this takes place, the basic purpose of baptism is fulfilled, otherwise not, although it remains valid in itself, and should not be repeated.

Luther writes in his book On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church:

"Baptism justifies no one, neither is it of any benefit; but this is accomplished by faith in the promise which is connected with baptism. It is this faith that justifies and fulfils the meaning of baptism. Faith is the immersion of the old man and the resurrection of the new man . . . The sacraments are said to be effectual in the sense that they convey a sure and effective grace when a true faith is present . . . We should therefore . . . learn to pay more attention to the word than to the sign, to faith rather than the use of the sign. We know that the divine promise requires faith, and that these two, promise and faith, must necessarily go together, for alone each of them is ineffective. It is impossible to believe without the promise, and the promise is not fulfilled without faith . . . for Christ says: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved'," (Weimar Ed. 6,532f.).

"Baptism means two things, death and resurrection . . . When we begin to believe, we also begin to die from this world and to live for God . . . Faith therefore truly dies and rises again. This is the spiritual baptism in which we are immersed and raised again" (ibid.p.534.)

Another time Luther says:

"The spiritual birth takes place through God's word, by baptism and faith. If we believe, we already are in this birth during our temporal life" (Weimar Ed. 47,19).

What Luther says in these statements is an explanation of the words of Christ: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the

kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:5). "Birth of water" takes place in baptism. "Birth of the Spirit" is a Spirit-worked renewal from unbelief to faith, and from disobedience to obedience. Luther says of this spiritual birth:

"The law prepares us for the new birth, which takes place through faith in Christ . . . It is, therefore, faith that makes us children of God" (Weimar Ed. 40,1,539, explan. of Gal. 3:26).

Another time Luther says:

"When the terrified conscience receives peace, consolation and joy from this Gospel, this is called faith; this faith justifies us before God" (Weimar Ed. 26,203, Unterricht der Visitatoren, 1528).

Thus, baptism means forgiveness of sins in the blood of Jesus and a new birth by the Spirit of God, or death to sin and resurrection to a new life to God; but this meaning and purpose of baptism is fulfilled and comes true through a personal repentance and coming to faith. To a person who has been baptized but is not a believer Luther says:

"I say, if you have not believed before, then believe afterwards and confess: 'The baptism indeed was right, but unfortunately I did not receive it rightly'" (Large Catechism, IV,56).

A baptized person who has been in the state of grace may have fallen from grace and become a "prodigal", like the son in Jesus' parable; but like that son, the fallen can repent and return to Christ. Luther says in his Large Catechism:

"Even if we fall from it and sin, we still always have access to it, so that we may subdue the old man. But we do not need that the water is poured over us again . . . Repentance, therefore, is nothing but a return . . . to baptism, to resume and practice again what had been earlier started but abandoned."

Luther illustrated baptism by comparing it to placing one on board a ship. Fall from faith into sin is like falling from a ship into sea. This ship is the kingdom of grace, participation in salvation through Christ. This "ship does not flounder . . . But it may happen that we slip and fall out of the ship." If this has taken place, one should "climb aboard again and stay there . . . if any one falls from his baptism, let him return to it." This return takes place through repentance and forgiveness by faith in the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession says of this (and Luther agreed):

“It is taught among us that those who sin after baptism (Lat. form: who have fallen after baptism) receive forgiveness of sin whenever they come to repentance, and absolution should not be denied them by the Church (Lat. form: the Church should impart absolution to those who return to repentance). Properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution, namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ, and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest (Lat. form: Properly speaking, repentance consists of these two parts: one is contrition, that is, terror smiting the conscience with a knowledge of sin, and the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, believes that sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror). Amendment of life and the forsaking of sin should then follow, for these must be the fruits of repentance (Lat. form: The good works, which are the fruits of repentance, are bound to follow)” (12).

III. This leads us to the third thing that Luther emphasizes in his Catechisms, namely, to use modern terms, the after-care or follow-up work of the baptized. It was for this very purpose that he prepared his Catechisms. In his Large Catechism he teaches the same thing as the quoted statement of the Augsburg Confession: People who have been baptized but are now not in faith should not be treated as Christian believers just because they are baptized church members, if their life does not show that they are in grace. They need to be led to repentance and faith; that is, called and helped to get back on board the ship of God’s kingdom. They need to be convicted of their sins and, when they humble themselves to seek grace, be absolved from them by means of the Gospel of forgiveness in the name and blood of Christ, and then to follow Him in the obedience of faith.

In the case of believers, the purpose of the Ten Commandments is to serve in the Third Use of the law, as a guide of their new life and conduct, and in the case of baptized unbelievers, in the Second Use of the law, to lead them to the knowledge and conviction of sins. Luther makes it clear that he does not use the Decalogue as a part of the Mosaic law, but as part of the “natural law”, the eternal law of God, which in the new covenant is in the form of the law of Christ, namely, His commandments, and the ethical teachings of the New Testament in general. The Decalogue is included in the law of Christ, and it is because of this that Luther uses it in the instructions of his Catechisms. It is this law

that in its Third Use is the guide and norm of the life of believers, and in its Second Use works knowledge and conviction of sins both in unbelievers and believers (who need repeated conviction of their sins in order to be led to repentance and renewed grace).

These simple and basic truths seem to have been forgotten by many pastors: They try to make baptized but spiritually dead church members to observe the commandments of Christ and to lead a Christian life, that is, apply the Third Use of the law to unbelievers, although Luther and the Book of Concord in general make it clear that it is for the born-again believers only. This kind of confusion of the law and the Gospel fosters Lutheran pharisaism or self-righteous churchliness, nominal church membership in which people imagine that they are Christians although they are not. Luther and Melancthon severely warned Lutheran pastors of this kind of error in their Unterricht der Visitatoren (Instructions for the visitors of local churches) in 1528, which was a sort of prelude to the Catechisms published the following year. They said that without a true preaching of repentance and leading people to experience the comfort and joy of forgiveness and salvation, proclamation of grace and faith leads to a “painted faith”, which is an error worse than all the previous errors, being a gross misuse of baptism and the Gospel.

True faith is a work of the Holy Spirit. As Luther says in the Small Catechism, by our own reason and strength we cannot come to Christ and believe in Him. The Holy Spirit must call us by means of the Gospel, enlighten us through it and kindle faith in our hearts. In his Large Catechism Luther says:

“Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in Him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit . . . Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death and resurrection, etc. But . . . in order that this treasure might . . . be . . . put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to use this treasure and salvation . . . through the Christian Church . . . it is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the word of God. The Holy Spirit reveals and preaches the Word, and by it He illumines and kindles the hearts, so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it . . . in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy

sacraments and absolution, as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel." (3rd art. of the Creed).

Sanctification and good deeds are the works or fruits of the Holy Spirit in the baptized and believing members of Christ's body, the fellowship of believers. But because of the old man, or flesh, in us this does not take place without struggle, or the good fight of faith. In its full meaning, baptism embraces this struggle, which covers the whole life of the Christian. Luther says in his Large Catechism that believers are in this life only "half way holy and pure", and therefore they must grow in faith and holiness, continuing to mortify the lusts and workings of their flesh through the Spirit. According to the Small Catechism, baptism implies "that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, shall be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence."

Thus, the significance of baptism embraces both forgiveness and renewal, justification and sanctification. Only as far these become realities in the life of the baptized, its purpose comes true in them.

I summarize:

I. Being instituted by Christ, baptism is in itself a divine and blessed thing, valid and true when administered according to Christ's institution, and should never be repeated, if so administered.

II. The meaning and purpose of baptism is realized and comes true in personal repentance and faith in Christ, which are the burial of the old life and resurrection to new life.

III. The task of pastors and the whole Church is to take care of the "follow-up work" in the life of the baptized — using instruction, evangelism, intercession — that these purposes of baptism would come true in their life, so that they would become believing, sanctified and fruit-bearing living members of the Church.