

# THE SPRINGFIELDER

Vol. XXXI

Winter, 1968

No. 4

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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*Indexed in INDEX TO RELIGIOUS PERIODICAL LITERATURE, published by the American Theological Library Association, Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.*

Clergy changes of address reported to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, will also cover mailing change of *The Springfielder*. Other changes of address should be sent to the Business Manager of *The Springfielder*, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

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# The Proposed Rite For Holy Baptism - Biblically Considered

DAVID P. SCAER

*The following article is directed specifically to Resolution 2-17 passed by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at its New York convention held in July 1967. The Resolution reads:*

*That the decision whether to include in the revised "Rite of Holy Baptism" the words "Go, unclean spirit, and give way to the Holy Spirit"; making the sign of the cross when the pastor prays "Hallow this water by Thy Word to be a washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit"; placing a white robe upon the person baptized; and placing a lighted candle into the right hand of the person baptized, be referred to the Commission on Worship.*

*It is hoped that this article will provide additional material to the pastors and congregations of the Missouri Synod before the issue is presented to the 1969 convention at Denver for final action.*

THE COMMISSION on Worship has prepared for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Slovak Synod) a new form of Baptism to replace the one now in use. The new liturgy retains some forms in use and reintroduces from earlier periods of the church certain forms which have fallen into disuse. This has evoked no little discussion in our circles. Questions have arisen concerning both the newly reintroduced forms and the perpetuation in the new liturgy of some forms now in use. The avowed purpose of the commission was to maintain the best possible Lutheran customs in the rite, and historical essays dealing with these should be available for both pastors and congregations. My one purpose in writing is to show whether or not there is any Biblical justification for some parts over which there has been much discussion. We will limit ourselves to seven points: 1. exorcism; 2. the pericope of Jesus' blessing the children; 3. the questioning or examination of the child; 4. the reference to Titus 2:5 in the post-baptismal prayer; 5. the putting on of the baptismal robe; 6. the receiving of the lighted candle; and 7. the laying on of hands at the blessing.

Exorcism means to drive out the devil or an evil spirit by the word of God. The words for the exorcism in the proposed rite are, "Go, unclean spirit, and give place to the Holy Spirit." A vital part of Jesus' ministry was helping demoniacs by driving out the devils through direct commands, not unlike the one used in the proposed exorcism.<sup>1</sup> Only a person committed to a mythological approach to Holy Scripture would deny that Satan has his own separate existence.<sup>2</sup> Frequently, the demons succumbed to exorcism only with the greatest reluctance, vehemently protesting their evic-

tion. The disciples were given a share in this ministry of Jesus, though not always with the same success.<sup>3</sup> The Marcan Epilogue indicates that exorcism would still be part of their ministry even after the ascension.<sup>4</sup>

The question before the church is not whether exorcism is permissible with the obviously demon possessed, but whether exorcism may be applied to a person who through Baptism is entering the church and where no special demoniacal possession is obvious. Doubts raised can be summarized into two questions. Should exorcism be used where there is no obvious possession with Satan? Does exorcism detract from both the power and meaning of Baptism as a sacrament instituted by Christ?

Obviously the rite of exorcism in the baptismal liturgy is an adiaphoron and therefore not really necessary for Baptism or salvation. But with the exception of the words used in the very act of baptizing, the entire rite, including such things as Scripture reading, the Lord's Prayer, and the Benediction, are liturgically unnecessary and hence also adiaphora. There might be even a little margin for change in the words of baptizing.<sup>5</sup> Thus if rightly understood, any rite could be classified as adiaphoron so far as the words are concerned. The argument from necessity is not sufficient reason to exclude exorcism, since such an argument might possibly be used to eliminate all set liturgical forms in the church.

Part of this same question, and perhaps the more important part, is whether exorcism at the time of Baptism is Biblically permissible and defensible. Of course its desirability in each situation is an open question. Baptism throughout the New Testament, beginning with the somewhat undeveloped Baptism of John the Baptist, is seen as one of God's weapons in overcoming Satan's kingdom in the hearts of men.<sup>6</sup> Baptism is both a joining to God's kingdom and a renunciation of Satan's, since as Jesus says, "No man can serve two masters." This is not a new thought in our churches, since our present rite, as well as the new, includes a renouncing of Satan before stating the confession of allegiance to the Triune God. While there might be general agreement on renouncing Satan, exorcism gives a new twist, since the words of the rite necessarily imply that Satan or a demon is actually in the person. Though the suggestion of satanic indwelling might sound both severe and anachronistic to the modern man for whom Satan as a personality is no longer a reality, Paul teaches that wherever the Holy Spirit is not working confession in the hearts of believers, there "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" is working unbelief.<sup>8</sup> As there is no neutral state between belief and unbelief, so there is no person, adult or child, who is without either the Holy Spirit or the "unclean spirit." Lack of manifest demoniacal possession in the unbeliever is no assurance that Satan is not there. Where Christ and His Spirit are not present in the heart by faith, there we can be certain that Satan has complete sway. A near perfect analogy

would be the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of Christians. The lack of extraordinary gifts in Christians in no way implies that the Holy Spirit has not worked faith there.<sup>9</sup> Considering this evidence, we cannot see any objection to exorcism based on the argument that it should be used only where there is obvious demoniacal possession.

This leaves us with the second question, whether exorcism detracts from the meaning and power of Baptism? Here we will attempt to show that exorcism, instead of detracting from Baptism, makes its meaning even clearer.

Baptism is not only saying "Yes" to God, but it is a loud and a clear "No" to Satan. In Baptism God's "clean" Holy Spirit is exchanged for the "unclean spirit." The words of exorcism, "Go unclean spirit and give place to the Holy Spirit" express this well.

Though theoretically exorcism is defensible in Baptism, there might be a practical difficulty in the Baptism of adults, since even before Baptism they have indicated their faith in Christ and the "new man" is already gaining the upper hand over the "old Adam." For adults exorcism does not mean that Satan will first be conquered in their lives in the rite of Baptism, but the words signify that God now lives in their hearts where once Satan was lord.

With infants the problem is a little different since they approach the font, still being under Satan's sway, and leave as God's own children with faith in their hearts. Here, however, there might be a time factor. It could be asked whether Satan were driven out in one part of the service and then in another part, a few minutes later, faith is received in the act of the pouring of the water. This is only a problem if we take an atomistic approach to God's word. The rite of Baptism, including all of the separate words, constitute for God only *one* word, by which God lifts the child from Satan's grip into the hands of the Good Shepherd, who holds His lambs in His bosom. The ideal would be for us to say all of the words in one breath. Since we are created, limited, and hence temporal creatures, this is impossible. But all the words in the rite of Baptism appear to God as only one moment and one word in eternity. Certainly, it is open to debate where the words of exorcism should be placed; however, after the pouring of the water, the words would have little meaning, as the child would already belong to God. Nothing in Scripture can be raised against exorcism and, if properly understood as a word of God signifying Satan's defeat in the individual, it brings out even clearer the true meaning of Baptism.

The reading of the Marcan pericope of the blessing of the children is continued in the new rite. The retention of this pericope is questioned since Jesus places His hands on the children but does not baptize them. Why Mark 10:13ff. was chosen by the early church instead of the parallel sections in Matthew 19:13ff. and Luke 18:15ff. is not known, though all three are useful in determining the original *Sitz im Leben*. The Lucan account identifies the children (*paidia*) as infants (*brefee*), so it is immaterial if these

words are used with older children or the younger infants, who are only a few hours or days old. The vital question is the place of these words in the rite of Baptism. The Baptists have used these same words in connection with their blessing and naming ceremony administered without the benefit of water. At first glance such a practice might seem more in keeping with what Jesus originally intended. But such a thought completely overlooks the fact that the Gospel accounts mention no one specifically by name baptized by Jesus or His disciples. The examples of great faith, the centurion and the Canaanite woman, are not mentioned as having been baptized. The argument that Jesus did not baptize the children proves pitifully little, since the Gospel of John specifically states that Jesus Himself baptized no one.<sup>10</sup>

The pericope of Jesus' blessing the children in each of the Synoptic Gospels appears according to literary arrangement shortly before His entrance into Jerusalem and the subsequent events of that sacred week which became the foundation of salvation.<sup>11</sup> According to Matthew's Gospel this saving activity is capsuled into Baptism, which is both apex and climax of this account. Just as Baptism could not be denied the centurion and Canaanite woman, who are examples of faith, so it cannot be denied children, even infants, who no less are held up to the disciples as examples of faith. Though much more has been said and could still be said, let it suffice here to say that the pericope of the blessing of the children is in the sequence of events in the life of Jesus intimately connected with the baptismal commission.

The questioning or the examination of the child is another part of the rite now in use which is to be retained with only slight modifications. It seems to have been used in the church since earlier times and was retained by Luther.<sup>12</sup> During the period of Rationalism it fell into disfavor, not because of historical reasons, but because some denied that children could have faith.<sup>13</sup> Again during periods of confessional revival it was reinstated. Some have thought that such a detailed questioning is not appropriate in the case of infants. There can be no quarrel with the use of an abbreviated confession as long as the Christ confessed is acknowledged to be the Son of the Almighty Father and who is now at work in His church through the Spirit. The church uses essentially identical forms of questioning with both child and adult to signify that Baptism has for each the same meaning. The examination of infants is not an adiaphoron in those cases where faith is denied to them, since the church is placed *in statu confessionis*, a position where she must maintain what she believes to be true.

Sponsors are retained to articulate for the child his faith. The inability of oral articulation of the faith is not sufficient reason to keep a person, adult or infant, from Baptism, since God intends to give all men salvation.

In the post-baptismal prayer we find the reference to Titus 2:5, "a washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit",

which is of course familiar to those brought up on Luther's *Small Catechism*. Though Paul is acquainted with the word "baptism" he refers to the sacrament here as "washing." While "baptism" is more familiar to us now as a technical term, both terms, "washing" and "baptism", were synonyms in the apostolic church for the act of initiation into Christ's church.<sup>14</sup> Thus the use of Titus 2:5 in the rite is in keeping with the New Testament usage.

The custom of putting on white robes after the Baptism has not been in use in our circles, though the dressing of the child in a long white christening gown, often a family heirloom handed down from one generation to another, is common among us. There is firm evidence that as early as the post-apostolic church, the candidate was dressed in a white robe after Baptism.<sup>15</sup> Galatians 3:27, which mentions that all who have been baptized into Christ have put Christ on, might very well indicate that this custom was already widespread in apostolic times. Revelation 6:11, picturing the saints being given white robes to put on, might also reflect this same practice connected with Baptism.

A word here might be said about total immersion, especially in regard to infants. This practice was in use till Luther's time and was suggested by him as a preferable mode of Baptism.<sup>16</sup> Though much Biblical evidence would recommend this mode, especially as signifying burial with Christ, there are many practical reasons for its exclusion from the new rite.

Another innovation suggested in the rite is the placing of the lighted candle in the hand of the baptized or the sponsor as a symbol of faithfulness to death. This custom seems to reflect Revelation 2:5 where a candle lit in heaven indicates that the church it symbolizes has been faithful. The church at Ephesus was in danger of having theirs extinguished for having abandoned their first love. Though in this case it is more difficult to show Biblically that such a custom in connection with Baptism was used in the early church, the symbolism itself is nevertheless taken from the Bible. Since many churches present baptismal candles to be lit on each subsequent anniversary of the Baptism, this use of the lighted candle at the act of Baptism itself should not be objectionable.

The laying on of the hands at the Lord's Prayer and the blessing of the child is retained. Acts 8:17 associates the laying on of the hands with Baptism and Hebrews 6:2 indicates that together they comprise one action. It is claimed that confirmation arose in the church when Baptism and the laying on of hands were separated. In the New Testament, however, Baptism is followed by the laying on of hands.

This article was not written with the purpose of commenting on form of language or suitability of the rite for our churches. Its one purpose was to show Biblical roots for significant portions of the rite so that pastors and congregations would have some assistance in determining whether it should be introduced. This writer

finds that the proposed rite for Baptism is faithful both in word and thought to the Holy Scriptures and that it enhances the meaning of this sacrament.

### NOTES

1. Mark 1 25 f. "But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him.' And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him."
2. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, translated by Louise Smith and Erminie Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) p. 56. "To this mythology belongs also the figure of Satan who now fights against the hosts of the Lord. If it is true that to Jesus the world can be called bad only in so far as men are bad, that is, are of evil will, then it is clear how little the figure of Satan really meant to him."
3. Mark 9:14ff.
4. Mark 16:17. "In my name they will cast out demons."
5. The words of baptizing in the earliest church might have simply been, "In the name of Jesus Christ." Cf. Acts 2:38, 8:12.
6. Matthew 3:1-10.
7. "N., do you renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?" *Proposed Rites for Holy Baptism and the Ordination of a Minister*. Produced by the Commission on Worship, Liturgics and Hymnology of the Synodical Conference, 1967, p. 5.
8. Ephesians 2:2.
9. 1 Corinthians 12 discusses the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians, though the manifestations of His presence differ individually.
10. John 4:2.
11. In Matthew the pericope appears in chapter 19 and the entry into Jerusalem in chapter 21. In Mark the chapters are 10 and 11, and in Luke they are 18 and 19.
12. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, translated by Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. 151 ff.
13. F. H. Kettler, "Taufe III. Dogmengeschichtlich" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, edited by Kurt Galling. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, Dritte, völlig neu bearbeitet Auflage, 1962), VI, 637-646.
14. Similar terminology is used in Ephesians: 5:26 and Hebrews 10:22. For a discussion of the entire issue cf. J. Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology* (Nijmegen: Dekker and Van de Vegt, 1962).
15. Henry F. Brown, *Baptism Through the Centuries* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1965), p. 13.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 68. Brown provides pictures showing how this was done.