

## Where is the Font?

[Presented at the Central Conference, Western Wisconsin District, WELS January 15, 2001]

by Mark G. Zarling

*Almighty eternal God, who according to thy righteous judgment didst condemn the unbelieving world through the flood and in thy great mercy didst preserve believing Noah and his family, and who didst drown hardhearted Pharaoh with all his host in the Red Sea and didst lead thy people Israel through the same on dry ground, thereby prefiguring this bath of thy baptism, and who through the baptism of thy dear Child, our Lord Jesus Christ, has consecrated and set apart the Jordan and all water as a salutary flood and a rich and full washing away of sins: We pray through the same thy groundless mercy that thou wilt graciously behold us and bless us with true faith in the Spirit so that by means of this saving flood all that has been born in us from Adam and which we have added thereto may be drowned in us and engulfed, and that we may be sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom, serve thy name at all times fervent in spirit and joyful in hope, so that with all believers we may be made worthy to attain eternal life according to thy promise, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>i</sup>*

Take a quick walk into the cellar of your memory. Rummage around a bit and try to find the box with the images of your boyhood congregation. As you work through that box, can you find a picture of the baptismal font at which the Lord God of Sabaoth worked an Easter miracle in your newly beating, yet cold and petrified heart of sin? Can you remember where that font was placed in the church, how big it was, what it was made of? For most of us I am sure that we remember not the moment of baptism. But I imagine that some of us can remember the font of our baptism. We saw it weekly. We learned about it from what our parents or pastor taught us. Do you have a picture of that font in your mental memories?

Now climb with me back out of the cellar into the bustling study and living room of your current ministry. Amid the chaos of urgent phone calls and piles of pastoral duties strewn around in your life, does the font of your parish stand as a solid reminder not only of whom you are, but of what you are trying to do? What does that font look like? Where is it in your sanctuary? Do you take the time to usher new generations of students up to the front of church,<sup>ii</sup> to stand around that font in awe and wonder at the Easter miracles that God has worked?

Why speak of the font when the miracle of new life in Christ is accomplished by water and Word? I know of one person who baptized his child in the kitchen sink. No doubt all of us present can relate a baptism experience under the hot and warming glare of an incubator light. The font is not important. Or is it? By metonymy, you realize that I am using this picture of a font to call to mind the momentous achievements that a gracious God achieves in the lives of individuals. I also wish to emphasize the visual and mnemonic benefit of the font in the life of a Lutheran individual and of a Lutheran parish. One WELS pastor and some of his members actually took a European tour as an outgrowth of a Bible Hour on baptism. As a result, these tourists took more than a passing interest in the baptismal fonts found in the sanctuaries of churches in Europe, especially Germany. In the old church buildings of the reformation, fonts were often massive concrete and stone structures. These fonts were in central and prominent positions. What a reminder to worshipers that baptism is a central and foundational tenet of our faith! Many times these fonts were eight sided, reflecting an Easter motif. But in churches built during the times of rationalism and pietism, both Lutheran and Roman churches, fonts shrunk in

size and visibility.<sup>iii</sup> Did the architecture reflect theology? If such is the case, what sermons do fonts speak today? What does your font look like? Where is it placed?

Where is the font in the Seminary chapel? You might challenge the need for such a font. The Seminary is not a normal “congregation” where the use of the Keys and administration of the Sacraments are usually carried out. Very true, yet must a font exist only in connection with baptism first and second? Is there not an appropriate place for baptism fourthly in justifying the inclusion of a visible Gospel reminder such as a font? Of course, such a reminder undergirds the Gospel only in direct connection with the amount of instruction in Gospel teachings that accompany the visual symbol. Hence the focus of this presentation.

Your program committee assigned the topic “Holding Baptismal Grace Before Your Congregation through Preaching and Teaching.” By a confluence of events that only the Lord can achieve, I was privileged to preach a week ago Sunday, the Sunday entitled “The Baptism of our Lord.” That sermon and preparations for this presentation were concurrent assignments that a gracious Lord Jesus used to open my eyes once more to a Gospel reality I so often callously ignore. I pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit that from now on, every time I see a baptismal font, the Paraclete might comfort me in the wonders of this divine washing. Such is my prayer for this paper and for you. Baptism is pure Gospel. Never let us cease to be amazed at the magnitude of Gospel revelation connected with the Sacrament.

Baptism, therefore, is divinely associated with that which is most vital and most holy in all the revealed dealing of God with men: the depths of God’s mercy, the riches of His grace, the infinitude of His power, the unspeakable treasures of His love and wisdom and the mountains of His unmovable righteousness - all the attributes of God Himself that are engaged and revealed in the mighty work of Salvation - are shown, by the light of the New Testament Scriptures, to be closely associated with the solemn and expressive rite of baptism.<sup>iv</sup>

When we begin to grasp just how pervasively baptism truths are interwoven throughout the Scriptures, when we see how vital these truths are in celebrating a God who intervenes and graciously takes action to save, is it any wonder that Satan seeks again and again to downplay, denigrate, despise, and distort the Bible’s teaching on Baptism? To make it more personal, would it surprise us if that father of lies would try to dull the gleam of Gospel grace in the eyes and words of those called to teach this marvelous truth? Lord, open our eyes to marvel at the miracle you work at the font. In response to the assignment given, I propose to challenge you this morning by asking the question “Where is the font?” How prevalent is it in your preaching and teaching? How often do you rejoice in its power? How frequently do we sing about it? How many times a day do we dive back into its waters to find the solace for our souls so often burdened with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and despair? Where is the font? In our time together, let us explore this emphasis on baptism following a three-fold outline. I. By the Spirit’s grace, find the font a focal point of Scripture. II. By the Spirit’s grace, find the font a focal point in our lives. III. By the Spirit’s grace, find the font a focal point of our ministries.

### **I. By the Spirit’s grace, find the font a focal point of Scripture**

Before we can speak of ways to hold baptismal grace before our congregation, it is necessary to review why such an emphasis is important. If the Spirit does not fill us with awe, wonder, and joy in this Sacrament, we will not speak of baptism in words filled with awe, wonder, and joy. Permit, therefore, this brief review of baptism truths. Since this is a practical paper, the discussion of pertinent passages will not be exhaustive. (I commend the program

committee for adding an exegetical paper on baptism for this afternoon. I also think the a continual exegetical series on many of the sections listed below - sections not always boot up from our catechism memory drive when we access the baptism file - would be of great benefit for further study and prayer. Throw in several doctrinal papers on baptism, and you have enough for a year or more!)

When our Savior gave the command to go and baptize in the name of the Trinity, he does not mention the specifics of how to baptize. When we read about John baptizing in the Jordan River, we hear no answers to the practical questions of how to baptize, how much water, the mode of baptism. The Gospel writers do not describe in detail the act of baptism itself. I suppose there was no need. Baptize, as you well know, means to wash with water. For Jewish readers this was not a strange concept in regard to their spiritual life. The Old Testament lists various forms of ceremonial washings in the Sinaitic code. From ablutions to deal with uncleanness to the ritual washings of the priests and the High Priest, water was constantly used to signify the need for cleansing. The huge “molten sea” was a constant visual reminder of the need for water in the ceremonial worship life of the Old Testament believer. (Peruse your isagogics notes on Leviticus.) In addition, in first-century Judaism there also appears to have been a practice called “proselyte baptism,” practiced upon both men and women. If the proselyte had children, these also were baptized at the same times.<sup>v</sup> Of course, archaeological evidence at the Qumran community also reinforces the prevalence of ceremonial washings in the religious life of various sects and groups. So when John appeared in the Jordan, I imagine that his baptizing custom was not in and of itself a strange curiosity to his hearers. What made John’s baptism so powerful was the word proclaimed and the work of the Spirit. “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:3)

Jesus takes a custom rather well-known at that time and then tells his Church to “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) What is remarkable and powerful is the connection of water and the Word—the name of the one saving God. That name is the Word, as we teach our children: “God’s Name is everything God has revealed to us about himself in his word.”<sup>vi</sup> You might remember in Matthew 28:19, that the Greek has εἰς. In baptism God brings us into his name, in close connection with that revelation of the essence of God that leaves the finite mind whirling in wonderment. God places upon us his name. Let us now look at a number of Bible references to show the magnitude of what it means to be baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.<sup>vii</sup>

### **A Washing of Destruction yet Deliverance**

Both the apostle Peter and the apostle Paul invoke this imagery in connection with holy Baptism. It is a water that destroys yet delivers. The context of Peter’s affirmation that “baptism now saves you also” is a reference to the universal flood. That water destroyed the world and all the wickedness thereof. Yet that water lifted up the ark and carried Noah and seven others to safety. That water safeguarded God’s plan and promise first enunciated in Genesis 3:15. Something just as tremendous happens in the flood at the font. “In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand.” (1 Peter 3:20-22) Luther writes: “Now baptism is by far a greater flood than was that of Noah. For

that flood drowned men during no more than one year, but baptism drowns all sorts of men throughout the world, from the birth of Christ even till the day of judgment.”<sup>viii</sup>

Paul also goes back to Old Testament history with an allusion inescapable to a New Testament believer. “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2) Those mighty waters of the Red Sea destroyed and drowned the enemies of God’s people. Those same waters brought freedom and deliverance to the Israelites.

How can we not see God’s steady hand of grace? At the font that old Adam is drowned, and God delivers us from a death that we by virtue of birth so rightly inherited. Destruction yet deliverance—the font is a flood that achieves both through the power of the Word of the Lord God.

### **A Water of Washing**

Paul probably never forgot what Ananias exclaimed: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16) Wash away years of zealous observance of the law? Wash away a hatred for those of the Way? Wash away a personal desire to crush the young Church? Wash away all the pride wrapped up in a smug Pharisaic approach to righteousness? Is it possible? Can it be? Paul knew first hand the joy of this washing, a washing that cleansed him from a life of works. And where sins are washed away, we stand clean and forgiven before the Lord. “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.” (Acts 2:38) The font has water that truly works wonders on the soul. We stand before God squeaky clean through the blood of the Lamb. That blood makes baptism water special.

### **A water of rebirth and a washing of renewal**

You can almost hear the finger scratching the head. Poor Nicodemus wondered “How can this be?” Jesus had just taught him about being born again. “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” (John 3:5-6) What a picture to emphasize pure grace! Don’t let the modern “born-againers” take the field and steal a wonderful Gospel-filled picture. Jesus uses the picture to remind us that baptism is something that happens to us. We had no part in the process of our conception, nor did we feed ourselves in our mother’s womb, nor did we thumb through the calendar to find just the right month and day we wished to celebrate for the rest of our lives. What is true of our physical birth is also true of our spiritual birth. It happened to us without our input. We who were born “dead in sins” find new life. “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Eph. 2:4-5) And God did it through the special washing of Baptism. “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:5-7) As a brief aside, please note the last part of this verse. In that washing of rebirth God has declared us innocent, justified. It is an accomplished fact.

### **A washing that also clothes**

The Lord God took pity upon our first parents. After the Fall, God clothed them with garments to cover their shame and to protect them in a world now infected by sin. How much more does he delight in covering our sin and protecting us from the “the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms!” (Eph. 6:12) What a joy to know that God wraps us up in the invincible One. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” (Ga. 3:26,27) Imagine standing before the Almighty One dressed up in the gleaming garments of the obedience and righteousness of Jesus. God looks at a baptized person and sees His Son. With the hymn writer we rejoice, “Jesus thy blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress. Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head.”<sup>x</sup> Do you look at the font and see your wardrobe? Do you see the garments that Isaiah talked about? “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10) God has measured you and tailored a robe that will never wear out, go out of fashion, or be in need of dry cleaning. “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (Rev. 7:14)<sup>x</sup>

### **A water of death and burial, resurrection and new life**

The church father Cyril talked about baptism with an unique picture, baptism as the water tomb and as mother womb. A candidate would walk down into the baptistery pool for immersion in the water. In the liturgy Cyril used, these words would be spoken: “At the self-same time you died and were born; and that water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother. And what Solomon spoke of others will suit you also for, he said, ‘There is a time to bear and a time to die,’ but to you, on the contrary, the time to die is also a time to be born; and one and the same season brings about both of these things, and your birth went hand in hand with your death.”<sup>xi</sup>

Luther talks about how appropriate the mode of immersion is to the meaning of baptism. “It would be proper...that the infant, or whoever is to be baptized, should be put in and sunk completely into the water and then drawn out again. ...This usage is also demanded by the significance of baptism itself. For baptism...signifies that the old man and the sinful birth of flesh and blood are to be wholly drowned by the grace of God. We should therefore do justice to its meaning and make baptism a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies.”<sup>xii</sup>

Where do Cyril and Luther find this imagery of the font as a tomb? Paul’s pen links baptism to Christ’s tomb. His death is our death. Baptism is our burial. No one, not our conscience nor the Adversary, can drag our sins out from being buried in that tomb of Jesus. Our sins are sealed up forever. Yet the tomb also brings forth the glorious news of victory. So in a real sense, the Christian believer on his walk of faith not only walks toward his future death and resurrection in Christ, he is also walking from his death and resurrection in Christ. How can anyone improve on the Spirit’s inspired sermon about the Easter miracle at the font? “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ...In the same way, count

yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.” (Romans 6, selected verses.)

### **A wonderful washing with the Word**

Time does not permit us to continue to explore the many other allusions to Baptism that are found throughout the New Testament. Through baptism we are adopted into God’s family and brought into the household of God. (Ga. 3:26-27; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph.2:19) At baptism God set us apart as his own. “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” (2 Cor. 1:21-22) God does work at the font! Through baptism God does indeed work “forgiveness of sin, deliver us from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe.”<sup>xiii</sup> God’s seal is upon us, a seal that identifies us as the Lord’s very own. No longer do we belong to sin and Satan. We are the Lord’s! With our Lutheran fathers before us, confess Baptism as a visible Gospel where God is active. “For these rites have God’s command and the promise of grace, which is peculiar to the New Testament. For when we are baptized, when we eat the Lord’s body, when we are absolved, our hearts must be firmly assured that God truly forgives us for Christ’s sake. And God, at the same time, *by the Word and by the rite*, moves hearts to believe and conceive faith, just as Paul says, Rom. 10,17: ‘Faith cometh by hearing.’ But just as the Word enters the ear in order to strike our heart, so the rite itself strikes the eye, in order to move the heart. The effect of the Word and of the rite is the same.”<sup>xiv</sup>

### **II. By the Spirit’s grace, find the font a focal point in our lives**

The story is told that whenever Luther found himself struggling against despondency or despair, he would take chalk and write *baptizatus sum* on his desk.<sup>xv</sup> Whether apocryphal or true, his writings give evidence that such an action would be in keeping with his character. What do we do when discouraged and fatigued? Look to the font and remember what God told you there. Your identity as well as your eternity flows through those precious waters. God says to you, “You are my child.” Imagine. My name is more than just Mark or Zarling. My name is Christian. So is yours. Our identity, dear brothers, rests not in our WELS lineage. Nor dare we boast about the “pastor” with which we prefix our name. Our joy is found at the font. God the heavenly Father reassures me, no matter my age, “you are my boy. For Jesus’ sake, with you I am well-pleased.”

Well-pleased with me? Do we ever enter that pulpit with heavy hearts? If only they knew, we think. If only those people knew how little time I spent on this message. Rather than joy at proclaiming the Good News, our conscience crushes us with guilt for stepping forward to feed God’s people with a fast food frozen pizza rather than a sumptuous banquet of the Word, prepared fresh with fresh insights gleaned from fresh study. Well-pleased with me? If only they knew. That couple sitting opposite me think I have the answers. After all these weeks, I don’t even know if I care anymore. Why try? Why bother? I feel like a hypocrite sitting here and pretending to be concerned. Well pleased with me? Sometimes I look forward to catechism class with about as much eager anticipation as if I was going for a root canal. It just seems like I’ve lost my pep to reach those young teens. Oh well, at least those lessons are down pat. I haven’t changed them since I first tried them out in vicar year. I can teach them in my sleep. Well-pleased with me? Right now I really am struggling with career indecision. The ministry sure didn’t turn out the way I thought it would, back when I was daydreaming in dog class. Nothing

but phone calls from angry people or from anxious people or from asking people. I'm tired, so tired. Maybe it is time for someone with more energy and enthusiasm.

Perhaps none of those ideas even filtered into your cerebrum. If not, praise a gracious Lord for preserving you from doubt and weakness. But if they have, go back to the font. There we find comfort for our past haunts and for our present horrors. The apostle says to you and to me, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Rejoice in those passive verbs. God has come through baptism and cleansed you, set you apart, and declared you innocent. Rejoice in those past tense verbs. It is an accomplished fact. Let Satan rage all he will, he cannot change what God has declared. "You are my child. For Jesus' sake, I am well-pleased in you."

Ah, but then I read Paul's words in Romans 7. It is so true. "The good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do." As a pastor, I'm weighed down by so many sins of omission: calls not made, visitors not contacted, a widow not comforted, a delinquent not rebuked, and I only got to the hospital three times this week. Yet the temptations never cease. Satan whispers, "Take it easy. The power is in the Word, so why work so hard." We turn on our cable TV's and see temptation turned into part of a plot, and we catch ourselves eagerly waiting to travel to Belize to find pleasure as voyeurs, wondering whether or not those "committed couples" will stay committed. Suddenly, we equate "live-ins" as married couples, and watch along with America to see who will succumb. We go on-line and find the world at our fingertips. Suddenly, it takes no effort at all to spend hours trying to find out the latest financial news at the expense of studying the Good News. Temptations, those fiery darts of the evil one do not slack off when we age. Do you feel helpless, and does it seem hopeless? Go back to the font, and listen to what God says. "You are my child. In Christ, you are more than conquerors!" Paul says in Romans 6, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." (verse 14) Through baptism we are dead to temptations and alive in resurrection power. A famous preacher, one who denied infant baptism, still preached powerfully about the effects of baptism on a sanctified life.

Tell the world they need not try to fetch us back, for we are spoiled for them as much as if we were dead. All they could have would be our carcasses. Tell the world not to tempt us any longer, for our hearts are changed. Sin may charm the old man who hangs there upon the cross, and he may turn his leering eye that way, but he cannot follow up his glance, for he cannot get down from the cross: the Lord has taken care to use the mallet well, and he has fastened his hands and feet right firmly, so that the crucified flesh must still remain in the place of doom and death. Yet the true, the genuine life within us cannot die, for it is born of God; neither can it abide in the tombs, for its call is to purity and joy and liberty; and to that call it yields itself.<sup>xvi</sup>

God, in Christ Jesus, has given you power. With the sword of the Spirit and with the voice of Christ, you also can shout, "Get behind me Satan." Rejoice, you are God's child, and the omnipotent Father has promised his power to you in Christ. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil. 4:13)

Baptism gives you what you need to serve God. You are united with Christ, forgiven and freed. You are sealed by the Spirit and receive the manifestation of his gifts. You find thereat the joy to continue without counting the hours or considering the cost. You find at the font the fun of living in Christ and laughing at Satan. Listen to the fullness Paul describes for you. "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in

the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” (Col 2:9-12) Did you ever consider that passage in the context of baptism? I didn’t, until I read the following:

“You have been given fullness in Christ.” The King James Version translates that phrase: “Ye are complete in him”; the translation of the New English Bible is: “In him you have been brought to completion.” The point that Paul is making is that just as Christ lacks nothing—he is fully God and fully man—so, in Christ, through Baptism, we lack nothing. Technically speaking, the Greek verb translated “have been given fullness” is a periphrastic perfect. It emphasizes that something happened in the past and that its effects continue into the present. To produce that thought in the English we would say something like this: in Christ, through Baptism, you have been made full, you have been brought to completion, and you are still full and complete in him.<sup>xvii</sup>

If only we can grasp these Baptism truths firmly with a hand of powerful faith. Oh Spirit of God, strengthen my grip!

Yet this side of heaven, we look at the reality of life and don’t always see the reality of Baptism in the image of the person that looks back at me from the mirror. My old Adam has Velcro, and those pet sins of weakness keep daily attaching and dragging me down. Do not despair. “That Christians often fail in this battle does not belittle the power of Holy Baptism, but rather their little use of Holy Baptism.”<sup>xviii</sup> When we fall, go back to the font and there you’ll see the ship that Luther saw.

The ship, Baptism, cannot be shipwrecked because, as we said, it is God’s ordinance and not something of ours. It can happen, however, that we slip and fall out of the ship. But when this happens and someone does fall out, he should at once swim for the ship again and cling to it until he can climb back on deck and sail forward as he had earlier begun to do.

Thus we see how splendid a thing Baptism is. It snatches us out of the devil’s jaws, makes God our own, defeats and puts away sin, daily strengthens the new man in us, keeps functioning, and remains with us until we leave our present troubles to enter glory everlasting.<sup>xix</sup>

Brothers in the faith, and brothers in the *Amt*, find the font as the focus of your life. Find joy in your forgiveness and salvation. Find strength and renewed zeal. Find Christ’s promises to you. Then what you say and do, what you teach and preach, will not echo emptily off the walls of rote professionalism. Rather, the Spirit will use your message in word and in life as a witness to the grace and comfort that is Baptism. Without realizing it, perhaps, you will indeed make Baptism a mainstay of your ministry.

### **III. By the Spirit’s grace, find the font a focal point of our ministries**

There can be no question that Luther not only found great personal comfort in his baptism, he also conducted a ministry that pulsated with the blessings of baptism beating a clear and loud refrain in his sermons and writings. A quick count in the index of the American Edition of Luther’s Works came up with 533 references to baptism.<sup>xx</sup> Baptism was a priority. From 1528 through 1539 Luther preached at least twenty-three sermons on baptism.<sup>xxi</sup> Do we average two sermons a year on this sacrament? How do we hold up the joy and the confidence that God pours out through Baptism? The final portion of this paper will simply offer some ideas for your



consideration. Of far greater importance than any idea I share with you (or report to you from the creative minds of others,) is the hope that such ideas might be a “jump-start” to your own engines of creativity as you ponder the uniqueness of your individual flock, the uniqueness of the gifts that a gracious Lord has given to you to serve that flock, and the uniqueness of the pressing trials and tribulations that might be harassing your flock.

### **In your private prayer and study time**

Make the review of holy baptism a priority for your personal study. Why not read through Luther’s Large Catechism on baptism several times throughout the year? It is not a long section, and it is filled with wonderful and comforting insights into the doctrine of grace. Underline “quotable quotes.” And when you find a quotable quote, share it. When you write out your bulletins and are listing information on a baptism that will occur on a particular Sunday, type in a “quotable quote” from the Large Catechism. Let your people see the victory God gives in baptism expressed in Luther’s own inimitable style. Not that your style of explaining God’s truth is inadequate. But why not allow some variety? As the sunlight gleams from the various facets of the diamond, the jewel of baptism shines forth and can be described in vivid ways. Listed below are just a few “quotables” from Marty.<sup>xxii</sup>

Moreover, He earnestly and solemnly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved. No one is to think that it is an optional matter like putting on a red coat. (p. 98)

For God Himself here puts His honor, might, and power on the line. ...This word contains and transmits all of God’s fullness. (p. 100)

The power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save. (p. 100)

It follows from this that whoever rejects Baptism rejects God’s Word, faith, and the Christ who directs us to Baptism and binds us to it. (p. 102)

In short, Baptism is so full of comfort and grace that heaven and earth cannot fathom it. It requires special insight to believe this; for, there being no deficiency in the treasure, the deficiency lies in a person’s failure to grasp the treasure and hold it in a firm grip. (p. 103)

Every Christian consequently has enough to learn and to practice all his life in regard to Baptism. (p. 103)

The way to regard and use Baptism rightly is to draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or consciences trouble us. (p. 104)

The question whether I am strong or weak in the faith I leave in God’s hands. (p. 106)

If you therefore live in repentance you are progressing in your Baptism which not only heralds the new life but also creates, begins and carries it forward. (p. 108)

In addition, one can review the Confessions, the dog notes, other interesting sermons or books you have found. Share your reading lists with a brother in the circuit.

### **In the corporate worship life of the congregation**

I imagine that everyone present has seen a gradual increase in the number of private baptism requested by members. In some of our large congregations, it is a practice almost of necessity. Have you also noticed a growing trend in parents wishing to have their baby baptized in the hospital room? I am not speaking about emergency situations where the health of the infant is at peril. Rather, it seems to me that more frequently than before, parents simply wish to have baptism within a couple of days of birth, and they do not wish to wait for a worship service. (Of course, what I hear nowadays is always of the second-hand nature from brothers in the field. Perhaps it is not as common as I think it to be.) I doubt very much if any of us would deny baptism when parents requested it. Indeed, far be it from us to ever say no when Christian parents seek the Sacrament for their child. However, maybe you can guess where I am going with this line of thought. Although Jesus commands baptism and not customs, nor sponsors, nor time of baptism, nor place of baptism—yet do we take the time to also remind parents of the wonderful visual reminder that the Sacrament presents in the worship life of the congregation? Do we take time to also teach them about the corporate responsibility we share, an emphasis well captured in the baptism liturgy of *Christian Worship*?<sup>xxiii</sup> Do we also teach them that baptism unites with Christ and with each other? “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (1 Cor. 12:13)

There is much to commend the practice of emphasizing baptisms within the worship life of the church. Even adult baptisms can be a powerful witness to what the real mission of the Church is all about! I confess that I never insisted that an adult had to be baptized within the worship service. In fact, on more than one occasion, the adult felt somewhat awkward about being up at the font alone. Yet how important for the body of Christ to rejoice in the on-going victory of the Gospel! I’m sure you can all recount times when the eyes of your members filled with tears of joy and emotion upon the baptism of another soul, now grafted into Christ. Do we teach and preach the benefits of public baptism in the service? I think it can be done without confusing the freedom we have or denying the willingness we possess to baptize whenever and wherever parents request it. (Of course, this emphasis is contrary to much of the practice of the early church. The early church did view baptism as a church function rather than a private one. But since the Sacrament was viewed also as the “entrance into the community of believers,” it did not normally take place in the presence of the assembled congregation.)<sup>xxiv</sup>

Many of the customs connected with baptism can serve to hold forth grace before the eyes of the flock, if we instruct! There is no time to speak about the various customs we often use, such as the sign of the cross and the wearing of a special “gown.” Teach the “why” of the custom and connect it with the Scripture’s symbolism.

Do we emphasis in our worship the vivid reminder each invocation calls forth? That name in which we assemble is the reason why we can assemble. The Holy God has placed that name upon us, and because of that name we are part of the family that can now boldly come forward into the presence of the holy God, sinners washed clean and dressed up in Jesus. The confession and absolution of the liturgy echoes the reality of the font!

Finally, do we see the boldness in prayer that we possess because of Baptism? At the font the pastor often lays his hand on the child and says the Lord’s Prayer. I am indebted to a little book called *The Gospel of Baptism* for making a connection that I never considered before. Please permit a rather lengthy quote.

Throughout the structure of the prayer there appears the intimate bond by which Baptism links all believers with Christ in one body:

*Our Father* - whose children we become through Baptism;

*Hallowed be Thy name* - into which we are baptized and through which name alone we have a life to dedicate to its hallowing;

*Thy kingdom come* - through the Baptism that translates us from the kingdom of sin, darkness, and death into the kingdom of Christ with forgiveness, light, and life;

*Thy will be done* - Baptism binds us to that gracious will of Him “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:40, and it leads us to pray;

*Give us...our daily bread* -including above all the bread of life in the sacramental meal which nourishes and strengthens us for pursuing our baptismal way;

*Forgive us our trespasses* - for they are washed away by Baptism’s cleansing waters;

*Lead us not into temptation* - especially the greatest temptation of all: to abandon our Baptism;

*Deliver us from evil* - in the power of Christ’s victory over Satan, which through Baptism becomes our own and assures us that we shall safely reach our goal.<sup>xxv</sup>

One final comment in this section on ways to highlight baptism in the worship life of the congregation. Do a hymn study! Find the numerous verses throughout various hymns that have passing references to the miracle of baptism. Use those verses as preparation prayers in the bulletin, quote in your sermons, refer to them in your parish newsletters. Some verses emphasize the first and second parts of baptism, others will emphasize the meaning of baptism for our Christian “thanks-living.”

### **In your preaching and teaching proclamation**

What a remarkable privilege it is to stand in the pulpit and address God’s people with terms that reflect reality as God proclaims it, not as we humans necessarily see it. Those people in your pews are God’s people, his children, sanctified and holy through baptism. Don’t call them as you see them, call them as God sees them in Christ! Your greeting from the pulpit is more than just a throw-away comment to get into the sermon. Your greeting expresses a relationship, a relationship between shepherd and flock, but more importantly between people and Savior. Use the terms that Scripture uses to reflect what baptism has accomplished. They are the people of God, they are the saints of God, they are dressed up in Christ, set apart and sealed, they are the lights and salt of the world. They are heirs of salvation. When you speak to your people sitting before you with their Scriptures open, what powerful evidence that the Spirit of God has kept a soul in baptismal unity with God. “He who belongs to God hears what God says.” (John 8:47) When you need to discipline students in confirmation class, remember who they are. Point to the font and teach them to drown the old Adam’s rebellious attitude in the waters that cover all sin. Point them to the font and remind them that they are wrapped up in the

obedience of the child “who grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” (Luke 2:52) I suppose I can summarize this paragraph with the term “great expectations.” The Gospel works miracles. In how you address and deal with the precious blood-bought souls, speak with the endearing terms of the font. Watch the Gospel create levels of sanctification that strive to reach what God says is reality. They are the body of Christ. Believe it and speak it. Our Gospel talk with God’s people will be blessed by the Spirit, and you will see attitudes change, apathy vaporize, and people energized to serve.

In connection with your preaching and teaching, permit one passing comment about confirmation. We invest huge amounts of time in instruction, and rightly so. How much of that instruction time not only deals with baptism, but also sprinkles baptism’s truths throughout our lesson plans? During the ceremony of confirmation, do whatever it takes to overcome the idea that somehow this day supersedes the day of baptism. Don’t focus so much on the promises that the teens will make, but take them back to the promise God pronounced upon them, the Gospel promise that alone enables a soul to make a promise in return. Focus on the font even at confirmation. With adults in Bible Information Class, you have a marvelous opportunity to let them see how baptism is pure gospel. These people searching for truth and yearning for love can be reassured that they are loved in baptism. No matter their previous track record, no matter how full the baggage might be that they are bringing with them, dump it all into the font. Please do not ever short-change your teaching of baptism with adults. For many people, they have never progressed beyond the idea of “christening” or “dedication.”

Consider your preaching schedule with an eye toward repeated emphasis on baptism. Perhaps it is in order to have a series on the Sacraments, or on baptism alone. Paint the full portrait of baptism as the Scriptures do, and there are more than enough word - pictures in Scripture to flesh out a sermon series. Some of the thoughts expressed previously in this paper could certainly be tweaked. For example:

*Series idea:* Find rest at the water. So many vacationers love to go to the ocean or to the lake, a place of relaxation and refreshment. Water sports invigorate. Sunsets over water pacify and please. If it is true for our physical sense of peace, what about our spiritual sense of rest? Return to a place of water that constantly refreshes, the wondrous water of Baptism! We never tire of going back to a place that brings such contentment.

*Series theme:* Find Yourself in the Water that Saves

- A Water with the Word
- A Water of Healing
- A Water of Destruction and Deliverance
- A Water of Washing
- A Water of Death and Resurrection
- A Water of Rebirth and Renewal
- A Water of Union

By no means did I clear that sermon series idea with the homiletics department! It is rather given to you just for the sake of making you think about possibilities you could develop.<sup>xxvi</sup> The ideas of that series do not deductively follow the doctrinal presentation of the catechism, but rather present ideas that flow from the variety of pictures that Scripture uses in connection with baptism.

**In counseling**

Have you noticed which famous baptism reference has not been used yet? “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, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way...” (Eph. 5:25-28) Perhaps no other baptism reference gets heard by outside visitors as often as this verse, read at every wedding service. Do we take the time to make the connection that Paul does? How is it possible for a marriage to be truly one? How is it possible for a home to be filled with peace and joy? The apostle takes the husband back to the font and to the reality of the love of Christ. Did you ever ponder this baptism reference used in this section on husbands and wives? Find the font as the focal point of a marriage as well.

Certainly, a paper could be written about using baptism truths in our counseling of couples and families. Law and gospel counseling flow from the font. Take an individual with much to confess and urge him or her to drown the old nature and crucify the old Adam. They are dead to sin. But they are alive in Christ. That means resurrection power! Resurrection power is power for forgiveness and forgetting; power to reconcile and reunite; power to find peace. There is in baptism power to change lives and heal hurts. It is all at the font.

Encourage families to remember baptism in their own family traditions. You are familiar with baptism candles and the customs some families have with them. I believe you can still purchase them from our publishing house. Make the baptism day a day of celebration and prayer. Light the candle to help solemnize the symbolism. Use the Bible study that is included in the new cradle roll program from CYD, *Strong Roots for Tender Shoots*.<sup>xxvii</sup> In that packet there is a Bible study for parents entitled “Spiritual Rebirth: How to Enjoy and Live the Blessings of Baptism.” The study includes the following lessons: what is baptism; baptism and our children; helping your children enjoy baptism’s blessings forever.

Another custom that I adapted and practiced with my children in years past came from a book called *The Family Blessing*.<sup>xxviii</sup> Without going into detail at this time, the basic tenet of the book is simple. Instruct your parents to tuck their children into bed at night with more than just a prayer. Place your hand upon the head of your child. Announce the blessing of God upon them, and call them by name. If parents can think of no other blessing, then have them simply repeat the Aaronic Blessing they hear every week. Speak the blessing but make it personal. “The Lord bless my \_\_\_\_ and keep her. The Lord make his face shine upon \_\_\_\_ and be gracious to her. The Lord look upon \_\_\_\_ with favor, and give her his peace.” The last thing that child hears for the day is the reminder of whom she is, a child of God, loved by God and loved by dad. No matter the arguments and temper tantrums of the day, that child closes her eyes in the reassurance of being part of a family that loves her. What a natural and special time to remind her of baptism’s blessings.

### **Conclusion**

Don’t worry, this won’t be long. I thought long and hard for some snappy conclusion to wrap up this paper. Finally, I decided to say what is on my heart. I thank you. I thank you for asking me to do something I would not have done without your assignment. I thank you for allowing me to spend time in Scripture, through which the Spirit of God opened my eyes anew to the glory of baptism. I pray that we stand at the font together through this Scripture study. Stand at the font in awe. Stand at the font in thanksgiving. Stand at the font in eager expectation.

I shall close as I began, with a prayer.

“All who believe and are baptized Shall see the Lord’s salvation;

Baptized into the death of Christ, They are a new creation.  
Through Christ's redemption they shall stand  
Among the glorious, heav'nly band  
Of ev'ry tribe and nation.

“With one accord, O God, we pray: Grant us your Holy Spirit.  
Help us in our infirmity Through Jesus' blood and merit.  
Grant us to grow in grace each day  
That by this sacrament we may  
Eternal life inherit.<sup>xxix</sup>

**References and Reading List**  
(Not all works listed where cited in the paper)

- Bente, F., ed. *Concordia Triglotta*. St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1921.
- Braun, J.A. *When We Are Baptized*. Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1993.
- Garborg, R. *The Family Blessing*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990.
- Jungkuntz, R.P. *The Gospel of Baptism*. St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1968. Reprint, 1986, by Pacific Lutheran University Press.
- Kuske, H.C. "Baptism Fourthly in the life of the Pastor." Unpublished essay, 1996. WLS Library, EF 1427.
- Lauersdorf, R. "Remember Your Baptism with Water and the Word." Unpublished essay, 1973 (?). WLS Library, EF 194.
- Luther, Martin. "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism." *Luther's Works*, Volume 35. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1960.
- Luther, Martin. "The Order of Baptism Newly Revised, 1526." *Luther's Works*, Volume 53. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1965.
- Luther, Martin. *The Large Catechism*. A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions. Translator is F. Sameul Janzow. St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1978.
- Nitz, H.C. "The Best Robe." Unpublished essay, 1960. WLS Library, EF 172.
- Riley, H.M. *Christian Initiation*. Printed in Quasten, J., ed. *Studies in Christian Antiquity*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1974.
- Spurgeon, C.H. "Baptism - A Burial." A sermon delivered on Oct. 30, 1881. Accessed @ [www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1627.htm](http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1627.htm).
- Spurgeon, C.H. "Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font." WLS Library, EF 990.
- Valleskey, D.J. "Spiritual Renewal - Back to the Basics and Forward to Maturity." Unpublished essay, 1988. WLS Library, EF 752.

---

<sup>i</sup> This prayer is slightly adapted from a prayer included in Luther's 1526 revision of the order of baptism. See LW, volume 53, page 197.

<sup>ii</sup> Of course you realize that I make an assumption here that most fonts are at the front of church. Many of you are aware that such is not always the case. Churches, both ancient and modern, and

---

I believe also some within our fellowship, have at times placed the font at the entrance of the sanctuary. A visual statement and reminder is also made with that placement, is there not?

<sup>iii</sup> See “Emphasize Baptism” in *The Lutheran Leader*, vol. 8, # 1, Fall, 1999. The eight-sided reference was an Easter reminder of how Christ rose on the eighth day (if you-count Sunday as the first day.) In that brief article Pastor Bill Tackmeier also mentions that baptism covers seem to have come into existence to counter the superstition that baptism water left in the font had miraculous qualities to heal, and so forth. People would try to steal the water.

<sup>iv</sup> Although the written style seems somewhat complex for current readers conditioned by CNN soundbites, H.C. Nitz summarizes truths that can never go out of style for the faithful. This is taken from his introduction in a paper called “The Best Robe,” written in 1960. It is in the essay file at WLS Library, EF 172. As a sidelight, many of you are aware of an on-going project to place the several thousand essays on file at the Sem library on the Sem web page for immediate access. I do not know how many are currently “on-line,” but I know it to be in the hundreds.

<sup>v</sup> For a brief discussion on this “proselyte baptism,” see comments by Richard Jungkuntz in *The Gospel of Baptism*, Pacific Lutheran University Press, 1986 reprint, page 39-40.

<sup>vi</sup> Question 41 from the “Kuske” Catechism.

<sup>vii</sup> By one count there are over 100 New Testament references to βαπτίζω and its cognates. Add the numerous references to washing, cleansing, birth, burial, adoption, etc., and one begins to see that baptism is not just a passing fancy of New Testament writers. What outstanding emphasis the Holy Spirit places on this act in which God imparts to the sinful the merits of the Savior!

<sup>viii</sup> “The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism,” in LW, volume 35, page 32.

<sup>ix</sup> TLH, 371.

<sup>x</sup> For another interesting and vivid illustration based loosely upon this Galatians reference, talk to a rancher from Wyoming about the practice of “jacketing.”

<sup>xi</sup> As quoted on page 302 of *Studies in Christian Antiquity, volume 17*. The book is edited by Johannes Quasten. The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1974. The volume is entitled *Christian Initiation*, and is authored by Hugh M. Riley.

<sup>xii</sup> “The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism,” LW, vol. 35, page 29.

<sup>xiii</sup> With apologies to Martin for a slight paraphrase.

<sup>xiv</sup> “Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, page 309 in the Triglot. Emphasis added.

<sup>xv</sup> I was unable to track down the reference, more due to lack of time than thorough research. However, I might add that in my reading of various materials, three different authors either quoted this phrase or alluded to it. Unfortunately, none of them cited a reference. This past week, a variant was heard during morning chapel at the Sem. The student claimed that Luther would tap his forehead and remind himself, “I am baptized.” Perhaps someone here today knows the reference.

<sup>xvi</sup> From a sermon by C.H. Spurgeon entitled, “Baptism - A Burial.” I found it at [www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1627.htm](http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1627.htm). Another sermon of his that I read was entitled “Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font.” (WLS Library, EF 990.) I can only imagine how he would choke at my title. In this second sermon Charles forcefully denied infant baptism. I suppose one need not be surprised at a Baptist finding the sanctification aspects of Baptism fourthly worth a fourteen page (single-spaced) sermon, while denying that the truths of Baptism secondly can be poured out upon infants.

<sup>xvii</sup> Valleskey, David. “Spiritual Renewal - Back to the Basics and Forward to Maturity.” An essay written in 1988, and on file at the WLS library. (EF 752). The quote is found on pages 5-6.



---

<sup>xviii</sup> Lauersdorf, Richard. "Remember Your Baptism with Water and the Word." An essay delivered to the Central Pastor-Teacher Conference back in May of 1973 (year uncertain, illegible). EF 194.

<sup>xix</sup> *The Large Catechism* of Martin Luther, page 109 in the translation by F. Samuel Janzow. St. Louis: CPH, 1978.

<sup>xx</sup> Please don't hold me to an exact count. I went through the columns a couple of times, but found my weak eyes kept losing place. In addition, my enumeration counted as a one time reference a listing that sometimes covered more than 4 or 5 pages! Perhaps even more telling is the effort of H.C. Nitz, in the paper alluded to earlier, "The Best Robe." He claims that the index in the St. Louis edition lists *sixteen columns* of references to baptism. Furthermore, he found only one reference to confirmation in all of the St. Louis edition. Makes a person wonder if our emphasis is misplaced!

<sup>xxi</sup> See the introduction to "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," LW volume 35, page 26. To be exact, here is the listing: 1528 - a series of four; 1532 - a series of three; 1534 - a series of six, plus later in the year a longer "three-parter" on baptism; 1538 - a series of six; 1539 - a series of three.

<sup>xxii</sup> All quotes are from the Janzow translation, and I will simply put the page number after each quote. Also keep in mind, as some of you perhaps know, Fortress Press has come out with a new translation of *The Book of Concord*. I have not yet read in it, but I believe the editors are Kolb/Wengert. I think the Sem bookstore already stocks copies.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See the order of Holy Baptism, pages 12-14, especially the exhortation on page 14.

<sup>xxiv</sup> For a brief discussion, see Jungkuntz, *op.cit.*, pages 126ff.

<sup>xxv</sup> Jungkuntz, R. *op. cit.*, pages 130-131

<sup>xxvi</sup> Lauersdorf, *op. cit.*, also presents a sermon series based upon a catechism review. I. The Use of Baptism, Mt. 28:18ff; II. The Benefits of Baptism, Acts 2:38; III. The Power of Baptism, Eph. 5:25-26; IV. The Significance of Baptism, Ro. 6:3-11. See page 11.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Contact the CYD or NPH.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Garborg, R. *The Family Blessing*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990.

<sup>xxix</sup> CW, 299.