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Water and Word: Martin Luther on Baptism

Andrea Grozli¹

Among Martin Luther's greatest contributions to the world is how the washing of water in the name of the Triune God, amid the gathered Christian assembly, is at the heart of one's entire life as a Christian.² It was through Luther's reflection on penance that his journey to baptism began almost 500 years ago, and ended following his death with the publication of the *Book of Concord* which Lutherans around the world continue to use today as the quintessential source for the doctrine of the Lutheran faith. It was never Luther's intention to start such a large-scale Reformation, but it was clear to him that change in the church was desperately needed for the faith of the German Christians, whom he felt were being abused and neglected by the unethical and tyrannical practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century. A review of Luther's theological writings on baptism from 1519 to 1530 demonstrate the growth and change of his baptismal theology and the legacy that continues today.

In medieval Christianity, although baptism was practiced, it was not considered a central part of the life of a Christian. Rather, penance was, despite the abuse of indulgences.³ Until 1519, baptism was not on Luther's radar as his main concern with the Church was the evil and corruption that was occurring daily in the public sphere. After writing the *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 in response to the malicious workings of the Church, he was kept busy writing about sin, faith and salvation. However, Luther found himself struggling with the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and arrived at the conclusion that there were others besides himself who were also struggling with the sacraments, due to either a lack of comprehension of their purpose or how to use them properly.⁴ To try to remedy this situation, Luther preached and published three sermons in November and December 1519 on Penance, Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar.⁵ His *Sermon on Baptism* was the catalyst for Luther's theology of baptism which was one of the decisive factors leading towards Reformation.

Luther's Development of Baptism in his Writings

a. The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism, 1519

Dirk Lange argues, in his introduction to this sermon in the *Annotated Luther Volume I*, that "Luther develops here his baptismal theology that undergirds his understanding of the forgiveness of sins and the implications, throughout the life of a Christian, of practicing

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² Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages Using Evangelical Luther Worship*, Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 4.

³ Dirk G. Lange, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism, 1519," *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 203.

⁴ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 358.

⁵ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 358.

penance.”⁶ In *The Sermon on Baptism*, Luther drew on Augustine to distinguish between the visible sign of baptism and its significance. However Luther added a third element to baptism – faith – which played a vital role in joining the sign and its meaning together.⁷ Luther had already introduced faith, which is the human experience through the action of the sacraments, in his sermon on penance and in this sermon. Now, however, he dives even further into the centrality of faith in baptism.⁸ Luther reclaims Augustine’s understanding that baptism does not remove sin but forgives it: for Luther, this broke apart the framework of the medieval church regarding baptism and penance – baptism’s work of forgiveness and new life remains forever and not simply that original sin be washed away restoring the sinner to a condition of grace.⁹ Luther would prefer that all baptisms include full immersion in water because it “helps the body to understand what the sacrament is all about” and that all of life is a “continual dying to sin and a daily rising up again to live with God.”¹⁰ The Holy Spirit begins the spiritual journey of baptism which is sustained through penance and nurtured at the Lord’s table.¹¹

b. The Address to the Christian Nobility, 1520

Luther follows up *The Sermon on Baptism* with *The Address to the Christian Nobility Concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate*, published shortly before *The Babylonian Captivity* in 1520. In this lengthy treatise aimed at the secular people to assist with the reform with Rome, although Luther’s mind is clearly on other matters dealing with the Roman Curate, he includes a section on baptism in which he continues to strengthen the link between baptism, grace and faith. In Luther’s attack of the first wall of the Romanist empire in the *Address*, he continues to expand on his link between baptism and faith together citing 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, saying that because we are all of one body “we all have one baptism, one gospel and one faith and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.”¹² Heiko A. Oberman states that for Luther, baptism is the “visible sign of unmerited justification through God’s grace,” and because this grace is free in comparison to the pope’s “indulgent grace,” the democracy of baptism gives everyone the justification of Christ and “everyone who comes crawling out of baptism has thus been consecrated a priest, bishop and pope.”¹³ Timothy J. Wengert argues that baptism, which was a relatively neglected sacrament in the late-medieval theology, illustrated to Luther the perfection of justification by faith alone.¹⁴ Both the *Sermon on Baptism* and the *Address to the Christian Nobility* were a precursor for his next significant work on baptism.

⁶ Lange, “Sacrament of Baptism,” 203.

⁷ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 358.

⁸ Lange, “Sacrament of Baptism,” 205.

⁹ Lange, “Sacrament of Baptism,” 206.

¹⁰ Lange, “Sacrament of Baptism,” 206.

¹¹ Lange, “Sacrament of Baptism,” 206.

¹² James M. Estes, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate,” *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 382.

¹³ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 227.

¹⁴ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 100.

c. The Babylonian Captivity, 1520

In this theological significant work, Luther continues to discuss the concepts of baptism, faith and grace. As he did in his 1519 sermon, he turns baptism upside down by linking it to penance. Luther was concerned that adults had forgotten about the significance of their own baptisms because Satan had succeeded in quenching it in all adults.¹⁵ Luther attacks St. Jerome's treatment of penance as the "second plank after shipwreck" as if baptism was not penance.¹⁶ Luther goes on to say that as a result of Mark 16:16, baptism is the divine promise for all people, and this in turn leads into a discussion of Moses, the exodus and the covenant that God made with all people. Luther then goes on to further explain Jerome's link between the ship and baptism. Luther highlights the error in thinking that the "power of baptism is broken, and the ship dashed to pieces because of sin."¹⁷ Luther believes, rather, that the ship will never be broken into the separate planks with baptism as the first plank and penance as the second plank because the ship itself represents baptism and remains "one, solid and invincible,"¹⁸ just as our God is one, solid and invincible. Jonathan Trigg makes the point that for Luther, penance as the "second plank," along with vows, monastic orders, and the searching of the mystics, is a tyrannous religion of works that sets aside both baptism and the liberty of faith and destroys the church.¹⁹ Trigg additionally notes that Luther's theology of baptism between 1519 and 1520 and the powerful image of the unsinkable ship that is baptism reveals not so much an "adjustment in baptismal theology occasioned by the reformation breakthrough, but the rediscovery of baptism to which this breakthrough led."²⁰ Luther continues his discussion on the sacraments as having been instituted to nourish faith and that salvation has nothing to do with works. Luther then makes the statement that when we are baptized, we are baptized by the "Triune God himself through a man acting among us in His name."²¹ God as the minister for baptism is strongly present here and later on in Luther's theology as well, when he insists that one should "ascribe both (inward and outward parts of baptism) to God alone, and look upon the person administering it as simply the vicarious instrument of God, by which the Lord sitting in heaven thrusts you under the water with his own hands and promises you forgiveness of your sins, speaking to you upon earth with a human voice by the mouth of his minister."²² Next, Luther begins to talk about the sign of baptism, immersion in the water, but that it is faith in the word of promise to which baptism is added and it is this faith which justifies and fulfils the significance of baptism.²³

Trigg identifies three significant points from *The Sermon on Baptism* which Luther changed in the *Babylonian Captivity*: 1) the degree which Luther develops the significance of baptism which focus in complete immersion in the water of baptism and the drowning and death of sin and the spiritual birth in growth in grace and righteous (which Trigg suggests is

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: American Edition*. 79 Volumes. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann and Christopher Boyd Brown, gen. eds., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), Volume 36: 57-58 (Hereafter cited LW).

¹⁶ LW 36:58.

¹⁷ LW 36:61.

¹⁸ LW 36:61.

¹⁹ Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 145.

²⁰ Trigg, *Baptism*, 148.

²¹ LW 36:63.

²² Trigg, *Baptism*, 141.

²³ LW 36:66.

even more detailed here than in Luther's *Large Catechism*); 2) Luther puts an emphasis on what actually happens to someone at the moment of baptism (they are made truly pure and without sin and guiltless); and 3) Luther uses covenant language²⁴ in paragraph nine by stating that "This blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because, in it God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a grace-filled, comforting covenant."²⁵ Bryan Spinks also identified the covenant language that Luther uses in this work by saying that Christians must pledge themselves to God through baptism and to slay sin until our dying day and as long as we keep our pledge to God, we will receive God's grace and God will not attribute to us the sins that remain after baptism.²⁶

Trigg's comparison of *The Babylonian Captivity* and *The Sermon on Baptism* leads him to the impression that Luther was not prepared for what he found when he began his investigation into baptism.²⁷ In the *Sermon on Baptism*, Trigg says that Luther "is beginning to grapple with the relationship of baptism and the orders, vows and works of human spirituality. But in *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther's position on baptism and penance is sharper, and the vehemence of his language in 1520 is a not only a "sign of a recent discovery of truth, which a few months earlier was only half perceived – the freedom of the sinner justified by God's grace in Christ is a *baptismal* freedom,"²⁸ but is also a reflection of his own personal struggles with monastic life, works, merits and pilgrimages.²⁹

d. The Baptismal Booklet, 1523/1526

By 1520, Luther still regarded the contemporary Latin rite of baptism with some favor, because as he wrote in *The Babylonian Captivity*, "Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who of his rich mercy has preserved at least this one sacrament in his church unspoiled and unspotted by man-made ordinances."³⁰ In 1523, however, Luther began to realize that the Roman Catholic rite of baptism was problematic for both the parents and godparents of the child being baptized because the service was performed in Latin and they could not understand their duties and responsibilities to the newly baptized child. To address this concern, Luther decided that it was time for the baptismal service to be published in German. Luther's *Taufbüchlein* or "Baptismal Booklet" was published in Wittenberg shortly after Easter in 1523 as a reformed model of the baptismal liturgy. In writing this booklet, he used the *Magdeburg Agenda* of 1497 as his template.³¹ He writes in the epilogue his rationale for the work:

One cause of which I consider is the fact that those who stand by (*the font*) understand nothing of what is spoken and performed, it seems to me not only useful but also necessary that baptism be administered in the German tongue . . . so that the sponsors

²⁴ Trigg, *Baptism*, 137-139.

²⁵ Lange, "Sacrament of Baptism," 212.

²⁶ Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism (Liturgy, Worship and Society: From Luther to Contemporary Practices)* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 6.

²⁷ Trigg, *Baptism*, 149.

²⁸ Trigg, *Baptism*, 149.

²⁹ Trigg, *Baptism*, 149.

³⁰ J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period-Some Early Reformed Rites of Baptism and Confirmation and Other Contemporary Documents* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), 3.

³¹ Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 8.

and bystanders may be moved much more to faith and to a more earnest reverence, and the priests who baptize should have much more care for the hearers.³²

Similar to early Reformed and Anglican orders, Luther used the text of Mark 10:13-16 with a “special zeal as the clear example and command of the Lord for infants to be baptized.”³³ David Scaer surmises that Luther altered or removed some of the prayers from the 1497 liturgy, but chose to keep the exorcism, the renunciation of Satan, the sign of the cross and the questioning based on the *Apostles’ Creed* before the act of baptism with water in the name of the Triune God.³⁴ In this first edition, Luther purposefully did not change too much to avoid criticism about instituting a new baptismal liturgy and to avoid the complaints that this new liturgy might invalidate the peoples’ previous baptism.³⁵

Luther went on to significantly revise the *Taufbüchlein* in 1526, three years after its initial release. This new edition was one of the derived benefits of his *German Mass* work which was first preached on Christmas 1525 in Wittenberg.³⁶ In this *Order of Baptism Newly Revised*, Luther removed the symbolic acts of exsufflation, salt, saliva and oil which the Roman baptismal structure had added to the Word of God and the act of baptism but kept exorcism.³⁷ In its rite of exorcism, the Church confessed that the child to be baptized was possessed by the devil and was a child of sin and wrath, who after baptism and acceptance as a child of God, was faced with a life long struggle with the devil.³⁸ Luther retained the exorcism of the Devil with a long address to him. For Luther, this was a word of power uttered in the name of God.³⁹ Both baptismal liturgies were instrumental in reforming the rite of baptism in the emerging evangelical, or Lutheran churches. On the other hand, theologians in the Reformed tradition excluded exorcisms, which they considered too superstitious. For Luther, however, baptism defeated the devil, as well as forgiving a person their sins.

e. Concerning Rebaptism, 1528

There is no sign in either the *Sermon on Baptism* or *The Babylonian Captivity* of the controversy that would explode over the next few years concerning infant baptism.⁴⁰ It was very clear for Luther’s theology of baptism based scripturally on Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-17 that infants are to be baptized. There was such an emphasis on faith in the recipient of the sacraments, that it would seem to make Luther’s retention of infant baptism inconsistent and perhaps even indefensible, but Luther defended it as such: On this matter I agree with everyone in saying that infants are helped by vicarious faith: the faith of those who present them for baptism. The word of God, wherever uttered, is powerful

³² Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 6.

³³ David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 162.

³⁴ David P. Scaer, *Baptism*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume XI. ed. John Stephenson (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1999), 182.

³⁵ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 480.

³⁶ Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, 474.

³⁷ Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, 480.

³⁸ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 121.

³⁹ Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530*, 480.

⁴⁰ Trigg, *Baptism*, 149.

enough to change the hearts even of the ungodly, and these are not less unresponsive and incapable than any infant. Further, all things are possible in response to the prayers of a believing church, when it presents the infant, and this is changed, cleansed, and renewed by their infused faith.⁴¹

In 1527, Luther wrote a letter entitled *Concerning Rebaptism* which came as a direct result of Luther's name being included in Balthasar Hubmaier's book on rebaptism published in 1525.⁴² Wengert says that in *Concerning Rebaptism*, Luther wrote with even more assurance about baptism's central position in Christian life.⁴³ Luther proves no one should doubt as to the validity of their infant baptism for baptism is "a work of God, not invented by man but commanded by God and witnessed to by the gospel."⁴⁴ One of Luther's main points about faith is that "faith doesn't exist for the sake of baptism, but baptism for the sake of faith. When faith comes, baptism is complete. A second baptism is not necessary."⁴⁵ Oberman says that the "argument against infant baptism, that infants cannot believe because they do not have the rational faculties to grasp the Christian message, distorts the sacrament, transforming it from the work of God into the work of man."⁴⁶ The question of "does baptism require faith to be valid, or does it create faith?" created quite the controversy which Luther argued that baptism did not depend on the faith of the baptized person, but rather it was bound to the Word by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ Gordon Jensen observes that this controversy led to the focus of infant baptism being on "whose faith" rather than "what God gives" in the sacrament.⁴⁸ The debate surrounding infant baptism continues to this day.

f. The Catechisms, 1529

Luther began to think about the idea of writing a catechism in 1525, probably at the suggestion of Nicholas Hausmann as an instructional booklet for children to learn about the most important parts of the Christian faith – the *Ten Commandments*, *The Apostle's Creed*, the *Lord's Prayer* and the sacraments with the help of Justus Jonas and John Agricola.⁴⁹ Luther wanted a catechism because he considered it an integral part of the new order of the church, along with his *German Mass* and the visitation program.⁵⁰ The *Small Catechism for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers* was originally published in early 1529 as a one page printed placard as an aid to instruction and only later appeared in the form of a book.⁵¹

The publication of the *Large Catechism* (which was titled the *German Catechism* by the printers) in April of 1529 resulted from the need for instruction of the poorly trained clergy on the basics of faith.⁵² Luther defends infant baptism in the *Large Catechism* on the grounds that it does not matter whether the person being baptized has faith or not as it will

⁴¹ Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 3-4.

⁴² LW 40:229.

⁴³ Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 101.

⁴⁴ LW 40:239.

⁴⁵ LW 40:246.

⁴⁶ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 231.

⁴⁷ Gordon A. Jensen, "Baptism," *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 74.

⁴⁸ Jensen, "Baptism," 74.

⁴⁹ Brecht, *Shaping and Defining the Reformation*, 273.

⁵⁰ Brecht, *Shaping and Defining the Reformation*, 274.

⁵¹ Brecht, *Shaping and Defining the Reformation*, 275.

⁵² Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," (hereafter cited LC), Editor's Introduction, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 377. Hereafter cited as BC.

not make the baptism wrong: everything depends on God's word and command, but that infants are brought to baptism in the "belief and hope that it has faith, and pray God to give it faith: but we do not baptize on this account, but solely because God has commanded it."⁵³

In both the *Catechisms*, Luther repeats the same four questions of baptism but includes an additional section on infant baptism in the *Large Catechism*. The first question Luther asks is "*Was ist das?*" ("What is it?") because at the time of 1528 in Wittenberg, there were two definitions of baptism in existence: 1) more of an emphasis on God's Word connected to the physical element of the water and 2) God's command of baptism connected with the divine promise of God.⁵⁴ Luther simplified the definition into one clear sentence: "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water enclosed in God's command and connected with God's Word."⁵⁵ From his earliest sermon on baptism in 1519 and throughout his writings up until this point, Luther continues to reference Matthew 28:19-20 as God's command and Mark 16:16 as the connection to God's promise as the scriptural basis for his doctrine on baptism. Luther says that "these words contain God's commandment and institution, so that no one may doubt that baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by human beings."⁵⁶ It was clear to Luther that water and the Word should not be separated.

Second, Luther asks in both Catechisms about the purpose of baptism, namely, what are their benefits, gifts and effects?⁵⁷ Wengert says for Luther the true, full meaning of a thing (whether it is a sacrament or a text from scripture) could not be ascertained unless the effects of it were measured, and both Luther and Melanchthon gleaned this from Aristotle's *Analytics*.⁵⁸ Melanchthon notoriously wrote in his 1521 theological textbook *Loci Communes*: "To know Christ is to know his benefits,"⁵⁹ which the first two questions of the Catechisms address. The *Small Catechism*, which Luther wrote as an instructional booklet for all Christians, summarizes the value of baptism so beautifully in one sentence: "It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare."⁶⁰ In the *Large Catechism*, Luther changed the vocabulary to describe the water in baptism as "a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water, for it is through the Word that it receives the power to become the 'washing of regeneration'," citing Titus 3:5.⁶¹

In addressing the third question of "who benefits from baptism?" Luther appears to give the impression of using two very different questions. In the *Small Catechism*, Luther asks how can water do such things and his reply illustrates that the benefits of baptism only come by faith – faith that is created and strengthened in the Word: "Clearly the water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with, in and among the water, and faith, which trust this Word of God in the water."⁶² Luther was such a mastermind with language that the words

⁵³ Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 5.

⁵⁴ Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 108.

⁵⁵ Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 108.

⁵⁶ LC, Baptism, 6; BC, 457.

⁵⁷ Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 110.

⁵⁸ Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 110.

⁵⁹ Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 111.

⁶⁰ Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," (hereafter cited SC), Baptism, 5-6; BC 359.

⁶¹ LC, Baptism, 27; BC, 460.

⁶² SC, Baptism, 9-10; BC, 359.

“in the water” closely resemble the incarnation – Word in the flesh.⁶³ In the *Large Catechism*, Luther clearly reiterates his position that baptism is not a result of our human work (although we perform the act of baptism), but that it is God’s work, which is necessary for salvation and it demands faith.⁶⁴ Luther continues to say that baptism is “not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the Lord Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith.”⁶⁵ Here Luther links Christ’s death on the cross with baptism – just as Jesus death and resurrection was a treasure to all Christians, so is the gracious gift of baptism.

In the fourth and final question, Luther purposefully chooses to use the same question in both *Catechisms* – how can water do such great things? For Luther, it was important that those being baptized be wholly immersed in the water and then drawn up out of the water. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther says that these “two parts, being dipped under the water and emerging from it point to the power and effect of baptism, which is nothing else than the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new creature, both of which must continue in us our whole life long.”⁶⁶ Heiko A. Oberman comments in his book *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* that penance is not a separate sacrament because it is closely linked with baptism and that penance is a “return to baptism, a return to the beginning that God made there! Baptism grabs the Devil by the throat and the old Adam by the collar; where we turn, baptism marks us throughout our lives.”⁶⁷ Thus, “Baptism is a dress rehearsal for the Last Day, and it is more. It is the actual enactment of the promise of God that finds fulfilment in that day, no day of judgment for those made alive in Christ as the judgment of being buried in Christ’s tomb fell upon them in baptism.”⁶⁸ In the *Small Catechism*, Luther succinctly points out that baptism with water “signifies that the old person in us (Adam) with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned through daily sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”⁶⁹ At this point in Luther’s life he sees baptism as “no greater jewel” of the Christian life.⁷⁰

g. The Augsburg Confession, 1530

The *Augsburg Confession* was written in 1530 in response to Emperor Charles’ V request to present a summary of the public teaching that Luther and other reformers following Luther’s theology and teachings were using at the time to the Diet of Augsburg.⁷¹ Although Philip Melancthon is the primary author of this “confession of faith,” Luther approved the contents of the *Augsburg Confession* as much of it was taken from Luther’s previous writings and sermons and it is for this reason that I include mentioning this faith defining work here. This document not only illustrates the culmination of the previous ten

⁶³ Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms*, 112.

⁶⁴ LC, Baptism, 36-37; BC 461.

⁶⁵ LC, Baptism, 37; BC, 461.

⁶⁶ LC, Baptism, 65; BC 465.

⁶⁷ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 231.

⁶⁸ Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 83.

⁶⁹ SC, Baptism, 12; BC 360.

⁷⁰ Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms*, 114.

⁷¹ “Editor’s Introduction,” *The Book of Concord*, 1.

years' worth of catholic reform that Luther had unintentionally begun but solidifies in a confessional format the beliefs and changes that Luther felt were necessary to reform the Church.

It is through the writing of *Augsburg Confession* that we can unmistakably see how Luther's strong beliefs about the role of baptism in the lives of Christians evolved from his early discussions. The role of original sin, the fall of Adam and baptism are linked in Article II: "Original sin is truly sin and condemns to God's eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit."⁷² Article IX specifically speaks about the issue of infant baptism and states that in addition to baptism being necessary for all people, "grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him."⁷³ Scaer identifies in his book *Baptism* that Article IX makes explicit what was already implicit in Articles II through V, namely that original sin (II) includes children, that the Holy Spirit is to bestow on the blessings of Christ's ascension on those who believe (III), that those justified for Christ's sake through faith will stand forgiven before God (IV) which can only take place through the ministry which offers grace through both sacraments.⁷⁴ Scaer comes to the conclusion that infant faith is present, even though the *Augsburg Confession* does not clearly address it which was key for Luther.⁷⁵

Baptism in Today's Context

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the world's major Christian churches (including Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterians, Methodists and Roman Catholics) have come together ecumenically in a move toward greater consensus on both interpretation and baptismal practice through conversation about baptism, sharing of rites and its place in the life of the church.⁷⁶ In 1982, after many years of dialogue following Vatican II and the realization of many commonalities between them regarding the theology of baptism and baptismal worship resources, the World Council of Churches created a document entitled *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*.⁷⁷ This document declares that "baptism is the one sacrament for which no church questions the validity of the practices of other Christians" and it agrees with Luther that the "life of baptism also encompasses human response: that baptism is a lifelong process of growth into Christ and that the Christian life involves both struggle and continuing in the experience of God's grace."⁷⁸ While this document acknowledges both infant and believers' baptism, it does not resolve the tension between them that has been ongoing for the past 500 years, but affirms that both are rooted in the faithfulness of Christ and within the faith community.⁷⁹

In this new millennium, one must ask the question: Does the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada follow the baptismal theology of Luther as well as the baptismal practice as set out in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*? The ELCIC's *Statement on Sacramental Practices* echoes Martin Luther's theology of baptism: "A person is baptized once; Baptism is

⁷² "The Augsburg Confession," (hereafter cited AC), II, 2; BC 38.

⁷³ AC IX, 1-2; BC 42.

⁷⁴ Scaer, *Baptism*, 133.

⁷⁵ Scaer, *Baptism*, 133.

⁷⁶ Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 9.

⁷⁷ Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 10.

⁷⁸ Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 10.

⁷⁹ Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 10.

not repeated. Christians live and affirm their Baptism through daily repentance, receiving forgiveness and renewal in the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁰ While not stating that Baptism involves an actual “drowning,” the ELCIC statement does talk about Baptism as a daily dying to sin and rising to newness of life.⁸¹ The ELCIC statement also declares that baptism is the sacrament of incorporation of membership into the church: “Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into life with Christ.”⁸² Following Luther’s theology, the document discusses both the theological tenets of baptism as well as the practical practices of baptism – for example that generous amounts of water are to be used to baptize individuals, that a period of instruction should precede baptism and that in case of emergency, any Christian may baptize someone in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁸³ The six implications of ecumenical consensus for baptismal practice noted in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* which include the composition of the essential parts of the service, the generous use of water, approval of the use of additional symbols, baptism as a communal act, connection of baptism to festivals of the church and the administration in the name of the Triune God are affirmed in the ELCIC document *The Use of the Means of Grace* and are reflected in the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Martin Luther’s changing and strengthening theology of baptism is the pinnacle of the Lutheran faith today, making significant strides from its humble beginnings as a sermon almost 500 years ago. If Martin Luther were alive today, he might be immensely pleased and humbled to see that the Church named after him continues to give the baptismal life central place in all of its worship.⁸⁵ This remarkable visionary reformer whose early identification that “grace is not for sale”⁸⁶ rocked the medieval world was God’s chosen prophet in a time when the church needed major reform. We give Luther the final word, as found in his *Large Catechism*:

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: “But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body” . . . No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ *Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada Statement of Sacramental Practices*, Theological Foundations: Baptism, 6. Accessed online December 9, 2017. <http://www.elcic.ca/What-We-Believe/Sacraments/Sacramental-Policy.cfm>

⁸¹ *ELCIC Statement of Sacramental Practices*, Theological Foundations: Baptism, 2.

⁸² *ELCIC Statement of Sacramental Practices*, Introduction, 5.

⁸³ *ELCIC Statement of Sacramental Practices*, Practical Principles: Baptism, 7.

⁸⁴ Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 9.

⁸⁵ Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 27.

⁸⁶ This was one of the themes selected by the LWF to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses in 2017.

⁸⁷ LC, IV, 44–45, BC 462.