

LUTHER ON BAPTISM – by Rev. Professor-Emeritus Dr. Francis Nigel Lee

The Mediaeval Church had been badly deformed, for many centuries. And that Deformed Church was now ripe either for destruction -- or otherwise for reformation.

That part of the Deformed Church earmarked for destruction, apostasized into the Neo-Paganism of the Renaissance -- alias 'baptized' Heathendom. On the other hand, those who arrested the decay and made a few cosmetic changes -- but who still resisted the Reformation as such, ended up as the Contra-Reformation (alias Neo-Romanism).

Those who went down the road toward revolution -- became the Anabaptists. They were not Protestant Reformers at all. For the Anabaptists concluded that the existing Church was quite beyond reform. Consequently, they totally repudiated the validity of the Pre-Reformation Church's Baptism. Instead, they rebaptistically called for a fresh Baptism of adults alone -- into a brand-new 'gathered Church'; and toward the fresh creation of a brand-new social order.

Fortunately, there was yet another party -- the Reformation. It certainly recognized that the Church was deformed. But it set out not to destroy -- but to reform her. It recognized the deformations even of the Church's Baptism. However, rather than reject it, the Reformation instead rejected its deformation. For the Protestants sought to uphold that Baptism as such, together with all of its demands -- as indeed also required by the infallible Word of God.

The Church herself had become very dirty. But her Triune Baptism was clean -- and untamishable. It is to a consideration of this mighty movement -- the Protestant Reformation of Christ's Church catholic to the glory of the Triune God -- to which we must next turn.

God through Luther starts the Protestant Reformation

God mightily raised up Martin Luther, to re-teach a dormant Church the great Biblical truth of salvation in Christ -- from Scripture alone; by grace alone; and through faith alone. This perspective permeates Luther's views even on Baptism. Therein, however, he was -- at times -- inconsistent. For he still remained, at least marginally, somewhat encrusted with remnantal post-biblical and mediaeval sacramentalistic accretions.¹

The Reformation formally started in 1517 -- with Luther's nailing of his *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. Two years later, he stated that "although **Baptism** is...an external ordinance -- yet it takes place but once."²

Also in 1519, he wrote his *Treatise on the Holy Sacrament of Baptism*.³ There, Luther taught⁴ that "Baptism is an external sign or token which so divides us from all men not baptized...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost [Matthew 28:19]... This significance of Baptism --viz. the dying or drowning of sin -- is not fulfilled completely in this life...until man passes through bodily death also, and utterly decays to dust..."

"The holy Sacrament of Baptism is a thing so great; so gracious and full of comfort! We should pay earnest heed to thank God for it ceaselessly...."

"However, we must have a care that no false security creeps in." Let it never be said: 'Baptism is so gracious and so great a thing, that God will not count our sins against us'...."

¹ See Luther's *Little Baptism Book Germanized* (1523) and his *The 'Order of Baptism' Newly Revised* (1526).

² Luth.: *A Treatise on the New Testament that is the Holy Mass* (in *Luther's Works of Martin Luther*, Holman, Philadelphia, 1915, I pp. 294f).

³ Luth.: *Works*, I p. 49.

⁴ Luther's *Treatise* II, IV, XIXf (in his *Works* pp. 56f & 70f).

"Baptism is indeed...a great thing.... If you turn again from sins, and appeal to the Covenant of Baptism -- your sins are forgiven! Only...beware lest -- even if you then desired to believe, or to trust in your Baptism -- your trial be by God's decree so great, that your 'faith' is not able to stand!" For then "shall your wickedness remain -- which has tempted and mocked God's grace!"

As the Lutheran scholar Henry E. Jacobs observes:⁵ "The Anabaptist controversy was still in the future. No objections against Infant Baptism or problems that it suggested, were pressing for attention.... In the distinction drawn between the sacramental sign and the sacramental efficacy, the Protestant distinction between justification and sanctification is involved.... This is in glaring contrast with the scholastic doctrine that original sin itself is entirely eradicated in Baptism.... Luther's purpose here is to guard against the mediaeval theory of any *opus operatum* efficacy in Baptism."

Also in 1519, Luther published his treatise on the Lord's Supper. There, he explained⁶ that "this Sacrament is received many times -- while **Baptism** is administered but **once**. Baptism is the beginning and entrance to a new life -- in the course of which boundless adversities assail us.... This was indicated of old in Joshua 3. After the children of Israel had gone **dry-shod through the Red Sea, a type of Baptism** [First Corinthians 10:1f] -- **they went through Jordan in like manner**.... Baptism leads us into a new life **on Earth!**"

Luther was not at all a 'baptismal regenerationist'

Luther's statements on Baptism's predecessor Circumcision in his *Commentary on Genesis*, is of very great importance. There God Himself said: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My Covenant." Genesis 17:14.

On this, Luther rightly commented:⁷ "The words must be understood of a **cutting-off from the Church** [implying they were in the Church without Circumcision **before** that cut-off].... The Gentiles...are...**not** excluded from the blessing, if they **believe** with faithful Abraham....

"For the Jews...this statement...does not involve infants who **died [uncircumcised]** before the eighth day. Even though they have original sin, **a merciful God will nevertheless find a way to deliver them**....

"One must have the same opinion about the **little boys** who were not circumcised either because of the carelessness or the wickedness of their parents -- just as today there are **some who are not baptized**.... Such little children should be committed to the dispensation of the goodness of God. For what guilt against this law have the little children, who either die or are neglected by ungodly parents? Therefore, **they should be left to the goodness of God -- and should not be condemned as the [Romish] Scholastics have condemned them**."

Luther on Romanism as the Church's "Babylonian Captivity"

In 1520, Luther published his famous anti-papal essay on the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.⁸ There, he quotes Augustine with approval -- that "it is not the Sacrament but the **faith** of the Sacrament' which justifies."⁹

It is very remarkable that "Satan, though he could not quench the power of Baptism in little children -- nevertheless succeeded in quenching it in adults. Consequently, there are scarcely any who call to mind their Baptism [as indeed they should] -- and still fewer who glory in it [as indeed they should]!"¹⁰

⁵ *Ib.* pp. 51-55.

⁶ Luth.: *Treatise concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ* 10 & 22 (in *Works* II pp. 5, 14 & 25f).

⁷ *Luther's Works*, Concordia: St. Louis, 1961 ed., III:143f.

⁸ Luth.: *The Bab. Capt. of the Ch.* (in *Works* II pp. 170f).

⁹ Luth.: *The Bab. Capt. of the Ch.*, in Walch: *Luther's Collected Writings* XIX:76.

¹⁰ Luth.: *The Bab. Capt. of the Ch.* (in *Works*, Holman ed., II pp. 219f, 224f 230f & 235f).

Said Luther: "Now the first thing in Baptism to be considered -- is the divine promise which says 'he that believes and is baptized shall be saved' [Mark 16:16].... For unless this faith be present...., Baptism will profit us nothing.... Baptism is the beginning and foundation....

"We ought to receive Baptism...just as if Christ Himself...were baptizing us with His Own hands. For it is not man's Baptism but Christ's...which we receive....

"This, the words themselves indicate -- when the priest says: 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!'" Matthew 28:19.

"For the priest does not say: 'I baptize you in my own name!' It is as though he said: 'What I do, I do not by my own authority but in the name and stead of God!' Consequently, you should regard it just as if our Lord Himself had done it in a visible manner....

"There is much comfort and a mighty aid to faith in the knowledge that one has been baptized not by man but by the Triune God Himself -- through a man acting among us in His Name.... Baptism truly saves -- in whatever way it is administered -- if only it be not administered in the name of man, but of God!"

Luther went on: "Baptism, then, signifies two things -- death and resurrection; that is, full and complete justification. The Minister's baptizing the child in water, signifies death; his drawing it forth again, signifies life....

"Here again, you see that the Sacrament of Baptism even in respect of its sign is not the matter of a moment -- but continues for all time.... Never does Baptism lose its power -- unless you despair and refuse to return to its salvation....

"This glorious liberty of ours, and this understanding of Baptism, have been carried captive in our day.... For this, we have we to thank the Roman Pontiff with his despotism....

"Few know this glory of Baptism and the blessedness of Christian liberty...., because of the tyranny of the Pope.... The Papacy is of a truth the kingdom of Babylon; yea, of very Antichrist....

"[Yet] infants are aided by the faith of others -- namely, those who bring them to Baptism. For the Word of God is powerful when it is uttered -- to change even a godless heart which is no less deaf and helpless than any infant.... The infant is changed, cleansed and renewed by in-pour-ed faith -- through the prayer of the Church that presents it for Baptism and believes. To that prayer, all things are possible!"

Baptism, faith and Donatism -- according to Luther

Luther stressed 'infant faith' even **before Infant Baptism**. For, he said, "children must themselves believe -- lest the majesty of the Sacrament and Word be obscured."¹¹

So "we are of the opinion and the expectation that the child should believe, and we pray that God give it faith. Yet we do not baptize it for that reason, but because God has so commanded."¹²

Already in 1521, Luther clearly stated¹³ that "without faith no Sacrament is of any use.... The Sacrament of Baptism is a divine sign or seal given by virtue of the promise and Word of Christ in the last chapter of Mark [16:16]. 'He that believes and is baptized, shall be saved'....

"In olden days, there were heretics called Donatists. They taught that nobody could truly receive Baptism...unless

¹¹ "*Fides infantilis...ne illudatur majestas Sacramenti et Verbi.*" Cited in Berkouwer's *Karl Barth & Inf. Bap.* p. 55.

¹² Luther's *Larg. Cat.* 3. Cited in Berkouwer's *Karl Barth & Inf. Bap.* p. 56 & n. 11.

¹³ Luth.: *An Argument in Defence of all the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther wrongly condemned in the Roman Bull* (in *Works* III pp. 11, 20f, 50f & 60).

the Priest or Bishop who administered it, was holy. St Augustine vanquished them. He proved that the Sacraments belong not to man but to God alone, Who administers them through good -- and bad -- servants.

"Now that this heresy has been suppressed -- the Pope's heresy steps into its place. This teaches that, although he who administers the Sacraments need not be righteous, he must be high and mighty....

"Beware of Antichrist, the Pope!... Be sure that the Sacraments depend neither on sanctity nor on rank...nor on Pope nor on Bishops nor on Priests nor on Monks -- but only on your own faith.... However the Sacrament comes -- whatever it promises, it is God's Sacrament and can be received by faith....

"The Pope would like to destroy this faith and seduce us into trusting his authority more than we trust God's Sacrament. As though by his mere authority, without our faith -- he could forgive sins! May God preserve all Christian hearts from this Antichrist and Apostle of Satan!"

Luther goes on to castigate the Pope -- for sinfully misadministering valid Christian Baptism. "The Donatists," continues Luther,¹⁴ "were nevertheless more tolerable than the Pope and his Bishops -- who wish to bind the sacraments to rank and authority....

"I ask further..., Pope, whether you also have a Sacrament of Baptism differing from that which all Priests [or Presbyters] and Christians have?... Whether by virtue of your exalted rank, when you baptize -- you do more than does a chaplain, a layman, a woman....

"[Pope.] Speak up! Have you lost your voice? If you have a different Baptism -- then St. Paul condemns you in Ephesians 4[:5-6] when he says: '**one Faith, one Baptism!**'"

It should be noted that Luther is not here advocating the permissibility or the desirability of Baptisms by laymen and by women -- but only the validity thereof. For "all Baptisms," he explained,¹⁵ "are equally valid -- wherever and by whomever they are administered....

"We cannot divide Baptism and give the Pope and the Bishops a part in it different from that which all Christians have.... If he has a different Sacrament, or more of a Sacrament -- then St. Paul excludes him from the Church. For he says in Ephesians 4:[5-6] '**One Faith, one Baptism, one Lord!**'" And that one Lord commanded that Baptisms be administered (as do both Romanism and Protestantism) "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19.

¹⁴ *Ib.* p. 62.

¹⁵ *Ib.* p. 63.