

# THE HOLY AND BLESSED SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

1519

*Translated by Charles M. Jacobs  
Revised by E. Theodore Bachmann*

## INTRODUCTION

*The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* captures and conveys the elemental dynamic of this rite of entrance into the communion of saints. It deals illuminatingly with a subject that seems as much in need of thoughtful restudy in our day as it was in the sixteenth century. Coming off Johann Grüenberg's press in Wittenberg on November 9, 1519, this treatise was the second in Luther's 1519 trilogy on the sacraments, dedicated to the Duchess Margaret of Brunswick.<sup>1</sup>

The unfolding of Luther's thoughts on baptism in these twenty paragraphs follows a logical progression. He speaks first of the "sign," and defines the meaning of the word "baptism" in terms of immersion (1–2). Next he tells what the putting in and the drawing out "signify," namely, the death of the old man and the resurrection of the new—an operation which begins at baptism and continues through all of life until the sinner dies, in which God affords constant comfort through his covenant of grace (3–11). Finally Luther treats of "faith" as the "third thing" in the sacrament, the "most necessary part"; it needs to be exercised daily with respect to God's covenant promise, to the exclusion of all reliance upon works and supplementary man-made vows, and precisely in the suffering attendant upon a life lived in the estate in which God has placed us (12–20).

This treatise is notably free from polemics. Indeed when Luther came to revising congregational worship in 1523, he took over with only minor modifications the customary Roman order of baptism then being used at Wittenberg.<sup>2</sup> In 1526, however, he revised this order by abbreviating it drastically; yet he added nothing new. This new order proved popular and was later appended to the Small Catechism and included in many of the contemporary church orders.<sup>3</sup>

Before long a polemical note entered the discussion of baptism when, in the early 1520's, the Anabaptists came on the scene. Therefore Luther's treatise here before us should be followed by a reading of his letter, in 1528, to two pastors *Concerning Rebaptism*.<sup>4</sup> Moreover this was only the beginning of a new explication and defense of the sacrament of baptism. In 1529 came his teaching on baptism in the Small and Large Catechisms.<sup>5</sup> After 1528 Luther preached at least twenty-three sermons on baptism. The first four, delivered in 1528, laid the basis of his exposition of the subject in the catechisms.<sup>6</sup> In 1532 came a series of three;<sup>7</sup> in February, 1534, a

---

<sup>1</sup> See p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *PE* 6, (193) 197–206; *WA* 12, (38) 42–48.

<sup>3</sup> *PE* 6, (193) 207–209; *WA* 19, (531) 537–541; 30<sup>1</sup>, 339–342.

<sup>4</sup> *LW* 40, (227) 229–262.

<sup>5</sup> Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord*, pp. 848–349, 436–446.

<sup>6</sup> *Katechismuspredigten*. *WA*, 30<sup>1</sup>, 18–23, 50–52, 109–116.

<sup>7</sup> *WA* 36, 96–117.

series of six<sup>8</sup> plus a longer sermon in three parts later the same year;<sup>9</sup> in 1538 another series of six;<sup>10</sup> and in 1539 a series of three.<sup>11</sup>

All of this is evidence of the earnestness with which Luther regarded baptism throughout his career as a reformer of the church. The keynote of his emphasis affirms that baptism is not the work of man but of God. Therefore the actions of men can neither make nor nullify this sacrament. Baptism is a command of God given us through the Scriptures, notably but not only in such passages as Mark 16:16 or Matt. 28:18–19. Above all, baptism is exalted for us by Jesus Christ; God honors our baptism in that of his son.<sup>12</sup>

The following translation, made originally by Charles M. Jacobs<sup>13</sup> and here revised, is from the original publication by Grünenberg, *Eyn Sermon von dem heyligen hochwirdigen Sacrament der Tauffe*, as reprinted with the subsequent variations noted in WA 2, (724) 727–737. Between 1519 and 1523 a total of sixteen different editions appeared in Wittenberg, Leipzig, Nürnberg, and other cities. In 1543 came also a Latin translation. At once recognized as a work of fundamental importance, this treatise has found a place in all major collections of Luther's works.

## THE HOLY AND BLESSED SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

D.M.A.<sup>1</sup>

1. Baptism [*Die Taufe*] is *baptismos* in Greek, and *mersio* in Latin, and means to plunge something completely into the water, so that the water covers it. Although in many places it is no longer customary to thrust and dip infants into the font, but only with the hand to pour the baptismal water upon them out of the font,<sup>2</sup> nevertheless the former is what should be done. It would be proper, according to the meaning of the word *Taufe*, that the infant, or whoever is to be baptized, should be put in and sunk completely into the water and then drawn out again. For even in the German tongue the word *Taufe* comes undoubtedly from the word *tief* [deep] and means that what is baptized is sunk deeply into the water. This usage is also demanded by the significance of baptism itself. For baptism, as we shall hear, 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.

2. Baptism is an external sign or token, which so separates us from all men not baptized that we are thereby known as a people of Christ, our Leader, under whose banner of the holy cross

---

<sup>8</sup> WA 37, 258–267, 270–275, 278–284, 288–293, 299–304.

<sup>9</sup> WA 37, 627–672.

<sup>10</sup> WA 46, 145–155, 167–185, 194–201.

<sup>11</sup> WA 47, 640–659.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Luther's sermon of March 10, 1532, on Matt. 3:16–17. WA 36, 126–134.

<sup>13</sup> PE 1, (51) 56–71.

WA D. *Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883– ).

<sup>1</sup> Doctor Martin, Augustinian. See p. 9, n. 1; cf. p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> While various forms of ablution have apparently been practiced in all periods, immersion was probably the most ancient; in the Latin Church it prevailed until the twelfth century, and in some places until the sixteenth century. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, II, 261–262.) The oldest baptismal order of the Münster bishopric (ca. 1400–1414) prescribes triple immersion. The 1521 order of the Schwerin diocese, however, allows a choice between immersion and washing [*abwaschen*]. While Luther's preference was for immersion—his 1528 order of baptism prescribed dipping the child into the font (PE 6, 201)—Bucer and Zwingli both favored pouring. (CL 1, 185, n. 12).

we continually fight against sin. In this holy sacrament we must therefore pay attention to three things: the sign, the significance of it, and the faith.

The sign consists in this, that we are thrust into the water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; however, we are not left there but are drawn out again. This accounts for the expression: *aus der Taufe gehoben*.<sup>3</sup> The sign must thus have both its parts, the putting in and the drawing out.

3. The significance of baptism is a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so that the old man, conceived and born in sin, is there drowned, and a new man, born in grace, comes forth and rises. Thus St. Paul, in Titus 3[:5], calls baptism a “washing of regeneration,” since in this washing a person is born again and made new. As Christ also says, in John 3[:3, 5], “Unless you are born again of water and the Spirit (of grace), you may not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” For just as a child is drawn out of his mother’s womb and is born, and through this fleshly birth is a sinful person and a child of wrath [Eph. 2:3], so one is drawn out of baptism and is born spiritually. Through this spiritual birth he is a child of grace and a justified person. Therefore sins are drowned in baptism, and in place of sin, righteousness comes forth.

4. This significance of baptism—the dying or drowning of sin—is not fulfilled completely in this life. Indeed this does not happen until man passes through bodily death and completely decays to dust. As we can plainly see, the sacrament or sign of baptism is quickly over. But the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, which it signifies, lasts as long as we live and is completed only in death. Then it is that a person is completely sunk in baptism, and that which baptism signifies comes to pass.

Therefore this whole life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and he who is baptized is condemned to die. It is as if the priest, when he baptizes, were to say, “Lo, you are sinful flesh. Therefore I drown you in God’s name and in his name condemn you to death, so that with you all your sins” may die and be destroyed.” Wherefore St. Paul, in Romans 6[:4], says, “We were buried with Christ by baptism into death.” The sooner a person dies after baptism, the sooner is his baptism completed. For sin never ceases entirely while the body lives, which is so wholly conceived in sin that sin is its very nature, as the prophet says [Ps. 51:5], “Behold I was conceived in sin, and in iniquity did my mother bear me.” There is no help for the sinful nature unless it dies and is destroyed with all its sin. Therefore the life of a Christian, from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death. For at the Last Day God will make him altogether new.

5. Similarly the lifting up out of the baptismal water is quickly done, but the thing it signifies—the spiritual birth and the increase of grace and righteousness—even though it begins in baptism, lasts until death, indeed, until the Last Day. Only then will that be finished which the lifting up out of baptism signifies. Then shall we arise from death, from sins, and from all evil, pure in body and soul, and then shall we live eternally. Then shall we be truly lifted up out of baptism and be completely born, and we shall put on the true baptismal garment of immortal life in heaven. It is as if the sponsors, when they lift the child up out of baptism, were to say, “Lo, your sins are now drowned, and we receive you in God’s name into an eternal life of innocence.” For in this way will the angels at the Last Day raise up all Christians—all the devout baptized—and will there fulfill what baptism and the sponsors signify, as Christ declares in Matthew

---

<sup>3</sup> Literally, “lifted up out of the baptismal water,” the expression was commonly used in the past tense to mean “be baptized,” in the present tense to mean “stand sponsor.” Cf. *PE* 1, 57, n. 1.

24[:31], “He will send out his angels, and they will gather unto him his elect from the four places of the winds, from the rising to the setting of the sun.”

6. Baptism was foreshown of old in Noah’s flood, when the whole world was drowned, except for Noah with his three sons and their wives, eight souls, who were saved in the ark. That the people of the world were drowned signifies that in baptism sins are drowned. But that the eight in the ark, with animals of every sort, were preserved, signifies—as St. Peter explains in his second epistle<sup>4</sup>—that through baptism man is saved. 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. Moreover while that was a flood of wrath, this is a flood of grace, as is declared in Psalm 29[:10],<sup>5</sup> “God will make a continual new flood.” For without doubt many more people have been baptized than were drowned in the flood.

7. From this it follows, to be sure, that when someone comes forth out of baptism, he is truly pure, without sin, and wholly guiltless. Still, there are many who do not properly understand this. They think that sin is no longer present, and so they become remiss and negligent in the killing of their sinful nature, even as some do when they have gone to confession. For this reason, as I have said above, it should be properly understood and known that our flesh, so long as it lives here, is by nature wicked and sinful.

To correct this wickedness God has devised the plan of making our flesh altogether new, even as Jeremiah [18:4–6] shows. For the potter, when the vessel “was spoiled in his hand,” thrust it again into the lump of clay and kneaded it, and afterward made another vessel, as seemed good to him. “So,” says God, “are you in my hands.” In the first birth we are spoiled; therefore he thrusts us into the earth again by death, and makes us over at the Last Day, that we may be perfect and without sin.

This plan, as has been said, begins in baptism, which signifies death and the resurrection at the Last Day. Therefore so far as the sign of the sacrament and its significance are concerned, sins and the man are both already dead, and he has risen again; and so the sacrament has taken place. But the work of the sacrament has not yet been fully done, which is to say that death and the resurrection at the Last Day are still before us.

8. A baptized person is therefore sacramentally altogether pure and guiltless. This means nothing else than that he has the sign of God; that is to say, he has the baptism by which it is shown that his sins are all to be dead, and that he too is to die in grace and at the Last Day is to rise again to everlasting life, pure, sinless, and guiltless. With respect to the sacrament, then, it is true that he is without sin and guilt. Yet because all is not yet completed and he still lives in sinful flesh, he is not without sin. But although not pure in all things, he has begun to grow into purity and innocence.

Therefore when a person comes to mature age, the natural and sinful appetites—wrath, impurity, lust, greed, pride, and the like—begin to stir; whereas there would be none of these if all sins were drowned in the sacrament and were dead. But the sacrament only signifies that they are to be drowned through death and the resurrection at the Last Day. So St. Paul, in Romans 7[:17–20], and the saints with him, lament that they are sinners and have sin in their nature, even though they were baptized and were holy. They lament in this way because the natural and sinful appetites are always active so long as we live.

---

<sup>4</sup> II Pet. 2:5; cf. I Pet. 3:20–21.

<sup>5</sup> Quoting the Vulgate version from memory, Luther inevitably presents many variations from the familiar text of Scripture. Cf. p. 20, n. 25.

9. You ask, “How does baptism help me, if it does not altogether blot out and remove sin?” This is the place for a right understanding of the sacrament of baptism. This blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because in it God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort.

In the first place you give yourself up to the sacrament of baptism and to what it signifies. That is, you desire to die, together with your sins, and to be made new at the Last Day. This is what the sacrament declares, as has been said. God accepts this desire at your hands and grants you baptism. From that hour he begins to make you a new person. He pours into you his grace and Holy Spirit, who begins to slay nature and sin, and to prepare you for death and the resurrection at the Last Day.

In the second place you pledge yourself to continue in this desire, and to slay your sin more and more as long as you live, even until your dying day. This too God accepts. He trains and tests you all your life long, with many good works and with all kinds of sufferings. Thereby he accomplishes what you in baptism have desired, namely, that you may become free from sin, die, and rise again at the Last Day, and so fulfill your baptism. Therefore we read and see how bitterly he has let his saints be tortured, and how much he has let them suffer, in order that, almost slain, they might fulfill the sacrament of baptism, die, and be made new. For when this does not happen, when we do not suffer and are not tested, then the evil nature gains the upper hand so that a person invalidates his baptism, falls into sin, and remains the same old man he was before.

10. So long as you keep your pledge to God, he in turn gives you his grace. He pledges himself not to impute to you the sins which remain in your nature after baptism, neither to take them into account nor to condemn you because of them. He is satisfied and well pleased if you are constantly striving and desiring to conquer these sins and at your death to be rid of them. For this reason, although evil thoughts and appetites may be at work, indeed even though at times you may sin and fall, these sins are already broken by the power of the sacrament and covenant. The one condition is that you rise again and enter again into the covenant, as St. Paul says in Romans 8[:1]. No one who believes in Christ is condemned by the evil, sinful inclination of his nature, if only he does not follow it and give in to it. St. John the Evangelist writes in his epistle [I John 2:1–2], “If any one does sin, we have an advocate with God, even Jesus Christ, who has become the forgiveness of our sins.” All this takes place in baptism, where Christ is given us, as we shall hear in the treatise which follows.<sup>6</sup>

11. Now if this covenant did not exist, and God were not so merciful as to wink at our sins, there could be no sin so small but it would condemn us. For the judgment of God can endure no sin. Therefore there is no greater comfort on earth than baptism. For it is through baptism that we come under the judgment of grace and mercy, which does not condemn our sins but drives them out by many trials. There is a fine sentence of St. Augustine which says, “Sin is altogether forgiven in baptism; not in such a manner that it is no longer present, but in such a manner that it is not imputed.”<sup>7</sup> It is as if he were to say, “Sin remains in our flesh even until death and works without ceasing. But so long as we do not give our consent to it or desire to remain in it, sin is so

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), in this volume, pp. 45–73, was the third in a group of three treatises, of which this was the second.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, wrote in his *De Nuptiis et concupiscentia* I, 25, 28: *Si autem quaeritur, quomodo ista concupiscentia carnis maneat in regenerato, in quo universorum facta est remissio peccatorum ... ad haec responditur, dimitti concupiscentiam carnis in Baptismo, non ut non sit, sed ut in peccatum non imputetur.* Migne 44, 429–430.

overruled by our baptism that it does not condemn us and is not harmful to us. Rather it is daily being more and more destroyed in us until our death.”

For this reason no one should be terrified if he feels evil lust or love, nor should he despair even if he falls. Rather he should remember his baptism, and comfort himself joyfully with the fact that God has there pledged himself to slay his sin for him and not to count it a cause for condemnation, if only he does not say Yes to sin or remain in it. Moreover these wild thoughts and appetites, and even a fall into sin, should not be regarded as an occasion for despair. Regard them rather as an admonition from God that we should remember our baptism and what was there spoken, that we should call upon God’s mercy and exercise ourselves in striving against sin, that we should even welcome death in order that we may be rid of sin.

12. Here, then, is the place to discuss the third thing in the sacrament: faith. Faith means that one firmly believes all this: that this sacrament not only signifies death and the resurrection at the Last Day, by which a person is made new to live without sin eternally, but also that it assuredly begins and achieves this; that it establishes a covenant between us and God to the effect that we will fight against sin and slay it, even to our dying breath, while he for his part will be merciful to us, deal graciously with us, and—because we are not sinless in this life until purified by death—not judge us with severity.

So you understand how in baptism a person becomes guiltless, pure, and sinless, while at the same time continuing full of evil inclinations. He can be called pure only in the sense that he has started to become pure and has a sign and covenant of this purity and is ever to become more pure. Because of this God will not count against him his former<sup>8</sup> impurity. A person is thus pure by the gracious imputation of God, rather than by virtue of his own nature. As the prophet says in Psalm 32[:1–2], “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven; blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.”

This faith is of all things the most necessary, for it is the ground of all comfort. He who does not possess such faith must despair of his sins. For the sin which remains after baptism makes it impossible for any good works to be pure before God. For this reason we must boldly and without fear hold fast to our baptism, and set it high against all sins and terrors of conscience. We must humbly admit, “I know full well that I cannot do a single thing that is pure. But I am baptized, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will slay it and blot it out.”

13. So, then, we understand that the innocence which is ours by baptism is so called simply and solely because of the mercy of God. For he has begun this work in us, he bears patiently with our sin, and he regards us as if we were sinless. This also explains why Christians are called in the Scriptures the children of mercy, a people of grace, and men of God’s good will.<sup>9</sup> It is because through baptism they have begun to become pure; by God’s mercy with respect to the sins that still remain they are not condemned; until, finally, through death and at the Last Day, they become wholly pure, just as the sign of baptism shows.

Therefore those people err greatly who think that through baptism they have become wholly pure. They go about in their ignorance and do not slay their sin. Indeed they do not admit that it is sin. They simply persist in it, and so make their baptism of no effect. They continue to depend only on a few external works. Meanwhile pride, hatred, and other evils in their nature, which they disregard, grow worse and worse.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Nachstelligen*. CL 1, 190, n. 22, suggests the meaning, *rückständige, frühere*.

<sup>9</sup> The reference may perhaps be to I Pet. 2:10, Luke 2:14, Eph. 5:1.

How contrary this is! Sin, evil inclination, must be recognized as truly sin.<sup>10</sup> That it does not harm us, however, is to be ascribed to the grace of God. He will not count sin against us if only we keep striving against it with many trials, tasks, and sufferings, and at last slay it at death. To them who do this not, God will not forgive their sins. For they do not live according to their baptism and covenant, and they hinder the work of God and of their baptism which has been begun.

14. Those who presume to blot out and put away their sin by “satisfaction”<sup>11</sup> are the same sort of people. They go so far as to disregard their baptism, as if they had no more need of it beyond the fact of having once been baptized. They do not know that baptism is in force all through life, even until death, yes—as said above—even to the Last Day. For this reason they presume to find some other way of blotting out sin, namely, by works. So for themselves and for all others, they create evil, terrified, and uncertain consciences, and despair at the hour of death. They do not know how they stand with God, thinking that by sin they have now lost their baptism and that it profits them no more.

Guard yourself, by all means, against this error. For as has been said, if anyone has fallen into sin, he should all the more remember his baptism, how God has here made a covenant with him to forgive all his sins, if only he will fight against them even until death. Upon this truth, upon this alliance with God, a man must joyfully dare to rely. Then baptism again goes into force and operation. Then his heart again becomes peaceful and glad, not in his own works or “satisfaction,” but in the mercy of God promised to him in baptism, a mercy which God will keep forever. This faith a person must hold so firmly that he would cling to it even though everything and all sins attacked him. For he who lets himself be forced away from this faith makes God a liar in his promise in the sacrament of baptism.

15. It is faith like this that the devil attacks most of all. If he can overthrow it, he has won the battle. For the sacrament of penance (of which we have already spoken)<sup>12</sup> also has its foundation in this sacrament, inasmuch as sins are forgiven only to those who are baptized, to those whose sins God has promised to forgive. The sacrament of penance thus renews and points out again the sacrament of baptism. It is as if the priest, in the absolution, were saying, “Lo, God has now forgiven you your sin, as he long since promised you in baptism; and now he has commanded me, by the power of the keys,<sup>13</sup> to assure you of this forgiveness. Therefore you now come again into that which baptism is and does. Believe, and you have it. Doubt, and you are lost. So we find that through sin baptism is indeed hindered in its work, in the forgiveness and the slaying of sin. Yet only by lack of faith in its operation is baptism canceled out. Faith, in turn, removes the hindrance to the operation of baptism. Thus everything depends on faith.

To speak quite plainly, it is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out. The forgiveness of sins is obtained by faith, even though they are not entirely driven out. But to drive out sins is to exercise ourselves against them, and at last it is to die, for in death sin perishes completely. But both the forgiveness and the driving out of sins are the work

---

<sup>10</sup> Luther is combating the view that man’s innate concupiscence is not really sin, a teaching which was finally promulgated as dogma in a decree of the Council of Trent, 1546, “This concupiscence, which at times the Apostle calls sin [Rom. 6; 12ff.], the holy Synod declares that the Catholic Church has never understood to be called sin.” Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, p. 248.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. p. 9, n. 3 and pp. 14–15.

<sup>12</sup> *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), in this volume, pp. 3–22, was published just before the present treatise on baptism.

<sup>13</sup> According to Roman teaching, this power to forgive and to retain sin (Matt. 16:19) belonged to the priest and was normally exercised in the sacrament of penance.

of baptism. Thus the Apostle writes to the Hebrews [12:1], who were baptized and whose sins were forgiven, that they should lay aside the sin which clings to them. For so long as I believe that God will not count my sins against me, my baptism is in force and my sins are forgiven, even though they may still in a great measure be present. After that follows their driving out through sufferings, death, and the like. This is what we confess in the article [of the Creed], “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the forgiveness of sins,” and so forth. Here there is special reference to baptism, in which the forgiveness takes place through God’s covenant with us; therefore we must not doubt this forgiveness.

16. It follows, then, that baptism makes all sufferings, and especially death, profitable and helpful, so that they simply have to serve baptism in the doing of its work, that is, in the slaying of sin. It cannot be otherwise. For he who would fulfil the work and purpose of his baptism and be rid of sin, must die. Sin, however, does not like to die, and for this reason it makes death so bitter and so horrible. Such is the grace and power of God that sin, which has brought death, is driven out again by its very own work, namely, by death itself.

You find many people who wish to live in order that they may become righteous and who say that they would like to be righteous. Now there is no shorter way or manner than through baptism and the work of baptism, which is suffering and death. Yet so long as they are not willing to take this way, it is a sign that they do not properly intend or know how to become righteous. Therefore God has instituted many estates in life in which men are to learn to exercise themselves and to suffer. To some he has commanded the estate of matrimony, to others the estate of the clergy, to others the estate of temporal rule, and to all he has commanded that they shall toil and labor to kill the flesh and accustom it to death. Because for all who are baptized, their baptism has made the repose, ease, and prosperity of this life a very poison and a hindrance to its work. For in the easy life no one learns to suffer, to die with gladness, to get rid of sin, and to live in harmony with baptism. Instead there grows only love of this life and horror of eternal life, fear of death and unwillingness to blot out sin.

17. Consider now the lives of men. Many there are who fast, pray, go on pilgrimage, and exercise themselves in such things, thinking thereby only to heap up merit and to sit down in the high places of heaven; they no longer learn<sup>14</sup> to slay their evil vices. But fasting and all such exercises should be aimed at holding down the old Adam, the sinful nature, and at accustoming it to do without all that is pleasing for this life, and thus preparing it more and more each day for death, so that the work and purpose of baptism may be fulfilled. And all these exercises and toils are to be measured not by their number or their greatness, but by the demands of baptism. That is to say, everyone is to take upon himself so much of these works as is good and profitable for the suppressing of his sinful nature and for the preparation of it for death. He is to increase or diminish these works according as he sees sin increasing or diminishing. As it is, people go their way and take upon themselves this, that, and the other task, doing now this, now that, according to the appearance or reputation of the work. Afterward they let it drop just as quickly and thus become altogether inconstant, till in the end they amount to nothing. Indeed some of them so rack their brains over the whole business, and so abuse nature, that they are useless both to themselves and to others.

All this is the fruit of that doctrine with which we have been so infatuated as to think that after repentance or baptism we are without sin and that our good works are to be heaped up for their own sake or as a “satisfaction” for sins already done, but not for the blotting out of sin as

---

<sup>14</sup> *Leren*. Many of the earliest editions read *lernen* instead (WA 10<sup>II</sup>, 487) and, along with CL 1, 193, n. 4, we have so construed it.

such. This is encouraged by those preachers who preach unwisely the legends and deeds of the blessed saints and hold them up as examples for all. The ignorant easily fall for these things, and effect their own destruction out of the examples of the saints. God has given every saint a special way and a special grace for living according to his baptism. But baptism and its significance God has set as a common standard for everyone. Each of us is to examine himself according to his station in life and is to find what is the best way for him to fulfil the work and purpose of his baptism, namely, to slay sin and to die in order that Christ's burden may thus grow light and easy [Matt. 11:30] and not be carried with worry and care. Solomon has this to say of it, "The toil of a fool only wearies him, because he does not know the way to the city" [Eccles. 10:15]. For even as they are worried who wish to go to the city and cannot find their way, so it is with these men also; all their life and labor is a burden to them, and yet accomplishes nothing.

18. In this place, then, belongs the common question whether baptism, and the vow which we there make to God, is something more or greater than the vows of chastity, of the priesthood, or of the clergy. Since baptism is common to all Christians, it is supposed that the clergy have taken a special and a higher vow.

I answer: From what has been said, this is an easy question to answer. For in baptism we all make one and the same vow: to slay sin and to become holy through the work and grace of God, to whom we yield and offer ourselves, as clay to the potter [Jer. 18:4–6]. In this no one is any better than another. But for a life in accordance with baptism, for the slaying of sin, there can be no one method and no special estate in life. This is why I said that each man must test himself that he may know in what estate he may best slay sin and put a check upon his nature. It is true, then, that there is no vow higher, better, or greater than the vow of baptism. What more can we promise than to drive out sin, to die, to hate this life, and to become holy?

Over and above this vow, a person may indeed bind himself to an estate which will be suitable to him and helpful for the completion of his baptism. It is just as though two men went to the same city, and the one went by the footpath, the other by the highway, just as each thought best. So he who binds himself to the estate of matrimony, walks in the toils and sufferings which belong to that estate and lays upon himself its burdens, in order that he may grow used to pleasure and sorrow, avoid sin, and prepare himself for death better than he could do outside of that estate.

But he who seeks more suffering, and by much exercise would speedily prepare himself for death and soon attain the goal of his baptism, let him bind himself to chastity or to the spiritual order. For the spiritual estate, if it is as it ought to be, should be full of torment and suffering in order that he who belongs to it may have more exercise in the work of his baptism than the man who is in the estate of matrimony, and through such torment quickly grow used to welcoming death with joy, and so attain the purpose of his baptism.

Now above this estate there is yet a higher one, that which rules in the spiritual order: the estate of bishop, priest, and so forth. These men should be well practiced in sufferings and works, and at every hour be ready for death—to die not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of those who are their subjects.

Yet in all these estates the standard, of which we spoke above, should never be forgotten, namely, that a man should so exercise himself only to the end that sin may be driven out. He should not be guided by the number or the greatness of the works. But, alas! how we have forgotten our baptism and what it means, what vows we made there, and that we are supposed to walk in its works and to attain its purpose! So, too, we have forgotten about the ways to that goal and about the estates. We hardly know to what end these estates were instituted, or how we are to

act in them for the fulfilling of our baptism. They have been made a sparkling show, and little more remains of them than a worldly display. As Isaiah [1:22] says, “Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water.” On this may God have mercy! Amen.

19. If, then, the holy sacrament of baptism is a matter so great, gracious, and full of comfort, we should diligently see to it that we ceaselessly, joyfully, and from the heart thank, praise, and honor God for it. For I fear that by our thanklessness we have deserved our blindness and become unworthy of recognizing such grace. The whole world was, and still is, full of baptism and the grace of God. But we have been led astray into our own anxious works, and then into indulgences and other similar false comforts. We have thought that we are not to trust God until we are righteous and have made satisfaction for our sin, as though we would buy God’s grace from him or pay him for it.

In truth, he who does not see in God’s grace how it bears with him as a sinner and will make him blessed, he who looks forward only to God’s judgment, will never be joyful in God, and can neither love nor praise him. But if we hear and firmly believe that in the covenant of baptism God receives us sinners, spares us, and makes us pure from day to day, then our heart must be joyful, and love and praise God. Thus God says through the prophet, “I will spare them as a man spares his son” [Mal. 3:17]. Wherefore it is needful that we give thanks to the Blessed Majesty, who shows himself so gracious and merciful toward us poor condemned worms. And the work itself we must magnify and acknowledge.

20. At the same time, however, we must also beware lest a false security creep in and say to itself, “If baptism is so gracious and great a thing that God will not count our sins against us, and as soon as we turn again from sin everything is right by virtue of baptism, then for the present I will live and do my own will. Afterward, or when about to die, I will remember my baptism and remind God of his covenant, and then fulfil the work and purpose of my baptism.”

Baptism is indeed that great a thing, that if you turn again from sins and appeal to the covenant of baptism, your sins are forgiven. But watch out, if you thus wickedly and wantonly sin [and go presuming] on God’s grace, that the judgment does not lay hold upon you and anticipate your turning back. Beware lest, even if you then desired to believe or trust in your baptism, your trial [*anfechtung*] be, by God’s decree, so great that your faith is not able to stand. If they scarcely remain who do not sin or who only fall because of sheer weakness, where shall your wickedness remain, which has tempted and mocked God’s grace?<sup>15</sup>

Let us therefore walk with fear, that with a firm faith we may hold fast to the riches of God’s grace and joyfully give thanks to his mercy forever and ever. Amen.

1

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. I Pet. 4:18.

<sup>1</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1960). *Vol. 35: Luther's works, vol. 35 : Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:23). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.