

# “Pastor, Am I Baptized?”

## The Validity of Baptism in Non-Trinitarian Groups and Related Questions on Who Has Received a Valid Baptism

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### Introduction

The way to regard and use Baptism rightly is to draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or consciences trouble us. We then must say, “See here, I am baptized. And since I am baptized, I have the assurance that I shall be saved in soul and body and have eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

Luther often waxed eloquent when it came to the power and strength of baptism. In the midst of the subjective fears and doubts of his heart, he found great comfort and assurance as he considered the objective and unassailable truth that he had been baptized and in the equally objective and unassailable promises of God’s Word in baptism. But only someone who is certain that he truly has been baptized can take such objective comfort from this sacrament. If someone is unsure of whether he has been truly baptized, that is a serious spiritual dilemma. Satan is successful enough in leading us to doubt the blessings of our baptism without adding the extra uncertainty of wondering whether our baptism is valid in God’s sight.

Your program committee asked me to give a thorough presentation on the Scriptural reasons for our standard declaration that baptism in non-Trinitarian groups is invalid. They have also asked me to answer some other related practical questions about what to do in doubtful cases where a member new to our faith, or you as his shepherd, has a concern about whether his baptism is valid.

Some might suggest that to undertake such a study together is a futile exercise in the subtle but otherwise impractical minutiae of dogmatics. However, since all Scripture is “**God breathed**” (2 Tm 3:15), there is nothing in this question of useless sophistry indulged in merely for its entertainment value for systematic theologians. Every doctrine of Scripture, even in its details, possesses practical value for salvation.

Therefore the question before us is eminently practical – especially because it concerns one of God’s greatest gifts to his Church, the gift of baptism. Baptism was instituted by Christ to give sure and certain comfort to sinners that they are washed in the blood of Christ, clothed with his holiness, and thereby made full members of God’s family. Therefore behind the question raised by your program committee is a concern for peace of conscience among those whom God brings to us. So great is the comfort of baptism that we do not wish any Christian to live without the certainty that he has indeed truly been baptized and has been given all the gifts promised in that miraculous “**washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit**” (Titus 3:5).

The questions this paper seeks to answer become even more crucial as more and more of visible Christianity moves deeper and deeper into the depths of apostasy from the truth of God. Unsettling questions will begin to arise about the baptism of more than just those who come to us from groups such as the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. Therefore let’s establish from Scripture what is indeed a valid baptism and what is not. Then, armed with that principle, we will be on sure footing to answer practical questions concerning how to deal with troubled consciences – our people’s and our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin, *Luther’s Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions*, St. Louis, CPH, 1978, p. 104.

## I. Our “Brief Statements” on the Matter

“We have observed that our writings uniformly declare non-Trinitarian baptisms to be no baptism at all. Yet, they offer very limited exegetical evidence for that position, if they offer any at all.” These words, from the letter your program committee sent to me, are very accurate. For instance, if you would turn to your Senior dogmatics notes to study this topic, you will find nothing but this terse reference on page 64:

3. Baptism of heterodox churches
  - a) The baptism of church bodies that retain the essentials (application of water, and confession of the Triune God) must be allowed as legitimate. (Here follows a Latin quotation from the Council of Arles [314].)
  - b) The “baptisms” of Antitrinitarians, Unitarians, Universalists, etc., are no baptisms.

You will notice that there is not a single Scripture reference in the whole section. As you recall the ream of “dog slugs” that accompany the middler and senior year dogmatics notes, you realize that Professor Meyer certainly was not shy about using voluminous Scriptural references to clearly establish points of doctrine. The contrast here is therefore all the more striking.

Our Synod’s current pastoral theology book, *Shepherd Under Christ*, gives more of the argument for calling such baptisms invalid, but you will notice that only one Scripture reference is given.

The Lord has given [baptism] to his church to be administered according to his institution. Whether a church is doing this will be evident from its confession. Any religious group that openly as a matter of confession denies the triune God, and with it the divinity and lordship of Jesus, has no Word of God and reveals that an essential factor of a valid baptism is lacking. Even if such a group should use a form that follows the external wording as found in Scripture, one must remember that not the mere sound of the words spoken, but their meaning, or content, is determinative. The god whom they serve is an idol even if they may choose in baptizing to use the same outward sounds in referring to him. The Lord Jesus and his Word are not present with a religious group that has denied him. He has not entrusted his sacrament to them. They do not perform his works, no matter how much they may cry out, “Lord, Lord” (Mat 7 21-23).<sup>2</sup>

If you have purchased the first volume of the translation of Dr. Adolf Hoenecke’s *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* in order to study this point in greater depth, you will search again in vain for scriptural and exegetical support for the point. While he develops the point in question in somewhat greater detail than our dogmatics notes or pastoral theology text book, note that he makes not a single scriptural reference in the two paragraphs on the subject.

### How are we to view a baptism performed by heretics?

In connection with the essence of Baptism, we also have to answer the question whether to recognize the baptism of heretics. The answer is:

1. We are to recognize the Baptism of those sects that have the essence of baptism: the water, the action with the water, and the Word, in which the action is done – and here the Word is viewed according to its essence, namely, as containing the

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<sup>2</sup> Schuetze and Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1974, p. 70.

divine truth of the triune God. Papists and Calvinists, despite severe errors in other matters, do have this essence of Baptism, and so their Baptism is to be recognized.

2. The baptisms of sects that do not have the essential parts of Baptism are not valid. It may be that they do not have the external element (for example, the Manicheans did not baptize with water, which they considered a product of Satan) or the correct formula of Baptism (the Arians had this formula: I baptize you in the name of the Father, the true God, of the Son, the Redeemer, and of the Spirit, the servant of both) or the trinitarian faith (Anti-Trinitarians, Unitarians, Universalists, Swedenborgians, Free and so-called Protestant congregations).<sup>3</sup>

Those searching through our Lutheran Confessions will search once again in vain for any discussion of this specific issue in regard to baptism. The closest that the Confessions come to dealing directly with the issue would be in the Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord. Even here, while speaking the general principle, the point is specifically addressed to the Lord's Supper, not Baptism, and the reader will also notice again that there is not a single Scripture reference given.

To preserve this true Christian doctrine concerning the Holy Supper, and to avoid and abolish manifold abuses and perversion of the testament, the following useful rule and standard has been derived from the words of institution: *Nihil habet rationem sacramenti extra usum a Christo institutum* ("Nothing has the nature of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ") or *extra actionem divinitus institutam* ("apart from the action divinely instituted"). That is: If the institution of Christ be not observed as He appointed it, there is no sacrament.<sup>4</sup>

We would be drawing a false conclusion from all this if we mistook the lack of scriptural references as a sign of weak exegetical support for these statements. Just as the lack of any detailed discussion in our Lutheran Confessions to defend and establish the doctrine of inspiration was not a matter of exegetical embarrassment to cover a weak argument but rather an indication of general agreement on the scriptural principle, so the same, I'm convinced, is true here. The lack of biblical support for the statements made in our dogmatics notes and textbook, and pastoral theology textbook, is not covering for an embarrassing inability to defend the statements. Rather it seems to be an assumption on the part of the writers that their statements are so generally accepted that no detailed explanation is needed. However, since we steadfastly maintain that no article of faith holds any standing in our midst without clear scriptural support, the task assigned to this paper is indeed important. Can we give clear support from Scripture to the statement that baptisms performed in non-trinitarian settings are invalid?

## II. Scriptural Support

The first thing we must do is to determine what is the essence of baptism as defined by Scripture.

Here we desire, first of all, to ask concerning the center of the baptismal act, that is, what must be maintained as the indispensable condition for the recognition of a validly administered Christian Baptism, when all further words and actions have been stripped away. This is both a dogmatic and a canonical, as well as a liturgical question. This constitutive center is the

<sup>3</sup> Hoenecke, Adolf, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, translated by Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier, Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, p. 90-91.

<sup>4</sup> *The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VII, paragraph 85, Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1001

baptismal act itself. In the baptismal practice of the churches this fact becomes evident again and again, whenever emergency Baptism is administered in the face of death, and the form of this act must be limited to what is indispensably necessary.... In the administration of Baptism the center is the application of water to the baptized by immersion or pouring, together with the invocation of the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The name is decisive in so far as through it the water becomes a Baptism. By means of the name invoked Christian Baptism is distinguished from all other religious baptisms, washings, and sprinklings.<sup>5</sup>

That Schlink has indeed boiled baptism down to its Biblical basics can clearly be supported from Scripture. **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (Matthew 28:19). Jesus’ simple words of institution clearly mark all three parts of the essence of a valid sacrament. The word (1), the name of the alone saving God, is joined to the application (2) of water (3). Both visible element and sacramental action are clearly indicated by the Greek term βαπτίζοντες.

This joining of Word with element and action is emphasized also by Paul in Ephesians 5:25,26: **“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.”** (Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπάτε τὰς γυναῖκας, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀγιάσῃ καθάρισα τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι.)

Since our dogmatic writings possess no shortage of clear biblical support both for the necessity of the use of water and the action of applying water, and since neither point was indicated as the main thrust of this paper, we will focus in on one basic element of the essence of the sacrament, the presence of the Word. Since non-trinitarian baptisms almost without fail use water and apply it to the one being baptized, the question of whether they have a valid sacrament of baptism comes down to this question: is the Word present in their sacrament? If their washing is not ἐν ῥήματι then their washing is not the one with which Christ cleanses his Church.

At first blush some might think the question is answered if only the precise formula of Matthew 28 is preserved in application of the water. After all, haven’t we consistently maintained that the efficacy of a sacrament does not depend on the faith either of the baptizer or the baptized? The Word of God remains the Word of God whether its truth is spoken by Christ or Caiaphas (Jn 11:50). If what is spoken is the truth, that truth does not become falsehood because it is uttered by agents of Beelzebub (Mk 5:7) or mercenary charlatans like Balaam (Nu 22-24). Since it is God who does the baptizing, and since his words are used with the application of water how can we say that a valid baptism has not taken place?

Where the Word of God is present with the application of water there is no doubt that a valid baptism has taken place. But the question is far deeper than what sounds and syllables are uttered as the water is applied. Luther is quoted in the *Formula of Concord* in this way, “For it [here the Lord’s Supper is in primary view] does not depend upon the faith or unbelief of men, but upon God’s Word and ordinance, unless they first change God’s Word and ordinance and interpret it otherwise, as the enemies of the Sacrament do at the present day, who, of course, have nothing but bread and wine; for they also do not have the words and appointed ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own notion.”<sup>6</sup>

Listen also to these words of Johann Gerhard. “The question is asked: Whether baptism may be considered valid if some letters or syllables are altered in the words. We respond: If the meaning remains whole and uncorrupted, nor is it perverted for some purpose, baptism by that mode ought to be received as legitimate; for not the sound but the sense of the words ought to be received as the institution of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Or to quote David Scaer:

<sup>5</sup> Schlink, Edmund, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman, St. Louis: Concordia, 1972, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VII, paragraph 32, Triglotta, p. 983.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard, Johann, as quoted in *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, Baier, C.F.W. Walther, editor, St. Louis, Concordia, 1879, Volume IIIb, p. 460, translation by author (*Quaeritur: Num baptismus ratus sit habendus, si alia litera aut syllaba in verbis mutetur.*

Baptism is the possession of the trinitarian community, those who confess by the Spirit's working that Jesus Christ is Lord (1 Cor 12:3) to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11). Where a community does not identify itself by this confession, it cannot stand in succession with the original apostolic community, and hence it is not trinitarian in the New Testament sense. Thus, for example, such groups as Mormons, Unitarians, and Swedenborgians may use the tripartite baptismal formula with water for initiation into their communities, but their rites may not in any way be equated with the Baptism commanded by Christ and practiced by the original apostolic communities.<sup>8</sup>

But we are still begging the question, aren't we? In none of those statements did the authors prove this point from Scripture: how can we say from Scripture that someone can say "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" and yet not actually have the Word of God at all?

Just as we boiled baptism down to its essence as we began to look at our question more specifically, we must boil down what the "Word" is to its essence. Our confessional Lutheran forefathers have made a distinction that the mere sounds and syllables of the Word are not the essence of the Word, but rather the essence of the Word of God is its God appointed sense and meaning. Here, then, is the statement we must seek to establish from Scripture: the sense and meaning of the Word is the key. If you empty syllables and sounds of their meaning, you have robbed those syllables and sounds of being able to boast that they are the very words of God.

I'm convinced Scripture teaches precisely that. Allow me to begin with the first (Christian) Pentecost. Acts 2 holds before us the glorious gospel truth miraculously broadcast in numerous languages by the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. If only precise sounds and syllables are the Word of God, then the Holy Spirit violated the message of the gospel by translating it into a whole host of different sounds and syllables.

**“Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs - we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’” (Acts 2:7-11)**

Indeed, we can know what it means. Neither the apostles nor the Holy Spirit were full of new wine. For the purpose of our discussion this morning, what this means is that the Word of God remains the Word of God in whatever language it is translated. Why is that? While different sounds and syllables filled the ears of those who spoke each of those languages, yet the sense and meaning were unchanged. The Holy Spirit was not involved in a blasphemous mutilating of the essence of the Word, but in a beautiful multiplying of the reach of the gospel.

Allow me at this moment to insert a brief excursus of application to our preaching. As you stand in your pulpit on Sunday morning, having determined the meaning of your text from a thorough study of the original sounds and syllables, you are in perfect agreement with that day of Pentecost to stand in your pulpits and declare the Word of God in new sounds and syllables than what is recorded in the inspired autographs. And please don't say as you finish reading your text, "Thus far the Word of God." Where God has blessed your prayerful study with words that illuminate the Spirit's meaning in that text, you are proclaiming the Word of God all the way to your "Amen."

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*Resp.: Si sensus maneat integer et incorruptus, neque ex industria aliquid corrumpatur, baptismus ejus modi pro legitimo habendus; neque enim tam de sono, quam sensu verborum institutio Christi accipienda.)*

<sup>8</sup> Scaer, David, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume XI, Baptism*, The Luther Academy, St. Louis, 1999, p. 83.

By none of this do we in any way minimize the importance of the original languages or the fact that the original authors were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit to record every letter they did. The autographs of Scripture are the Word of God in a special, unique and important way that no translation or sermon ever can be. Those inspired autographs establish for us what is the essential meaning God desired to communicate to us.

But now let's return to more evidence that the Word is not just certain required sounds or syllables. Consider the inspired use that the New Testament apostles and evangelists often made of the Septuagint when referring to Old Testament prophecies and other passages (for example: see Matthew's use of the Septuagint at 15:8-9 and 21:16). If precise sounds and syllables were the essence of the Word, then such use of a human translation would again be a violation of God's Word. But of course those who wrote, **"as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"** (2 Peter 1:21) could not possibly be guilty of such blasphemy. Wherever the LXX had beautifully captured the sense of the Hebrew original, and thus was indeed sharing the truth of the Word of God, it could be and was authoritatively quoted by the inspired New Testament authors.

Perhaps here it is fitting to briefly add a reference to Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman at the well. **"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth"** (John 4:23-24). If we would cling merely to the outward sounds and syllables of God's Word while violating the clear meaning of what those sounds and syllables proclaim, our claim to be worshiping God **"in spirit and in truth"** would be hollow hypocrisy.

Allow one more angle of approach to this question. Consider what happens if we fail to make this distinction that the Word of God in its essence is not just proper sounds or syllables but the God ordained meaning which the Spirit has given them. If we fail to see this distinction, then we are in grave danger of treating God's Word as if it were a magical incantation, the mere speaking of which compels God to act in a certain way. Repeating the proper sounds of the tripartite baptismal formula is not a threefold stroking of the "bottle" of the Word out of which then magically springs a divine genie who is compelled by our incantation to leap into action regardless of our distortion of the real meaning of his name. Yes, the Word of God is **"living and active"** (He 4:12), but not as if it possessed a separate life of its own apart from its power as the truth of Christ. As Paul tells us, **"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ"** (Ro 10:17). When the name of Christ is called upon in baptism but the truth about Christ's personal identity is denied, then the message which works faith is not present. To claim that such words, stripped of their meaning, still carry with them the power of the Spirit would be to treat the Word as some kind of superstitious, cabalistic, God-ordained "abracadabra." As Professor Meyer correctly observes, "The power of the gospel is not magical; it is the power of the divine truth."<sup>9</sup> To insist that the proper syllables – regardless of the meaning that is openly attached to them – combined with the application of water automatically produces a valid Baptism is to promulgate a misunderstanding of the sacraments that is similar to – if not really worse than – Rome's *ex opere operato*.

Listen to these words Luther writes in his inimitable style. In addressing the distortion of the words of institution of the Lord's Supper by his opponents who then begged him to produce a clear Scripture to make his point, he writes,

This certainly is an extraordinary situation! It is just as if I denied that God had created the heavens and the earth, and asserted with Aristotle and Pliny and other heathen that the world existed from eternity, but someone came and held Moses under my nose, Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"; I would try to make the text read: "God" now should mean the same as "cuckoo," "created" the same as "ate," and "the heavens and the earth" the same as "the hedge sparrow, feathers and all." The word of Moses thus would read

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<sup>9</sup> *Senior Dogmatics Notes*, p. 34.

according to Luther's text, "In the beginning the cuckoo ate the hedge sparrow, feathers and all."<sup>10</sup>

Luther is saying that even if the ears of my hearers reverberate from the sounds and syllables of Genesis 1:1, yet if I have corrupted the meaning in their minds, it will benefit them as little as if they had indeed actually heard, "The cuckoo ate the hedge sparrow, feathers and all."

"But," someone might try to conclude, "if this is the case, then wouldn't only Lutherans possess the sacrament of Baptism because all others such as Evangelicals and Roman Catholics teach in error about baptism?" No, that would not of necessity follow. Destroying the essence of the sacrament and teaching erroneously about its blessings are two different things. One deals with what the sacrament *is*, the other with what the sacrament *does*. The question we are dealing with is whether a valid sacrament exists.

What we have been saying in this paper does not change what we have always taught – in fact what has been taught by most of the visible church ever since it struggled with the Donatists. As long as the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity is not publicly distorted beyond recognition, the correctness of the personal faith – even the complete lack of faith – of the administrator of baptism does not invalidate the sacrament of baptism. "Our faith and sacrament must not rest on the person, be he godly or wicked, ordained or unordained, called or sneaking in, the devil or his mother, but on Christ, His Word, His office, His command and ordinance."<sup>11</sup>

This point remains valid not only when the personal faith of the administrator is under consideration, but also when the official teaching of a whole church body badly distorts or even completely obliterates the biblical teaching concerning the blessings of "**the washing with water and the Word.**" For instance the Roman Catholic Church's teaching that baptism is only the beginning of God's process of infusing grace instead of granting the full status of saints seeks to rob Roman Catholics of the true security and comfort of their baptism. However, because the Roman Catholic Church still teaches the Trinity and thereby does not alter the meaning of the Word that is used with the application of water, they still have a valid sacrament. So also those who reject baptism as a means of grace (almost all Evangelicals) and treat it merely as a sign or worse, as some outward law obedience, rob their people of the truth that the Spirit did indeed make his home in them through that water and Word of their baptism and sealed to them personally the gift of the forgiveness of sins. However, wherever also in Evangelical circles the teaching of the Triune nature of God is not denied, the Word is still being used with the application of water and there exists a valid sacrament.

For the complete picture, one more thought needs to be added, although it is not the topic of discussion in this paper. Lack of faith on the part of the receiver of baptism also does not invalidate the sacrament. Those blessings are present because God neither lies nor deceives in the words of baptism. Of course, to defend us from the Evangelicals who would love to call this nothing but the *ex opere operato* of Rome, we quickly add that without faith the sacraments do not benefit the recipient. While my faith or lack thereof does not make or break the essence of the sacrament and thus its validity, it does make or break my enjoyment of the blessings of a valid sacrament.

But does the Scripture allow for such a distinction? Where does it say that the faith or lack thereof of those proclaiming or receiving gospel promises does not alter the essence and power of those promises? Consider Paul's words to the Philippian Christians, "**It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice**" (Philippians 1:15-18). Paul doesn't rejoice over the false motives and purpose of those who preach the gospel only to stir up trouble. For that sin they are responsible to God. However, Paul does rejoice that despite the false motives and purpose of those preachers, "**Christ is preached.**" God's gospel doesn't suddenly become the power of God

<sup>10</sup> Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works, Word and Sacrament III*, Volume 37, edited by Robert H. Fischer, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, pp. 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, Martin, quoted by Edwin E. Pieplow, "*The Means of Grace*," *The Abiding Word*, Volume II, St. Louis, Concordia, p. 343.

only if we preach it with correct motives or only if we receive it with firm faith. **“It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes”** (Romans 1:16). Even if I proclaim the truth as an utter hypocrite, and all who receive it are nothing but hypocrites, that does not change the power and validity of the gospel in either Word or Sacraments. **“What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar”** (Romans 3:3-4).

In a recent essay, John Brug beautifully sums up the difference between errors that affect the validity of a sacrament and errors that affect the full enjoyment of the blessings of a sacrament.

In discussing the sacraments of a heterodox church we must distinguish two questions: 1) are the sacraments being celebrated in a proper, God-pleasing way? (are they *legitimate*?) and 2) do real sacraments still exist in this church? (are they *valid*?). There are cases in which we recognize that illegitimate abuses or false notions have become attached to the sacramental practices of a church, but the church still has real sacraments because it retains all the essential elements of Christ’s institution...On the other hand, if one of the essential elements of a sacrament was missing...then there was no sacrament.<sup>12</sup>

But there may still be one objection to all of this lurking in our minds. All of our scriptural “proof” was made up of logical deductions from Scripture passages. There is indeed no passage that says, *expressis verbis*, “Non-trinitarian baptism is no baptism,” and “The personal faith or lack thereof of administrator or receiver of baptism does not change the validity of baptism.” We have looked at Scripture statements and drawn conclusions not explicitly stated in those passages. Are we going beyond *sola Scriptura* to draw such conclusions and call them doctrine?

### III. The Valid Use of Reason in Formulating Doctrine

In opposition to modernism (the confident belief that man by the power of his reason could solve all problems and remedy all troubles) we have grown very accustomed to pointing out the flaws of fallen man’s reason. And, of course, in a very important point, we are right to do so. **“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:20-21). When human reason sets itself up as lord over God’s revelation – and apart from the Holy Spirit changing the heart it can do nothing but this – it sees nothing but **“foolishness.”** **“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned”** (1 Corinthians 2:14). Man’s reason has been distorted by the fall because the image of God is lost – and lost with it is any possibility of true, saving knowledge of the true God. **“[God] has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end”** (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

But while the image of God was lost in the fall, man did not become an irrational brute beast. He alone among God’s creation still possesses the capacity to reason. As far as matters of this life are concerned, even unenlightened reason still can think through and solve complex problems of earthly, human existence. The stunning advances in medical science, while at times pushing the envelope of ethical propriety, are examples of what still remains in the reasoning ability of the crown of God’s creation. In fact, much to our shame at times, **“the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light”** (Luke 16:8).

Now while sinful man cannot use that reason to ascend to heaven, God does descend to us in the forms of human speech and language. While the truth and validity of what he proclaims in the gospel can never be

<sup>12</sup> Brug, John, “*The Sacraments of the ELCA: Are They Valid?*”, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, Essay Number 1675, p. 1.

grasped by unbelieving man, and while what God reveals often goes far beyond any human ability to grasp and understand it, yet God's revelation is never irrational ravings. He uses the conventions of language and grammar and logic to make his points so that even an unbeliever can understand the flow of thought of Scripture. Even though trust in what has been proclaimed can only come from the Holy Spirit, whenever an unbeliever categorizes the gospel as foolishness, he is actually stating that he knows what it says. It is just that as a **“man without the Spirit”** he utterly rejects it as preposterous.

Therefore, since God speaks in his Word as one talking to rational creatures, he often does put before us statements of truth from which we are to draw logical conclusions. Drawing such conclusions from Scripture is not a violation of God's prerogative of establishing doctrinal truth. Instead, it is one of God's divinely established ways of articulating his truth through the clearly inspired language of Scripture.

For example, consider Jesus' words to the skeptics of his day, the Sadducees. As they attempted to show the foolishness of any belief in any kind of continued existence of the soul, Jesus proclaimed that they were the fools since they had not rejoiced in faith in a logical conclusion from a statement of God in Exodus 3. **“Jesus replied, ‘You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead – have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not the God of the dead but of the living’”** (Matthew 22:29-32). Notice how Jesus admonishes them for refusing in stubborn unbelief to draw the logical conclusion. The words clearly imply that believers possess a continued existence beyond this life since God does not say, “I was” the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but says instead **“I am”** their God. Jesus has thus drawn the proper conclusion for them and thereby called them to repentance for their blindness and urged them to apply that truth to themselves in faith. Of course we must hasten again to add that while the logical conclusion of what God is saying can be drawn even by an unbeliever, the power to actually believe what that conclusion teaches comes only from the Spirit of God at work in that portion of gospel truth. As our senior dogmatics notes simply state, “The mode of operation of the Word is both psychological and supernatural. In common with ordinary speech, the Word of God is adapted to the constitution of the human soul. It addresses itself to the heart. It addresses itself to the intellect. It addresses itself to the will.”<sup>13</sup>

But before this paper appears to be giving a blanket endorsement to the use of enlightened reason in formulating articles of faith, we must remember the grave danger that our reason presents in this area. The danger is that we still possess an old sinful nature, which will always quickly want to pervert our use of reason from its ministerial role (as servant under the Word) to a magisterial role (as judge and arbiter of what Scripture is permitted to say and what it isn't). It is then that also our reason shifts from serving as a wonderful gift of God to being a tool of Satan to twist and distort God's clear truth. This explains, as Dr. Becker points out so admirably in *The Foolishness of God*, why Luther spoke about our capacity for reason in such seemingly contradictory terms.

Reason is a big red murderess, the devil's bride, a damned whore, a blind guide, the enemy of faith, the greatest and most invincible enemy of God. Reason is God's greatest and most important gift to man, of inestimable beauty and excellence, a glorious light, a most useful servant in theology, something divine. In terms like these Martin Luther gave his estimate of human reason....

Luther's paradoxical view of reason is there for every Lutheran child to see already in the Small Catechism. In his explanation of the First Article of the Creed Luther lists reason as one of the greatest gifts of the Creator for which men ought to be grateful. However, in the explanation of the Third Article he makes it plain that human reason is helpless and deserves no share of the credit for the conversion of man. He says there, “I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to him.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Senior Dogmatics Notes*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, pp. 32,33.

<sup>14</sup> Becker, Siegbert, *The Foolishness of God*, Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1982, p. 1.

It is with this caveat in mind that our dogmatics notes sound these four wise warnings about any conclusions we draw from Scripture:

Legitimate conclusions are only those:

- a) which do not violate the laws of logic;
- b) which do not in the slightest contradict what Scripture says;
- c) whose premises are drawn from Scripture itself;
- d) which are implicit in the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup>

All of this “principle” that we have discussed in this paper is, of course, meant to affect our “practice.” Now comes the time to apply these biblical principles to practical questions of ministry. That, after all, is always the purpose of doctrine – its practical application to the salvation of souls and the glory of a merciful God.

#### **IV. Practical Application of the Principles**

Let’s quickly summarize what we have established so far as we now turn to application.

The personal faith neither of the one doing the baptizing nor of the one being baptized effects the power and efficacy of baptism. Faith is only involved in benefiting from what the sacrament *does*, not in establishing or making valid what the sacrament essentially *is*. While false teaching about the blessings and benefits of a sacrament hinder faith from enjoying the true comfort and strength of a particular sacrament, the sacrament is still a valid sacrament as long as the essence of the sacrament remains. However whenever the essence of the sacrament is altered from God’s institution in either element (e.g., failing to use water), action (e.g., Corpus Christi celebrations), or Word (e.g., a deliberate altering of the meaning of the instituting Word connected to the element), there is no valid sacrament. For then we are no longer “doing” what Christ has commanded us to do. We would have substituted a rite of merely human origin for a divinely appointed sacrament.

Let’s first look at a beautiful and clear witness we can make as we carefully think through what baptisms are valid and which are not. The principle of what makes a valid sacrament and what destroys its validity, places us as confessional Lutherans in some very unusual ecumenical waters. In the Lord’s Supper, our biblical stance of close(d) communion often leaves “ecumenicals” caricaturing us as nothing but hopeless biblicists and schismatics who are withdrawing into our little German Lutheran ghetto. However, our conviction about the validity of the sacraments wherever trinitarian truth is proclaimed, positions us as some of the most open in accepting the baptisms of other Christian denominations.

For example, a recent article from *Ecumenical Review* catalogues the chagrin some feel within the World Council of Churches over the failure of their overture to forge closer ecumenical union on the basis of a commonly recognized baptism. In 1982, the WCC produced a document entitled *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* by which they had hoped to forge closer sacramental ties between its member churches and other groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and the various branches of Eastern Orthodoxy. As the author of this 1998 article reviews 16 years of response to this document, she draws what she sees as some rather disappointing conclusions. “Ecumenism is founded on the faith expressed in the Creed, ‘I believe in *one...church.*’ One sometimes gets the impression that we do not in fact really believe what we are saying in these words.”<sup>16</sup> Her comments are based on her observation that Orthodox churches continue to refuse to accept baptisms that lack the stamp of apostolic succession and the act of chrismation. She also notes that the Roman Catholic Church’s record of acceptance of the baptisms of other denominations has been extremely

<sup>15</sup> *Middler Dogmatics Notes*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, p 24 (newly revised notes, p. 9 in “older” notes).

<sup>16</sup> Heller, Dagmar, “Baptism - The Basis of Church Unity?”, in *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 50, Issue 4 (October 1998), p. 489.

inconsistent around the world. In addition, most of those who teach only “believers’ baptism” continue to reject categorically the baptisms of paedobaptists like us.

In stark contrast, we as confessional Lutherans willingly accept as valid every baptism from every Christian Church that has retained the essentials of the sacrament! We, who are so often pilloried as those who refuse to see that the Holy Christian Church might just possibly extend beyond the borders of our dear WELS, are in fact among the most open church bodies in the world when it comes to accepting as valid the baptisms of every Christian denomination that has not destroyed the simple essence of Trinitarian baptism. With that we are making a very clear declaration that we do indeed believe that there is but one Holy Christian Church, and that her borders extend far beyond the cozy confines of the WELS.

Certainly we must continue to point out the glaring weaknesses of the false ecumenical movement with its love for outward union at the price of biblical integrity. But at the same time it is important that we proclaim clearly by our acceptance of other baptisms that we do indeed acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace wherever those means are used. It is perhaps a point we would do well to emphasize more than we do with those who accuse us of narrow-minded sectarian bias against everything not confessional Lutheran.

But now let’s move on to more specific practical questions as envisioned by your program committee. First of all, there should obviously be no change in our customary procedure in dealing with those who come to us whose only baptism has been with a non-trinitarian group. As we would with any adults who came to us for instruction, we would follow the example of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch. We would begin by instructing them in the truth about who our Triune God is and what he has done for us. When it came time to instruct about baptism, we would show the astounding blessings God holds out for those who are baptized into the name of the co-equal and co-eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit about whom the Scriptures truly teach. The goal is to overwhelm error with truth as Paul did so eloquently in Colossians. Our prayer is that even without our specifically addressing the issue of the invalidity of their first “baptism,” those who are being instructed are led by the Spirit to recognize that they have not received anything like what you have just described. It is best if they can be led from their own initiative to declare with the eunuch, **“Why shouldn’t I be baptized?”** (Acts 8:37). Obviously, where weakness of faith still prevents someone from drawing that conclusion from Scripture, specific encouragement would need to be brought. In every case it would be important that we speak of them as being “baptized” and not “rebaptized.” It wasn’t that their first “baptism” failed, but that they were never truly baptized. We do not want to do anything to suggest in any way that God’s unilateral promises of baptism had failed them.

The questions become more difficult to resolve at those times when someone comes to us from a heterodox church body that, while still officially professing the Christian faith, appears in practice to be deviating more and more from even the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. The rise of postmodernism with its radical anti-dogmatic bent and its popular, if naive and simplistic rejection of the idea of absolute truth, means that care for doctrinal integrity will become even more rare than it already is. Finally, add to that hodgepodge the growing distaste for denominational identity, and you have a disturbing mix of cafeteria style “spirituality” which more and more resembles the biblical time of the judges when **“Everyone did as he saw fit”** (Judges 21:25).

In other words, it may no longer give you much information when you “look for the union label.” The former denominational tag of your new catechumen – if he even has one – may tell you nothing at all about what he was taught or what he received in baptism. Patient and thorough instruction coupled with careful listening to our adult catechumens will be even more important as wide ranges of difference will be noted even in those coming to us from the very same denomination. We may be stunned to find the most basic elements of Christianity to have been entirely absent.

As a general principle, we will need to be careful not to plant doubts where they don’t need to be. We will want to be very cautious lest we speak too quickly about our own doubts about the baptism they have received. We do not want to create doubt where Spirit-worked confidence in the blessings of a valid baptism already exists. Where we have nothing more than nebulous misgivings which the adult confirmand does not

share, it may be better to ere on the side of acknowledging a previous baptism rather than raising what may very well be needless doubts. While the following words of Luther could be taken too far if we used them to conclude that the faith of a recipient makes even an otherwise invalid sacrament valid, yet these words can give us pause when we are tempted to declare too quickly that a specific baptism is invalid. “Finally I claim that if someone had not been baptized, but did not know it and firmly believed that he had been rightly baptized, that faith would be sufficient for him. For before God he has what he believes.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Luther’s words can be best understood as reminding us that a mere lacking of baptism does not condemn. What condemns is despising God’s offered gifts, such as baptism. In such a case, the despising of the God-ordained means would not exist.

However, when an adult in our instruction class harbors strong doubts about the validity of his own baptism, especially if the teachings of his previous church were deviating markedly from fundamental doctrines, there it is better to offer what we know will be a valid baptism. Even where we might have begun by trying to assure them of the validity of their baptism, if severe doubts remain, there it is better to baptize in order to erase all doubts. After all, it is the precise purpose of the sacraments to empower us to rest securely in God’s objective and unailing promises.

Next, how do we apply the biblical principles to various “novel” baptismal formulas sprouting up in the church? Great care must be taken not to make too hurried a judgment about all such forms. While it is doubtful whether Luke and Paul are establishing an alternate formula by stating “in the name of Christ” or “in Christ,” such a formula together with a clear Trinitarian context would certainly seem to be in keeping with the spirit of the more common baptismal formula which was given to us by the Lord Jesus. After all, a true biblical confession of Jesus cannot truly be separated from trinitarian truth. As Jesus himself said, “**Now this is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent**” (John 17:3). Of course, if this substitute formula were used to mask false theology (in the dogmatic sense of teaching “about God”), that would indeed invalidate any such “baptisms.”

That brings us to the use of baptismal formulas such as “In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier” and others similar to it that speak a tripartite formula without the specific personal names of each person of the Triune God. Perhaps here it is interesting to note that even liberal ecumenical voices speak out against this practice. The *Christian Century* reports these words from a United Church of Christ sponsored ecumenical “colloquy.” “Alternative language distorts the church’s trinitarian faith; ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ are three persons, not three functions. Formulas like ‘Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer’ do not affirm that God, through baptism, invites women and men into a relationship with the three persons of the Trinity. Instead, they argued, it seems to imply that baptism is administered in the name of three theological functions – an abstraction, not a relationship.”<sup>18</sup> Our problem with these words often involve two more concerns: the rampant reediting of inspired Scripture by radical theological feminism, and the quiet rejection of trinitarian doctrine that those words also often mask. Such novel wordings leave the validity of that baptism in doubt at best, if not so altering its essence to make it categorically invalid. Perhaps it goes without saying that the following formula, reported to be used at Riverside Church in New York City, crosses the line of making a mockery out of God’s name for the sake of inclusivism, “...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: One God, Mother of us all.”<sup>19</sup>

Your program committee made specific reference to dealing with those who come to us from the ELCA. The ELCA’s wholesale abandonment of key Lutheran teachings (so-called justification accords with Rome and the declaration of “full communion” with denominations such as the Reformed Church of America) leads one to wonder whether the day will come when not only *Evangelical Lutheran* will be a misnomer but even *Church*. For the present, they appear at least officially to be encouraging congregations to adhere to the standard baptismal formula. The following is taken from the ELCA official web site. The title of the entire study document, from which this excerpt is taken, is “The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament with Commentary.”

<sup>17</sup> Luther, Martin, “Concerning Rebaptism,” p. 260.

<sup>18</sup> “Debating Baptismal Language,” *Christian Century*, September 27-October 4, 1995, p. 880.

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

Holy baptism is administered with water in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism into the name of the triune God involves teaching the doctrine and meaning of the Trinity. The baptized are welcomed into the Body of Christ. This is the community which lives from "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit." A world-wide ecumenical discussion is now under way about the ways in which trinitarian orthodoxy can be maintained while speaking in appropriate modern language and contexts. Failing a new consensus in the churches, we have no other name in which to baptize than the historic, ecumenically received name.<sup>20</sup>

While the first part of this paragraph is somewhat encouraging, the last sentence bears some ominous tones. The "consensus in the churches" seems to weigh more heavily on their doctrine and practice than the "consensus" of the apostles and prophets.

While beyond the scope of this paper, the ELCA's declaration of full communion with the Reformed Church of America (1997) and other Protestant church bodies makes one wonder whether the loss of a valid Lord's Supper might precede the loss of a valid Baptism. May God preserve his faithful still among them in the midst of doctrinal confusion and outright heresy!

We will close this section on practical questions with a thought for our own comfort as those who administer baptism. Because the words of baptism are not a magical formula that must be reproduced with absolute accuracy to assure its power, our slips of the tongue do not remove the power of baptism. This is analogous to what has probably happened to all of us in the distribution of the bread in the Lord's Supper, "Take eat, this the true *blood* which is given for you," or "Take eat, this it the true body *shed* for you." David Scaer relates an interesting story from the middle ages of a distorted "Latin" formula used by priests who were ignorant of the "official" church language they officially mumbled. "In the Middle Ages, priests who were not at home in Latin, so it was said, might have misspoken the baptismal formula out of ignorance. *In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* might have become *In nomine Patriae et Filiae et spiritui Sancti*, quite literally, 'In the name of the fatherland and the daughter and the Holy Spirit.'"<sup>21</sup> While our use of the vernacular keeps us from such foolishness, certainly we will prayerfully strive to make as few blunders as humanly possible so as not to distract the faithful from the perfect beauty of God's sacraments. Yet even where we do slip, it is a comfort both to those administering and those receiving the sacraments to know that not only are we forgiven for our carelessness, but that verbal and phonetic precision is not a prerequisite of a valid sacrament.

## V. Conclusion

Whenever churches by their public confession and teaching empty the words of institution of their intended meaning, then such churches have robbed the Sacraments of something which is absolutely essential to them, and their sacramental observances are no longer true Sacraments. They have robbed the words of institution of that which makes them the Word of God, the divine sense and meaning. And so the rite which they observe is minus the Word of God and no sacrament.<sup>22</sup>

Our goal in studying this point of doctrine is to gain greater certainty that what we have taught about non-trinitarian "baptisms" is not just our historical practice but is also biblically sound. Our goal is to be able to counsel troubled consciences not only with compassion but also with knowledge backed by sure conviction. As the climate of our pluralistic culture becomes even more hostile to doctrinal integrity, the questions we have answered will certainly not be idle speculation. This practical knowledge will be put to use more and more.

<sup>20</sup> The web site from which this quotation was taken is: <http://www.elca.org/dcm/complete.html>

<sup>21</sup> Scaer, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Neitzel, Arthur E., "The Means of Grace," in *The Abiding Word*, Volume II, St. Louis, Concordia, 1947, p. 378.

Conversely, keeping clearly in mind what does invalidate the sacraments helps us also to understand why, for all their false teachings about the blessings and purpose of baptism, heterodox Christian churches still possess a valid sacrament. By such clear teaching we can comfort still other troubled consciences who may wonder about the validity of their baptism. Armed with Scriptural truth, we can make a biblically faithful statement of what it truly means that there is only “one holy Christian and apostolic Church.”

Finally, while the focus of this paper is very important, may we not lose sight of our most urgent task when it comes to the sacrament of Baptism. The most urgent task before us is to routinely exalt Baptism as the wondrous, ongoing comfort and power for our life that it truly is. Brothers, as we stated, the purpose of thinking through clearly the whole matter of this paper is to help members new and old to be certain that they are truly baptized. However, unless we want to act like we believe the *ex opere operato* of Rome, all of that is preliminary. Helping our people have the certain foundation of a valid baptism leads us then to move on to remind them regularly in our preaching and teaching that they are clothed in the holiness of Christ as in a garment. We must move on then to urge them to live their baptism as they daily drown that incorrigible old Adam with his evil lusts and desires and find in that water the gospel’s forgiveness and its power to live a new life. We must move on then to hold before them regularly the comforting down payment of redemption they have received in this sealing of the Spirit, and point them ahead to God’s final payment in full. Being certain of a valid baptism is but the necessary precursor to verbally immersing the saints in Christ in all the treasures poured out abundantly in that sacred washing. We are, after all, the spiritual descendants of the great reformer who preached five extended sermon series on baptism in the space of eleven years. “With faith in Christ, crucified yet risen, we remember the baptism in our past, its impact on our present, its promise for our future. The preacher has reason to say so again and again.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Preece, Robert C., “*Sacramental Preaching: Holy Baptism*,” in *Liturgical Preaching: Contemporary Essays*, editors Paul Grime and Dean Nadasdy, St. Louis, CPH, 2001, p. 64-65.

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