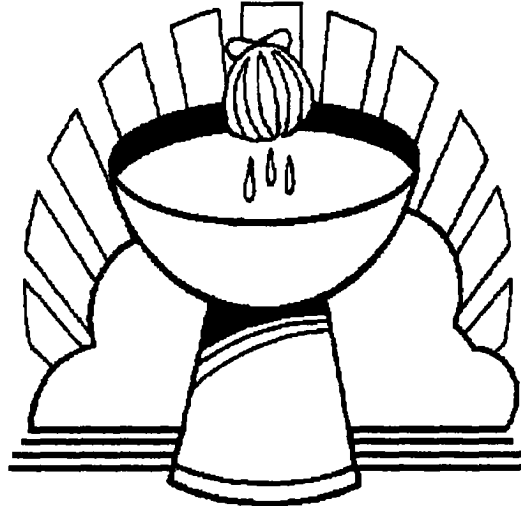


Baptism: The Means of Grace with Irresistible Power?

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It was March 12, 1998. Baby Daniel was born. I went up to the hospital to visit Mom, Dad and baby Daniel anticipating that this would be the “typical” hospital call on a new Mom. When I arrived I found out that baby Daniel was “not quite right.” The doctors were not sure why, but there was something amiss about Daniel’s appearance and his abilities. I went to see him in the neo-natal nursery. He looked perhaps a little premature, but otherwise to my untrained eye he looked like most other newborn babies. One day went by then another and still another and the doctors simply were not sure what was causing baby Daniel’s inability to suckle and his increasingly noticeable lack of muscle tone. I had been visiting with Mom and Dad encouraging them to have baby Daniel baptized. Finally, on March 18, 1998, baby Daniel received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism in a waiting room adjacent to the neo-natal nursery. That same day he was transferred to Children’s Hospital for more intensive tests.

Six days after Daniel was baptized the doctor’s informed his parents of the diagnosis. Daniel had a rare genetic disorder called Zellweger’s Syndrome. There were only three babies in the entire nation who were diagnosed with Zellweger’s and still alive. The average life-span for a Zellweger’s baby is six months. There is no cure.

On June 29, 1998, baby Daniel died in his mother’s arms. The next day I accompanied his parents to the funeral home to help set up arrangements for baby Daniel’s funeral. A memorial service was conducted on July 3, 1998. The church was full. My funeral devotion was based upon our Savior’s words, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 13:14-15). My entire devotion can be summed up by quoting just one section:

In a little room in Valley Medical Center you brought your son to Jesus because on the basis of God’s holy Word you knew that Jesus could give Daniel something far more precious and far more necessary than we can even begin to imagine. On that day through the power of God the Holy Spirit working in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism all the sin that Daniel was born with was completely washed away. On that day your beloved son became the dearly beloved adopted son of the Triune God Himself. On that day a little pure white robe of righteousness was wrapped

around Daniel, a robe which brought with it the absolute guarantee that one day—and now we know that it would be one day soon—Daniel would inherit the eternal glories of heaven above. Jim and LeeAnn, out of love you gave Daniel many, many wonderful things during the short time he was with us. You gave him your love. You gave him your heart. You gave him your time. You gave him your attention. You gave him all the help and all the hope that medical science had to offer. But by bringing him to Jesus you made sure that Daniel received the greatest gift of all. By bringing him to Jesus you insured that Daniel received the gift of saving faith in his heart, the gift which automatically brings with it the complete forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven above. And now by having brought Daniel to Jesus through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism you have the quiet comfort and the complete confidence which is brought out so well in the first hymn that you chose to sing this morning, “Who so happy as I am, Even now the shepherd’s lamb? And when my short life is ended, By his angel hosts attended, He shall fold me to his breast, There within his arms to rest” (CW #431).

Did I go too far? Did I say too much? Did I go beyond what Scripture teaches concerning the Sacrament of Holy Baptism? That is essentially what we are here to discuss today.

The topic I was given to research and present to you today is: *Baptism: The Means of Grace with Irresistible Power?* Even more specifically I was given this guidance: “The paper would focus on whether baptism, especially of infants, is actually an irresistible grace. This is how we generally regard the sacrament, but is this consistent with our teaching of grace and consistent with Scripture?” Hence, brothers, this paper.

I anticipate dividing this paper into three basic sections. First, what does Scripture say on this issue. Since we have all taken a vow to believe, teach and confess only what is clearly taught in Scripture this seems like the natural place to start. Secondly, I want to take us through some of the Confessions of our church to see what our spiritual forefathers have to say on this subject. After all, we have also vowed that all of our teaching and our administration of the Sacraments shall be in conformity with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of our church. And finally, let’s see what dangers we face and what dangers we place in front of others if we either go too far or not far enough in our doctrine and practice of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Scripture Speaks

Scripture, as you know, is not silent on the subject of Baptism. We will look at some of the major portions of the New Testament which speak on this subject noting especially the blessings that God’s holy Word intimately connects with the Sacrament of Baptism.

Mark 16:16

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται, ὁ δὲ ἀπιστήσας κατακριθήσεται.

πιστεύσας – 1 aorist active participle nom sg masculine of πιστεύω

βαπτισθεὶς - 1 aorist passive participle nom sg masculine of βαπτίζω

σωθήσεται - 3 person sg future passive indicative of σωζω

ἀπιστήσας - 1 aorist active participle nominative sg masculine of ἀπιστέω

κατακριθήσεται - 3 person sg future passive indicative of κατακρίνω

He who believes and is baptized will be saved (rescued), but he who fails (or refuses) to believe will be condemned

The two participles describe for us who will be saved. The fact that they are aorist participles emphasizes that the action described therein represents a single act that has taken place in the past.

Here we see very clearly that faith and baptism are combined as the means of obtaining salvation. Faith and baptism go together we might say. The moment a man believes he will want baptism. Recall the Ethiopian eunuch, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” (Acts 8:36). At the same time baptism is the means whereby God bestows on an individual the faith which grasps onto the salvation won by Christ. The rejection of baptism, not the absence of baptism, is what condemns. For in the rejection of baptism we see the absence of true saving faith.

John 3:5

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ

ἀπεκρίθη - 3 person sg 1 aorist passive indicative of ἀποκρίνομαι
γεννηθῆ - 3 person sg 1 aorist passive subjunctive of γεννάω
δύναται - 3 person sg present passive indicative of δύναμαι
εἰσελθεῖν - 2 aorist active infinitive of εἰσερχομαι

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born by means of water and Spirit he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.”

There are just a couple of points to note here. First, the ἐκ denotes origin and source. The fact that there is one preposition makes water and Spirit a single concept. The absence of the Greek articles with the two nouns makes their unity even more apparent (Lenski p. 237).

On the concept of being born of water and the Spirit we will have more to say when we look at Titus 3:5.

Acts 2:38-39

Πέτρος δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς, Μετανοήσατε, [φησίν,] καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν καὶ λήμψεσθε τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. ὑμῖν γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐπαγγελία καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις ὑμῶν καὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς εἰς μακρὰν, ὅσους ἂν προσκαλέσεται κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν.

Μετανοήσατε - 2 person pl 1 aorist active imperative of μετανοέω
βαπτισθήτω - 3 person sg 1 aorist passive imperative of βαπτίζω
λήμψεσθε - 2 person pl future middle indicative of λαμβάνω
προσκαλέσεται - 3 person sg 1 aorist middle subjunctive of προσκαλέομαι

But Peter (said) to them, “Repent and be baptized each of you in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness (cancellation) of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all those who are far away whom the Lord our God will call.”

There are two extremely important points to be noted here—both centered in the words εἰς ἄφεσιν. According to our *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* the εἰς here is used to indicate the goal and to denote purpose (p. 228).

Lenski in his commentary on this passage emphasizes the same truth when he writes,

This is emphasized strongly in the addition: “for or unto remission of your sins.” It amounts to nothing more than a formal grammatical difference whether εἰς is again regarded as denoting sphere (equal to ἐν), R. 592, or, as is commonly supposed, as indicating aim and purpose, R. 592,

or better still as denoting effect. Sphere would mean that baptism is inside the same circle as remission; he who steps into this circle has both. Aim and purpose would mean that baptism intends to give remission; in him, then, who receives baptism aright this intention, aim, and purpose would be attained. The same is true regarding the idea of effect in εἰς. This preposition connects remission so closely with baptism that nobody has as yet been able to separate the two. It is this gift or remission that makes baptism a true sacrament; otherwise it would be only a sign or a symbol that conveys nothing real. (pp. 107-108)

The other main word to be noted here is ἄφεσις. ἄφεσις means to “let go, send away, cancel, remit, pardon” (BAG). One of the premier truths of Christianity is that the Lord in His great mercy “sends away” or “cancels” or “pardons” our sin purely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Here I am sure we all think of passages such as Psalm 103 especially verse 12—“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us,” or Micah 7:19, “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

On that first day of Pentecost Peter makes it unmistakably clear that baptism effects the cancellation of sins.

Acts 22:16

καὶ νῦν τί μέλλεις; ἀναστὰς βάπτισαι καὶ ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου ἐπικαλεσάμενος τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.

μέλλεις - 2 person sg present active indicative of μέλλω
 ἀναστὰς - 2 aorist active participle nom sg masculine of ἀνίστημι
 βάπτισαι - 2 person sg 1 aorist middle imperative of βαπτίζω
 ἀπόλουσαι - 2 person sg 1 aorist middle imperative of ἀπολούω
 ἐπικαλεσάμενος - 1 aorist middle participle nom sg masculine of ἐπικαλέω

And now what must you do? (Or, And now why are you waiting?) Stand up, be baptized and wash away your sins calling on his name.

According to *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Blass-Debrunner) the two aorist imperatives are causative middles—“Get thyself baptized and get thyself washed as to thy sins.”

Especially important here is the addition of the second imperative. Ananias could have very simply told Saul to “get up and be baptized calling on his name.” But under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit Ananias included the second imperative, “Wash away your sins.” Once again we see how clearly Baptism is portrayed as the means by which our sins are washed away.

Romans 6:3-4

ἢ ἀγνοεῖτε ὅτι, ὅσοι ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθημεν; συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον, ἵνα ὡσπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν.

ἀγνοεῖτε - 2 person plural present active indicative of ἀγνοέω
 ἐβαπτίσθημεν - 1 person plural 1 aorist passive indicative of βαπτίζω
 συνετάφημεν - 1 person plural 2 aorist passive indicative of συνθάπτω
 ἠγέρθη - 3 person singular 1 aorist passive indicative of ἐγείρω
 περιπατήσωμεν - 1 person plural 1 aorist active subjunctive of περιπατέω

Or do you fail to understand (disregard) that we, as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus are baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried together with Him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father in this same way we also might walk in newness of life.

Here we can see very clearly how our baptism, Jesus' death and resurrection, and our death and resurrection are intimately tied together. Our baptism is our guarantee that we are personally connected to Jesus' death and resurrection. See also Ephesians 2:5 & 6.

With the *διά* of verse four Paul makes baptism a means—not a symbol, but a means—which applies Christ's death and resurrection to us. Baptism is also a means whereby we are given the ability to put away sin in our lives and walk in the newness of life that we have been given.

The passive forms of the verbs are vital to note. We do not do something for Christ when we are baptized. No rather, Christ does something for us through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

On this section of Scripture permit me to quote from Dr. George Stoeckhardt's commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans*:

And so we, being baptized into Christ, were also baptized into His death; and so through baptism have become partakers of His death and its fruit, His redemption, redemption not only from the guilt but from the power of sin. Baptized into Christ and His death, we are freed from sin's power. In us the power of sin is broken.

Adults, those of age, who understand human speech and teaching, are brought into fellowship with Christ and His merits through the Word. For them baptism is a seal and confirmation of the gracious promise of the Gospel... Children and those under age, on the other hand, who cannot as yet grasp the Word, indeed through baptism have fellowship with Christ and His death (p. 79).

On this point remember also Galatians 3:26, 27: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

Ephesians 5:25-26

Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀγιάσῃ καθαρίσας τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι,

ἀγαπᾶτε - 2 person plural present active imperative of ἀγαπάω
 ἠγάπησεν - 3 person singular 1 aorist active indicative of ἀγαπάω
 παρέδωκεν - 3 person singular 1 aorist active indicative of παραδίδωμι
 ἀγιάσῃ - 3 person singular 1 aorist active subjunctive of ἀγιάζω
 καθαρίσας - 1 aorist active participle nom sg masculine of καθαρίζω

Husbands, love your wives just as also Christ loved the church and delivered Himself up for her in order to make her holy, cleansing (purifying) (her) with the washing of water in the Word.

Lenski brings out that when a verb and a participle follow so closely upon each other the two are generally simultaneous (p. 631).

The τῷ λουτρῷ is very simply a Dative of Means. Christ "cleanses, makes clean or purifies" His Church by means of "washing with the water (Genitive of Material) in connection with the word."

The ἐν ῥήματι has no article because "the water in connection with the spoken word" is one concept. That, too, is why τοῦ ὕδατος the article (Lenski p. 633).

Obviously, one of the key concepts contained in this portion of Scripture centers around the word ἀγιάσῃ. On this concept Professor Habeck has some very useful insights. He states:

Either one has been cleansed from all sinful defilement so that he is acceptable for membership in God's family or he has been made able in his conduct to conform to God's will. It is only a matter of emphasis, for in life these characteristics are inseparable. I opt for the former emphasis. Here Paul states only the fact that baptism effects a cleansing. But the context of the epistle makes it clear that this is not apart from faith. In Titus 3:5 he says that faith is worked by baptism and calls it λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας. To have been born again means to have been made a believer. This then is the process by which the church has been made holy. (*Ephesians*, p. 116)

Titus 3:5

οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων τῶν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ἃ ἐποιήσαμεν ἡμεῖς ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος ἔσωσεν ἡμᾶς διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας καὶ ανακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου.

ἐποιήσαμεν - 1 person pl 1 aorist active indicative of ποιέω
ἔσωσεν - 3 person sg 1 aorist active indicative of σώζω

Not by means of the works in righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us by means of the washing (cleansing) of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

This is undoubtedly one of the key passages concerning Baptism. It goes without saying that Christians know of only one "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" and that is the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Lenski gives us an interesting look at the genitives used here. He says,

The genitives may be regarded as possessive: "bath belonging to regeneration"; or qualitative: "regenerating bath"; or objective: "bath effecting regeneration." Any one of these genitives retains the main point, namely, that this bath and this regeneration plus the renewing are inseparably connected: where the bath is, there the regeneration and the renewing are. (p. 933)

I Peter 3:21

ὃ καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀντίτυπον νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα, οὐ σαρκὸς ἀπόθεσις ῥύπου ἀλλὰ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν, δι' ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

σώζει - 3 person sg present active indicative of σώζω

And this (water) is a figure pointing to baptism which now saves you, not removal of dirt of the body but a promise of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The analogy that Peter is using here is very simple: the saving effect of water. For Noah and those with him on the ark they were saved by means of the flood waters. For Peter's readers we are saved by means of the water of Baptism.

The appositions have the effect of explanatory clauses as if Peter had written "for it is not ...but it is." One of the most common means of emphasizing the positive is to place it in contrast with the negative. Here Peter is emphasizing that Baptism is not simply a ceremonial outward washing but a sacramental inward washing.

The "promise" is God's promise to us and not some kind of promise on our part to God. The point being emphasized here is that God is bestowing something on us which becomes ours through Baptism.

Also crucial to our understanding of Baptism is that this sacrament rests on the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Jesus' resurrection is the means by which our sins were paid for. Without the

physical resurrection of Jesus there is no forgiveness, there is no Baptism, there is no promise, there is no righteousness, there is nothing.

Summary

When one takes Scripture at face value it becomes abundantly clear that when a person is baptized with water in the name of the Triune God that individual truly and actually receives: salvation (Mark 16:16); new birth (John 3:5); cancellation of their sins (Acts 2:38-39); a washing away of their sins (Acts 22:16); a personal connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 6:3,4); a cleansing or purifying from sin (Ephesians 5:25-26); a washing of rebirth and renewal (Titus 3:5); and, the certainty of salvation (I Peter 3:21).

Nowhere in any of these passages are we given the impression that baptism is anything less than a tool, a means, whereby the Lord bestows upon us the blessings listed above.

So far, I do not think that I went too far in the unqualified assurances that I gave to the parents of baby Daniel.

Our Confessions Speak

As stated earlier, we have also taken a vow which includes the question, “Do you believe that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is a true exposition of the Word of God and a correct presentation of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church; and that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the two Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord—as contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with the one true faith set forth in God’s Holy Word?” To which we answered, “I do.” Should we? Especially when it comes to the doctrine and practice of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?

As I read through each of the references to Baptism in the *Concordia Triglotta* I was impressed with how clearly the Confessions of our church proclaim the truth of Scripture when it comes to Baptism. Without fail from the Augsburg Confession to the Visitation Articles the Confessions clearly emphasize that when a person is baptized they truly and actually receive all of the blessings that we have been discussing: forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation.

For the sake of expediency we will look at only a few quotations from the Confessions. In these quotations we will see how clearly the Confessions expound on the passages which we have studied in this paper.

On the blessing of *forgiveness of sins* we read in *The Large Catechism*, Baptism:

In the second place, since we know now what Baptism is, and how it is to be regarded, we must also learn why and for what purpose it is instituted; that is, what it profits, gives, and works. And this also we cannot discern better than from the words of Christ above quoted: *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*. Therefore state it most simply thus, that the power, work, profit, fruit, and end of Baptism is this, namely, to save. For no one is baptized in order that he may become a prince, but as the words declare, that he be saved. But to be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, and to enter into the kingdom of Christ, and to live with Him forever.

Here you see again how highly and precious we should esteem Baptism, because in it we obtain such an unspeakable treasure, which also indicates sufficiently that it cannot be ordinary mere water. (*Triglotta* pp. 738-739).

In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Art. XXIV. (XII.) we are told:

A Sacrament is a ceremony or work in which God presents to us that which the promise annexed to the ceremony offers; as, Baptism is a work, not which we offer to God, but in which God baptizes us, *i.e.*, a minister in the place of God; and God here offers and presents the remission of

sins, etc., according to the promise, Mark 16,16: *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.* (*Triglotta* p. 389)

In a sermon on Baptism (January 1538) Luther brought out this same emphasis when he said, “However, when the Word of God is pronounced over it so that Baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, it possesses the power and might to wash away sin and to save from death” (Plass, volume 1, pp. 45-46).

On the truth that Baptism offers and gives to us *new life* we read in the *Visitation Articles*:

III. All who are baptized into Christ Jesus are baptized into His death, and through Baptism are buried with Him into His death, and have put on Christ.

IV. Baptism is the washing of regeneration for the reason that in it we are born anew, and sealed with and graciously (by grace) given the Spirit of adoption (*Triglotta*, p. 1153).

And when it comes to the blessing of *salvation* being bestowed upon us through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism *The Large Catechism* assures us:

Now, since both, the water and the Word, are one Baptism, therefore body and soul must be saved and live forever: the soul through the Word which it believes, but the body because it is united with the soul and also apprehends Baptism as it is able to apprehend it. We have, therefore, no greater jewel in body and soul, for by it we are made holy and are saved, which no other kind of life, no work upon earth, can attain. (*Triglotta* p. 743)

On this same subject the *Visitation Articles* state:

II. Through Baptism, as the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, God saves us, and works in us such righteousness and cleansing from sins that he who perseveres in this covenant and confidence unto the end is not lost, but has eternal life. (*Triglotta* p. 1153)

Baptism and Infants

Since I was directed to address the subject of infant baptism on a more specific level I jotted down the number of places where the Confessions speak directly to this subject. We should not be surprised that this topic receives a fair amount of attention in the Confessions of our church.

When it comes to the subject of whether or not infants are to be baptized neither Scripture nor the Confessions nor we have any doubts. Substantiation for infant baptism can be found in: *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Art. IX. (*Triglotta* p. 245); *The Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Art. V (*Triglotta* p. 491); the *Augsburg Confession*, Art. IX: Of Baptism (*Triglotta* p. 47).

It is extremely interesting to note—especially for the purposes of this paper—that Martin Luther felt more confident when it came to the baptism of children than that of adults. A few quotes will suffice:

I still maintain, as I have maintained in the *Postil* (SL 11, 496 f) that the surest Baptism is infant Baptism. For an old person may deceive, may come to Christ as a Judas and permit himself to be baptized. But a child cannot deceive. It comes to Christ in Baptism as John came to Him and as the little children were brought to Him, that His Word and work may come over them, touch them, and thus make them holy. For His Word and work cannot pass by without effect; and in Baptism they are directed at the child alone. If they were to fail of success here, they would have to be entire failures and useless means, which is impossible. (Plass, p. 50)

To be sure, children are brought to Baptism by the faith and work of others; but when they get there and the pastor or baptizer deals with them in Christ's stead, it is He who blesses them and grants them faith and the kingdom of heaven. For the word and act of the pastor are the Word and work of Christ Himself. (Plass, p. 51)

Speaking against those who say that children should not be baptized until they have reached the age of reason Luther says:

The fact is that just because they are unreasoning and foolish, they are better fitted to come to faith than the old and reasoning people whose way is always blocked by reason, which does not want to force its big head through the narrow door... (Plass, p. 51)

Once again as we look at the Confessions of our church and as we look at the writings of Dr. Luther I am still confident that I did not go too far in the unqualified assurances that I gave to the parents of baby Daniel.

Why do some who are baptized not act baptized?

Both the Scriptures and the Confessions very clearly state that when a person is baptized—and especially when a child is baptized—they are given the gifts of forgiveness, new life and salvation. The questions then arises: Why is it that some people who have been baptized do not act like it? This is undoubtedly a question that has caused many of the faithful to lift their eyes to heaven on more than one occasion on behalf of more than one individual.

Perhaps the best way to address this issue is to not focus questions and doubts on Baptism but rather to focus on the person who has been baptized. Sadly, there are some—and here I am sure you can supply ample number of names from your own experience—who even though they have been baptized either appear to use their Baptism as a license for carnal living (Romans 6:1-14) and/or lose their baptismal faith altogether.

Martin Luther addressed this issue as he warned against the aberrations of Rome's teaching on Baptism in his book on the *Babylonian Captivity*. In it he states:

Just as the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it should never cease but should be nurtured and strengthened until death by the constant memory of the promise made to us in Baptism. Therefore when we rise again from sin, or repent, we do nothing else than return to the power and the faith of Baptism, from which we fell, and come back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. For the truth of the promise once made stands steadily, ever ready to receive us with open arms upon our return....

So you see how rich a Christian, or one who is baptized, really is. Even if he so desired, he is unable to lose his salvation, however much he sins, unless he refuses to believe; for no sins except unbelief alone can condemn him....

At the same time you see how dangerous, nay, how false it is to suppose that penance is the "second plank after the shipwreck." How harmful an error it is to hold that the power of Baptism is gone and that this ship is shattered! This one solid and unsinkable ship stays on, and it is never splintered into drifting timbers. It carries all who are brought to the haven of salvation; it is the truth of God giving us its promise in the Sacraments. Of course, it does happen that many rashly leap from the ship into the sea and perish. These are they who depart from faith in the promise and plunge into sin. But the ship itself remains intact and continues on its steady course. If a man is able to return to the ship by an act of grace, he is borne on to life, not on any plank but by the seaworthy ship herself. This is he who returns to the stable and settled promise of God through faith. (Plass, p. 60)

The Confessions address this very same issue in *The Formula of Concord*. Thorough Declaration. II. Of Free Will. There we read:

Therefore there is a great difference between baptized and unbaptized men. For since, according to the doctrine of St. Paul, Gal. 3,27, *all who have been baptized have put on Christ*, and thus are truly regenerate, they have now *arbitrium liberatum* (a liberated will), that is, as Christ says, *they have been made free again*, John 8,36; whence they are able not only to hear the Word, but also to assent to it and accept it, although in great weakness.

For since we receive in this life only the first-fruits of the Spirit, and the new birth is not complete, but only begun in us, the combat and struggle of the flesh against the spirit remains even in the elect and truly regenerate men; for there is a great difference perceptible among Christians not only in this, that one is weak and another strong in the spirit, but each Christian, moreover, experiences in himself that at one time he is joyful in spirit, and at another fearful and alarmed; at one time ardent in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak. But when the baptized have acted against their conscience, allowed sin to rule in them, and thus have grieved and lost the Holy Ghost in them, they need not be rebaptized, but must be converted again, as has been sufficiently said before. (*Triglotta*, p. 907)

Because of the fact that a person can lose the faith that was bestowed upon them in Baptism we need to encourage all the baptized to continue to nurture that faith through regular use of the Word and Supper. We also need to encourage the baptized to live their life in daily contrition and repentance so that they do not “leap from the ship into the sea and perish.”

Caveats to Consider

As a Means of Grace we acknowledge that Baptism has a two-fold power: a conferring or imparting power and an efficacious or operative power. In other words God both confers on men the remission of sins merited by Christ and works faith in the proffered remission, or where faith already exists, strengthens it.

All this is based on a correct understanding of what Scripture teaches concerning Objective Justification. The emphasis is on the fact that our justification is based on an historical finished event—“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:19). Any deviation, any aberration, any misunderstanding of this truth will skew one’s doctrine and practice concerning the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

On this point Pieper states:

We reiterate: The teaching of church bodies and theologians on the means of grace always corresponds to their teaching on Christ’s work of reconciliation. If they mutilate the Scripture doctrine of the perfect reconciliation of all men by the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ, they cannot correctly present the Scripture doctrine of the means of grace. These cease to be *media iustificationis* and become no more than means of stimulating such changes of mind and conduct as would make man completely, or at least decisively, his own savior. (Pieper, Vol. III, pp. 116-117)

Since our directive for this paper was to consider the Sacrament of Baptism in the light of “our teaching of grace,” today we will simply note how Baptism and grace are misunderstood by the two most common churches with which we come into contact: the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed churches.

Rome's misunderstanding of both objective justification and grace are not difficult to see when it comes to the Sacrament of Baptism. For example, Rome's misunderstanding has led to the error of "infused grace" when it comes to the Sacrament of Baptism. Pieper reminds us:

Therefore the *media gratiae* in the papistic sense are not means through which God offers to faith the complete forgiveness of sins and the salvation merited by Christ, and through that offer also works faith in man or strengthens the faith already present, but they are means to incite and aid him to such virtuous endeavors, under Roman direction, as can gradually and in constantly increasing measure (*Trid.*, Sess. VI, cap, can.32) win God's grace for him (Pieper, Vol. III, p. 117).

A quick look into the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reveals just how true this is. In Article 1, The Sacrament of Baptism is defined as follows:

1213 Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: "Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word."

At the same time Rome gives us this correlation between faith and Baptism:

1253 Baptism is the sacrament of faith. But faith needs the community of believers. It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe. The faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a beginning that is called to develop. The catechumen or the godparent is asked: "What do you ask of God's Church?" The response is: "Faith!"

In Article 2, Grace and Justification, the catechism gives us further insight into what Rome means when she uses the term grace:

- 1996 Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is *favor*, the *free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.
- 1997 Grace is a *participation in the life of God*. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life: by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body.
- 1999 The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the *sanctifying or deifying grace* received in Baptism.
- 2000 Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love.

A "contemporary" version of The Catholic Catechism puts it this way: "Once baptized, they receive an infusion of divine grace and a title to divine assistance that only those who have been reborn of water and the Holy Spirit can expect from God's mercy" (p. 513).

With this understanding of Rome's idea concerning grace and Baptism it is very easy for us to see why Pieper makes the following observation:

But Rome would have us believe that the grace won by Christ moves God to infuse into man so much grace (*gratia infusa*), that is, sanctification and good works—and this, let it be noted, with man’s constant *co-operation* (*Trid.*, Sess. VI, can. 4)—that he is enabled truly to merit (*vere mereri*, *Trid.*, Sess. VI, can. 32) justification and salvation, either *de congruo* (according to fairness or liberality) or *de condigno* (by actual merit). According to Rome, Christ has merited only enough grace to enable men to merit salvation for themselves. (Pieper, Vol III, p. 117)

In the Reformed churches Baptism is clearly taught as a symbol and not a sacrament. In a conference paper entitled, “Luther on Baptism,” Pastor Donald Stuppy writes:

The Reformed bodies, for example, have lost much of the comfort of Baptism by looking upon it as just a ceremony. They teach that Baptism is merely a “picture” or “symbol” of regeneration. Calvin taught that Baptism is merely a sign that the Holy Ghost has already wrought faith prior to the use of the Sacrament. It is not the establishment of a gracious covenant with God, but rather a public profession of faith. Such a position on the Sacrament of Baptism robs those baptized of many of the blessings and comforts of Baptism. (p. 12)

Herschel H. Hobbs in his book *Fundamentals of our Faith* makes it expressly clear that Baptism (and the Lord’s Supper) are “not sacramental but symbolic in nature” (p. 114). Hobbs goes on to say such things as:

Beginning, therefore, in the second and third centuries, the idea of baptismal regeneration gradually became an accepted teaching of that group {note: he is referring here to the Roman Catholic Church}. Happily, however, there persisted a minority, somewhat underground, group which continued to practice the New Testament faith. This group later came to be known as Baptist. (p. 117)

Baptism is to be administered only to those who have experienced an inward change by a conscious acceptance of Jesus as Saviour. (p. 119)

In Summary we quote Sanday and Headlam in their *Commentary on Romans*: “It (baptism) expresses *symbolically* a series of acts corresponding to the redeeming acts of Christ. Immersion = Death. Submersion = Burial (the ratification of death). Emergence = Resurrection.” No Baptist could have stated it better! The meaning of baptism is seen in its symbolism of that which Christ taught by example (p. 122).

One more note before we move on to a comment from Luther. T.E. Watson in his book *Should Infants be Baptized?* writes in his chapter entitled, “The Evils of Infant Baptism”:

When baptism is administered to infants, it ceases to be

“a badge of discipleship” (Hodge, see p. 70)

“an outward sign of faith” (Calvin, see p. 27)

“a sign of regeneration or the new birth” (Article XXVII of the Church of England)

“a sign and seal to the party baptized of his ingrafting into Christ, of his remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.”

(*Westminster Confession*, XXIII. L)

A little Luther to round things out:

We should be on our guard against the Anabaptists and sectarian spirits, who speak contemptuously of Baptism and say that is it nothing but ordinary water, which helps no one. They look at the sacred act as a cow looks at a new door; for they see a poor preacher standing there or some woman who baptizes in an emergency, are offended at the sight, and say: Indeed!

what might Baptism be? Moreover, they state: Whoever does not believe is really not baptized. In this way they dishonor and blaspheme the most worthy Sacrament, not seeing any further than a horse or a cow sees... (Plass, Vol. 1, p. 45).

So what shall we say? When we look at Scripture it is crystal clear that those who have been baptized have freely received wonderful gifts of God's grace. When we look at the Confessions of our church it is crystal clear that those who have been baptized have freely received wonderful gifts of God's grace. Is Baptism therefore to be considered an "irresistible grace"? Since the term "irresistible grace" is so easily misunderstood perhaps it would be best for us to conclude that Baptism is an irreplaceable grace. Where else do we have the grace of God conveyed more "purely" and more "certainly" than in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism—especially when it comes to the Baptism of infants? Where else can we daily receive more constant assurance of our salvation than in the grace given to us in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism? Luther reminds us,

In consequence, we must hold boldly and fearlessly to our Baptism, oppose all sins and terrors of conscience with it, and humbly say: I know very well that I do not have a single work which is pure; but surely I am baptized, and through my Baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound Himself not to count my sin against me but to slay it and blot it out. (Plass, Vol. 1, p. 60).

The parents of baby Daniel are expecting another child—a boy. All the tests show that everything seems to be fine: no Zellweger's Syndrome has been detected. But, no matter how things go I plan on reminding them that, "There is on earth no greater comfort than Baptism" (Luther).

What would you do?

Addenda

7 Good Bible Reason for Baptizing Infants

1. *Jesus commanded infant baptism.*

Jesus' exact words to his disciples were, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..." (Matthew 28:16-20, selected) His command includes *all nations*. Nowhere in the Bible is there anything written limiting his words *all nations* according to age or sex. Note also in Matthew 28 that Jesus' command lists *baptizing them* as the first way to make disciples of all nations and teaching them as the second way. This is not in conflict with the Christian Church's practice of baptizing children first and then continuing to instruct them later as they grow in understanding.

2. *Little children are born sinful and need baptism.*

This teaching is clearly stated in the Bible:

Genesis 8:21—The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.

Psalm 51:5—Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

John 3:6—Flesh gives birth to flesh.

Romans 7:18—I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.

Ephesians 2:3—Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

3. *Baptism provides the forgiveness of sins and salvation.*

Baptism is not merely symbolic. The blessings that baptism brings are clearly listed in the Bible:

1 Peter 3:21—Baptism...now also saves you.

Acts 22:16—Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

Acts 2:38—Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

Other sections of Scripture which teach the effectiveness of baptism: Mark 16:16; Colossians 2:11-13; Ephesians 5:25-27; Titus 3:5; Galatians 3:27.

4. *Infants can believe.*

The Bible often connects faith and repentance with the mention of baptism. For this reason, many deny infants baptism, because they say that infants cannot believe. Jesus warned about offending “These little ones who believe in me...” (Matthew 18:6). Faith is entirely the gift of the Holy Spirit in the heart of an adult or an infant. It does not depend upon the cooperation or the reason of the human being involved. If we are going to be raised from death in sin (Ephesians 2:1), then God himself must do the raising (Ephesians 2:4,5). Jesus warns adults not to let their reason and understanding to get in the way of believing like a little child.

Mark 10:15—I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

5. *Baptism is the way of salvation God has revealed for infants.*

God has the power to do anything he wants; he can bring infants to faith in any way he chooses. But he has given us only one way, and he commands us to use it. We do not have his promise for any other way. Prayer cannot save; prayer is simply our communication to God, not what God does to save man. Saving faith is created through God’s use of tools, *Means of Grace*, through which God conveys his forgiveness. These Means of Grace of the gospel in word and sacraments:

Romans 10:17—Consequently faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

1 Peter 3:21—Baptism...now also saves you.

A parent’s faith cannot save a child; each person alone must stand accountable to God:

Ezekiel 18:4—For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

A baby cannot take Communion, because that is only for those who can examine themselves:

1 Corinthians 11:29—For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Only baptism has God’s command and promise for the blessings of the cross of Christ to all people.

6. *The Bible has examples of infant baptism.*

It bothers many people that most of the instances of baptism in the Bible are of adults. Jesus’ own baptism was as an adult. Jesus’ baptism, however, cannot be considered a model for our own, and Jesus never gave any indication that it was. First, he was baptized before he commanded baptism for his disciples. Secondly, Jesus was the innocent Son of God, without sin. The Bible says that Jesus was baptized to receive the Holy Spirit and power for his earthly ministry. (Acts 10:38; Matthew 3:13-17) Jesus was baptized at age 29; not even Baptists consider 29 to be the age of accountability.

What about other adult baptisms in the New Testament? It is not hard to understand why most recorded baptisms were of adults. The church was young, and adults were converted many times without their families

even being present. Yet baptism of children and family and servants is always mentioned with the adults, whenever they were present. Lydia's family was present, so the Bible says, "She and the members of her household were baptized" (Acts 16:15). So was the jailer's family present, so it is mentioned of him, "He and all his family were baptized" (Acts 16:33). Even on Pentecost Day St. Peter reminded the holiday travelers that the promise was for them and for their children (Acts 2:39).

7. *The Bible compares baptism to circumcision.*

Colossians 2:11,12—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.

There are several comparisons with circumcision which encourage us to baptize our children as infants. First, there is the matter of age. In the Old Testament God commanded circumcision on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12). God also warned that a person who despised circumcision could be considered lost (Genesis 17:14). St. Paul reminds us that through baptism our sinful nature is buried with Christ, and we are brought into the family of God.

What a powerful and compelling word of God we have for having our children baptized as infants!

Arguments Against Infant Baptism

"God doesn't consider children guilty of sin until they reach the age of accountability."

If you can find scriptural support for this notion, show me!

Romans 6:23a—The wages of sin is death.

The Bible consistently reiterates that sin and death go together. Where there is sin there is death; conversely, where there is no sin, there is no death. We know that little babies and unborn children also die. If they were sinless, how could a just God require death of them?

"God would not be fair if he were to condemn little children just because they had not been baptized."

Oh, so now you're telling God what's fair?! Only his mercy keeps any of us from eternal death. A person who holds to this argument does not understand the damning nature of sin that separates all of us from God. Sin destroys completely the relationship between humans and God, and a holy God will not allow sin in his presence. We know that babies are also sinful. This means they, too, are conceived and born under the wrath of God. If we dare to impose upon God our ideas of what is just and fair, then God help us!

"Once you are saved, you cannot lose your salvation. If baptism saves, then why are so many baptized people now unbelievers?"

The Bible doesn't teach "once saved, always saved." The Bible teaches that neither Satan, nor his hosts, nor the world, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39) or snatch us out of his hand (John 10:28). The Bible does teach that we ourselves can reject the word of truth planted in our hearts and fall from grace:

1 Corinthians 10:12—So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

Galatians 1:6—I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ.

1 Timothy 1:19—Some...have shipwrecked their faith.

Hebrews 6:4-6—It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance while to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

“*Baptism is just symbolic water.*”

Baptism is *powerful* water, because it is connected with God’s word and used according to Jesus’ command. Its use in conjunction with God’s word makes baptism more than just simple water.

“*Babies can’t understand God’s plan of salvation.*”

As far as I can tell, I agree with this statement 100%! Why is that a problem?

Churches that equate faith with reason usually believe that people themselves must make the decision for Christ and logically understand what’s taking place. The Bible says that if grace is to be grace, then God must do *all* the work!

Romans 11:6—And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Infant baptism is the purest application of God’s grace, the perfect example of a guilty sinner doing *absolutely nothing* to receive full and free salvation.

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