

Lenten Service: Baptism  
March 17, 2010

The three parts of the catechism that we have covered so far, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer Luther calls the 3 parts of our common Christian teaching. This is the core of Christian faith that parents promise to teach their children when they have their children baptized. The remainder of the catechism covers the sacraments. Luther saw the Roman church's seven sacraments as too fuzzy and too cumbersome. He constructed a definition to sort them out. He decided that a sacrament must involve an earthly element and must be instituted or commanded by Christ. Baptism and Holy Communion met these criteria.

So, in discussing baptism we begin with "the words upon which Baptism is founded". "Go into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19 These words tell us that baptism is not something that people thought up, but something commanded by God and done, not in our names but in God's name. Moreover, we don't baptize people; God baptizes people. It is God's act, even though it is carried out by human beings.

Some "left-wing radicals" in Luther's time wanted to say that baptism was not important or necessary since it was just "external". Luther's reply was, "No, God commands it, no matter how external it may be. "What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. It is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it may not be worth a straw."(Book of Concord, p.437)

The earthly element in baptism, then, is water. What makes the water a sacrament is God's command and Word which accompanies the water "for it contains and conveys all the fullness of God."(ibid, 439) Water by itself is just water, the same water that we use to cook or bathe the dog.. "But when the Word is present according to God's ordinance, Baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ's Baptism. So this is what Baptism is.

Secondly, we must also learn the purpose of Baptism, "what benefits, gifts and effects it brings." For this we can find no better source than Christ's words: "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." "To put it most simply, the power, effect benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save...To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever."

To those in his day who wanted to say, "Well, the water doesn't do anything. It depend on faith alone" Luther says, "Yes, but faith has to have something to cling to." "It must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart."

All God asks of us is that we believe and trust the salvation that He promises in baptism. So baptism is not a work that we do, but is a treasure which God gives us and faith grasps, just as the Lord Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure comprehended and offered to us in the Word and received by faith. (Not something we do for God, but something God does for us.)

"In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings, victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts."

"Suppose there were a physician who had such skill that people would not die, or even though they died would afterward live forever. Just think how the world would snow and rain money

upon him! Because of the pressing crowd of rich men no one else could get near him. Now, here in Baptism there is brought free to every man's door just such a priceless medicine which swallows up death and saves the lives of all people.

"To appreciate and use Baptism aright, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort, "But I am baptized!"

Luther's final point is the continuing meaning of baptism. Here he draws on the picture of baptism that we find in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. Paul pictures a baptism by immersion where the whole person is plunged beneath the surface of the water, symbolic death, and then, raised out of the water, a symbolic resurrection: "3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

"Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued."

Luther sees daily life as a continual process of drowning the old self, that part of us which is irascible, spiteful envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud and unbelieving, so that the new self that we are in Christ can come forth, a self that is more gentle, patient and meek, more free from greed, hatred, envy and pride.

"Here you see that Baptism...comprehends also the third sacrament, formerly called Penance, which is really nothing else than Baptism. What is repentance but an earnest attack on the old man and an entering upon a new life? If you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in Baptism, that not only announces this new life but also produces, begins, and promotes it. In Baptism we are given the grace, Spirit, and power to suppress the old self so that the new may come forth and grow strong.

Therefore, Baptism remains forever. Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access to it, so that we may again subdue the old self...Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should be found in faith and amid its fruits, every day he should be suppressing the old self and growing up in the new.

Amen

*Quotes are from Luther's Large Catechism in the Book of Concord, pp. 436-446*