

Six Chief Parts Of Luther's Small Catechism. The Sacrament Of Holy Baptism

Text: Rom 6:4

Suggested Hymns:

279, 277, 831, 848, 828

- 1) Baptism Is God's Act
- 2) Baptism And God's Word
- 3) Baptism Is God's Act For Us
- 4) Baptism's Benefits
- 5) Baptism's Significance
- 6) Baptism and Eternity
- 7) Baptism's Use

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Romans 6:4, ***Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Although Luther insisted over and over again that the common Christian layman would know the essentials of Christianity if he knew the first three parts of the Catechism, he did not want the Christian to stop there.

The heart of Christianity was that the simple believer know what kind of life God expects of Him through the Law, how this kind of life was available to him by faith as he learns in the Apostles' Creed, and where there is help for him to gain this life as he learns in the Lord's Prayer.

Luther knew that the Christian could expect much more from God, because God offers His grace in a variety of ways for the Christian to grow on. Nothing was more compatible to Luther's teaching of the Gospel of God's grace than his understanding of the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

To be sure, Luther was highly critical of Roman sacramentalism, which was the church's attempt to make the sacraments dependent on the power of the church. Yet Luther recaptured the apostolic understanding of the sacrament in such a way as to make the Christian life highly sacramental in character.

Of the sacraments Luther considered Baptism primary. In the same way that the First Commandment holds together the other commandments, so the entire sacramental life is dependent on the sacrament of Holy Baptism. This is the fourth chief part of *Luther's Small Catechism*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Baptism Is God's Act

Baptism is God's act. Luther's explanation of what Baptism is makes that very plain. *"Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word."* Our natural tendency is to think that Baptism is something that we do, or something that we perform, something that we fulfil as a requirement for salvation.

In his day Luther saw that notion pushed from two sides. The Roman Church made the act dependent on what the clergy did. The enthusiasts made the sacrament dependent upon what the believer did. That second idea is extremely popular today with the people of the Pentecostal movement.

However, Luther was adamant in striking out at both ideas no matter how appealing or reasonable they may appear to be. Luther grounded his conviction in the fact that the sacrament of Baptism is something that God does to us and for us.

Baptism is a visual sign of the Gospel that comes to us from the outside, which is God's side. Baptism is God's act which He performs for us.

2. Baptism And God's Word

What gives Baptism its power and efficacy is the Word of God. The Word of God is the plain Word which we use in connection with Baptism, *"I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

The reason we use that Word is because God has commanded us to do so through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. What stands behind that command is the promise of God which offers to us everything that Christ has done for our salvation. The command and promise of God make the Sacrament a holy and valid act. Nothing else does.

In the debate as to whether one should sprinkle, pour, wash, or immerse with water, Luther highly favoured the act of immersion because of its symbolic

beauty. However, when one argued about the mode of Baptism too much, then Luther returned to the fact that it is the Word of God which makes the water the Sacrament.

He emphasised that the water in Baptism is a holy, living, heavenly, and blessed water because of the Word and command of God. If one were to take away the Word of God from the water in Baptism, said Luther, then it would be the same water with which the maid waters the cow.

But with the Word of God that water is a divine and living water with which God washes away our sins. Luther also used the analogy of the parents. Without the command and Word of God parents would only be flesh and blood, sacks of bones, which one could trample under foot. However, with the command and the Word of God they are a divine gift to us to be honoured, loved and respected. By the Word of God parents are crowned with garlands and halos. So in Baptism Christ gives the water its divine authority. He alone puts salvation into Baptism.

3. Baptism Is God's Act For Us

While Baptism is exclusively God's act, it is an act that He performs for us. To be sure the pastor or the administrant of Baptism is God's instrument or tool in this act. Luther calls him the "*bath-house servant*."

What God does, is for the recipient of this holy act that he might be assured of God's grace. We are not doing something in Baptism to satisfy some requirement God has laid down. God does not need Baptism for His sake. We need Baptism.

We need Baptism, because we are the sinners who need salvation. We need Baptism, because we have no way of saving ourselves. We need Baptism, because we need to be reminded that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. We need Baptism, because habitually we are tempted to think that we can bargain with God.

In Baptism God accommodates all of these needs and more. In one simple act God makes clear our total dependence on Him for our full salvation. Because this is His act which He performs for us, we can come back to it over and over again as that moment in which God summed up all the power and love of His Gospel to cover us with the assurance of His grace.

Luther asks, “*Do you think it was a joke that the heavens were opened at Christ’s baptism?*” So, as the heavens were opened at the power of God’s Word at Christ’s Baptism, they were also opened to pour out all the blessings of heaven for us.

4. Baptism’s Benefits

Well, what are the blessings of Baptism? What does God do for me in this act which is so much exclusively His? In Baptism God accommodates Himself to a desperate need we all feel. God has accomplished our salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. He has made this salvation known to us in the Gospel message and promises. We know of our salvation through the Word of God.

However, God also knows how often and how much we are tempted to believe that the Gospel is not for us. He knows how severely the conscience can be tested, and we can doubt that we are forgiven when we are disturbed by our sin. He knows that the devil works overtime to make us believe that the Gospel may be for someone else but not for us. He knows that the world offers all kinds of allurements for other forms of security in achieving some sense of dignity.

So God introduces Baptism in our lives to give us that moment we can look to and say, “*That is when God made me His own and said of me what He said of His Son, ‘This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.’*”

For us Baptism has all the legal certainty and validity of an adoption proceeding which guarantees us the right to share fully with our Lord Jesus Christ the blessings and kindness of His heavenly Father. Baptism has that once-for-all character of an eternal pledge which the heavenly Father has made to us. We can go back to it and return to it over and over again in the assurance that what stands behind our baptism is the Word and promise of God which no one can make null and void.

This is why Luther can say that Baptism “*works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe what He has promised.*”

5. Baptism’s Significance

Baptism has the power to deliver us from our worst enemies because our own sinful nature, the devil, and the world are always challenging our status with God. When we try to be somebody in the world, when we try to discover who we are or whether we have any worth in the creation at all, we are really trying to find out where we stand with God.

Constantly we are placed under the judgment that we are not worth very much at all. That is why people struggle and toss to and fro in the world as they do.

However, Baptism delivers us from all of that. In Baptism God is saying to us that He confers on us His own righteousness through His Son Jesus Christ. As certainly as Jesus died and rose again to declare to the world that He was right about the Father and that the Father was right about Him, so in Baptism we are buried with Christ and raised again to new life. Baptism shows or signals that truth to us.

The water of Baptism signs to us that our old sinful nature has drowned and died in Christ's death. There never need be any question about our status before God. Every day when we get up we can, says Luther, by daily contrition and repentance drown the old man and daily rise to new living in Christ. Baptism is the assurance that there is always forgiveness for us, always a new life available to us.

6. Baptism and Eternity

In effect, what God does for us in Baptism is to give us a new birth. The question of baptising infants never troubled Luther, because God gave them life to begin with, though they did not ask to be born.

Furthermore, our Lord Himself said that little children can believe, because faith is not head knowledge, but it is trust, confidence, and reliance on God. Thus God is able to give new life as He once gave us physical life.

And as we grow up physically dependent on God, so we are also able to grow up in spiritual dependence on our gracious Father. God preserves for us the life He gave at birth, so He is willing to preserve for us the new life He gave at baptism. That is His pledge to us. In fact, He baptises us in view of our death.

Our baptism is the reminder for us that every day we die with Christ by contrition and repentance, and every day we rise with Him. Every night when we say our prayers to our God, we have to confess that we have sinned against Him again. And as He promises in Baptism, every day He forgives. Finally there will come that time when we put our head on the pillow for the last time to make our confession.

However, our baptism is the assurance to us that then we shall not die. We shall not die, for long ago in baptism we died to sin with Christ. And this time God shall raise us from our pillow to life eternal with Christ in bliss and glory. No longer will we have to rehearse our baptism in confession and repentance. However, in all of eternity we shall remember that glorious day when at our baptism God opened the heavens to say to us, *“This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.”*

7. Baptism’s Use

Baptism has been greatly neglected in the Christian church. We have not neglected Baptism for the young. However, for many people this has been all too much a custom and a name-giving ceremony. But Baptism has even been neglected by those who make much ado about a baptism of the Spirit.

However, we all neglect baptism when we fail to use it daily. How we should use our baptism is, as Luther suggested, “to believe it.” Our faith and trust in the Word of God in baptism is to trust what God has done for us in His Son. We use our baptism by daily making it the major point of reference in our lives. We should use every reminder we can to recall what God made us in baptism.

The Germans called their baptismal certificate a “Show of Baptism.” One saw them hanging in bedrooms to recall the great event. The original Roman Catholic use of holy water was intended to recall one’s baptism. Baptismal candles, the prominence of the baptismal font in the church, and the baptismal rite in the church service also help to remind us of our own baptism.

However, the best use we can make of our baptism is to daily refer to our baptism as a glorious reminder of what a gracious God we have. Certainly that should not be too difficult. We daily sin much, but in this wondrous act we can

daily return to the all-sufficient grace of our God, who promised to meet our every need. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.