

Shaping a Congregation's Self-awareness as a Baptizing Community

John T.Pless

"We are little fishes according to our great fish, Jesus Christ. We are born in water and continue to live healthily only as we remain in the water"- Tertullian¹

Baptism is present tense. It is not simply that "I was baptized" but that "I am baptized." For a Lutheran congregation to recapture its self-awareness as a baptizing community, this present tense nature of baptism needs to be accented in preaching, liturgical practice, catechesis, and pastoral care. A good starting point would be Luther's exposition of the reality of God's gracious gifts in baptism as set forth in the *Large Catechism*². Using the *Large Catechism* for this task presupposes knowledge of the *Small Catechism* as it provides the foundational understanding of baptism with reference to its institution by Christ, its benefits, its efficacy, and its significance for the life of repentance and faith.

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther expands upon the truth of baptism confessed in the *Small Catechism* as he emphasizes the fact that baptism is God's work not the work of any human being. "To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act" (LC IV:10, Kolb/Wengert, 457). Luther never tires of stressing that baptism is God's work. "Thus you see plainly 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 received by faith" (LC IV: 37, Kolb/Wengert, 461). With a polemical edge that is lacking in the *Small Catechism*, Luther engages the "new spirits" who set baptism aside, regarding it as empty. "Therefore it is sheer wickedness and devilish blasphemy that now, in order to blaspheme baptism, our new spirits set aside God's Word and ordinance, consider nothing but the water drawn from the well, and then babble, 'How can a handful of water help the soul?'" (LC IV:15, Kolb/Wengert, 458). As in the *Small Catechism*, Luther focuses on the benefit or blessing of baptism. "This is the simplest way to put it: the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. For no one is baptized in order to become a prince, but, as the words say, 'to be saved.' To be saved, as everyone knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever" (LC IV:24, Kolb/Wengert, 459).

Perhaps the most significant dimension of the *Large Catechism's* treatment of baptism is the significance of baptism for the daily life of the believer. Here Luther remarks "In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings-victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of baptism are so boundless that if our timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could be all true" (LC IV:41, Kolb/Wengert, 461). For Luther, the significance of baptism is found in the rhythm of the dying and rising that marks Christian existence: "Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth" (LC IV:65, Kolb/Wengert,

65). Baptism is not something that is confined to the moment of the liturgical rite, but rather embraces the life of the Christian from font to grave. Thus, there is as Jonathan Trigg aptly describes it, a certain "circularity" to the baptismal life:

"The circularity of the Christian life for Luther is reflected in several aspects of his theology. Conversion itself becomes, not an event, but a state to be preserved in by the Christian who must be *semper penitens* ... A Christian never progresses beyond the need for justification because of the nature of justification itself- he remains a sinner although righteousness is imputed to him as he lives by faith....The life of faith is no complacent reflection on past victories but an armed struggle."³

So in the face of sin and death, temptation and struggle, Luther counsels the Christian to retreat to his or her baptism and seize the consolation that it gives. "Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may 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 work on earth can acquire" (LC IV:44,46, Kolb/Wengert, 462).

How, then, might we so extol the great jewel that is holy baptism in the life of the congregation so that our people become more aware of the treasure that God has placed in this sacrament? Four areas suggest themselves for attention: (1) liturgical practice, (2) preaching, (3) catechesis, and (4) pastoral care.

Liturgical practice. Under normal circumstances, baptism takes place within the context of the Divine Service. The rubrics for the Order of Holy Baptism in *Lutheran Worship* place rite at the beginning of the service. Liturgically this expresses the fact that baptism is our entrance to life in Christ. The invocation along with confession and absolution then call us back to baptism, illustrating the point the Christian life is a continual return to the font. This point is enhanced by placing the font near the entrance of the nave so that worshipers might be visually reminded that we come into the church by the washing of regeneration.

A careful use of the symbols that are associated with the baptismal liturgy (sign of the cross, white robe, baptismal candle) can point to the significance of what God is doing in baptism⁴. They are reminders that baptism joins us to Jesus' death, clothes us in His blood-bought righteousness, and enlighten us with His light.

With the publication of the *Lutheran Worship Agenda* in 1982, the ancient service of the Easter Vigil with its vivid baptismal themes has been recovered for use in our churches. This service connects the resurrection of our Lord with baptism in the way of Romans 6. A careful use of this service will elucidate the centrality of baptism as the sacrament of the new creation.

Baptismal hymnody reinforces the place of baptism in the ongoing life of the Christian. Both *Lutheran Worship*⁵ and *Hymnal Supplement 98* enriched and expanded the corpus of baptismal hymns. Additional strong baptismal hymns are to be found in *Christian Worship* and the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*.

Luther's preface to his baptismal booklet⁶ of 1526 speaks to the reality of what God is doing in baptism. Some congregations print portions of this preface as a bulletin insert on Sundays when the sacrament is administered as Luther's words serve to remind parents, sponsors, and congregation of the tremendous work that God is performing in baptism and how this gracious activity of the triune God provokes the wrath of the devil.

Preaching. Just as the pulpit is architecturally located between the font and the altar, preaching is positioned between baptism and the Lord's Supper. Preaching within the Divine Service presupposes baptism.⁷ Liturgical preaching is addressed to the baptized who have been gathered "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Liturgical preaching leads from the font to the altar as it proclaims the Lamb of God who gives us His body and blood to eat and drink in the holy supper. In this sense baptism provides the context for preaching.

Certainly there are many occasions within the church year that call for explicit preaching on baptism (i.e. The Baptism of our Lord and other Sundays where the lectionary sets a distinct baptismal theme). These Sundays will provide the preacher with opportunities to preach on various aspects of baptism. Baptismal preaching, however, will not be limited to these days. The preacher will understand that the Scriptures to be read and preached on with baptism in view as they invite the unbaptized to "repent and be baptized" and as they call those who are baptized to live as those whose lives have been claimed by the Triune God.

Catechesis. Catechesis is the teaching that is connected with baptism (see Matthew 28:19-20). In the case of those who are not yet baptized, catechesis is the teaching that leads to baptism. For those who are baptized, catechesis is the teaching that unpacks all that the Lord has given in baptism. Whether given before or after the administration of baptism, this teaching cannot be separated from baptism. Andrew Pfeiffer writes:

"Pre-baptismal instruction, especially in the form of adult catechesis, is obviously evangelistic. However, post-baptismal instruction which draws on previous catechesis can be essentially evangelistic. This is often overlooked. It can be evangelistic in the sense that (a) it recalls believers to the grace foundation of their salvation and therefore keeps them in the faith, and (b) it strengthens them in their daily Christian witness, which is significant for the witness of the whole church"⁸

A congregation that understands itself as a "baptizing community" will also see itself as a "catechizing community" both as it prepares converts for baptism (or confirmation) and as it sees to it that those who are baptized continue "steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). Such catechesis will be more than informational, it will be formation in repentance, faith, and holy living.⁹ This catechesis will engage catechumens in the church's three books as our doctrine is drawn from the Holy Scriptures, confessed in the *Small Catechism*, and expressed in the hymnal.¹⁰

As the baptism of infants and young children anticipates catechesis, the congregation might present the parents with a copy of the *Small Catechism*.

The pastor could write these or similar words inside the front cover:

Dear N,

Today God washed away your sin in the waters of baptism, gave you the gift of His Spirit, and made you a priest in His holy and royal priesthood. This Catechism is your handbook for life in God's priesthood. Your parents will give you this book to help you understand what God has done for you today in your baptism as He has made you His own so that you might live in Him and proclaim His praises forever. God bless and keep you in the grace of your baptism.

In Christ,

Pastor N

Pastors will encourage and equip parents to teach and pray the catechism with their children so that they continue to draw their life from baptism.

Pastoral Care. Baptism will also provide the context for pastoral care as troubled consciences are directed to the bedrock promises of God made and bestowed in this holy bath. As baptism plunges the believer into a life of dying to sin and rising with Christ to the newness of life, a renewed understanding of baptism will lead to a recovery of private confession and absolution as the primary means of pastoral care in the church.¹

In summary, the congregation that understands itself as a "baptizing community" will confess with Luther: "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory. Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new. If we want to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians, and let those who fall away return to it. As Christ, the mercy seat, does not withdraw from us or forbid us to return to him even though we sin, so all his treasures and gifts remain. As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, that is, as long as we carry the old creature around our neck" (LC IV:83-86, Kolb/Wengert, 466-467).

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¹ . Quoted in Norman Nagel, "Holy Baptism" in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*. Edited by Fred Precht (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 268.

² . Helpful surveys of Luther's understanding of baptism are to be found in Brecht, Martin. "Gelebte Taufe nach Martin Luther" in *Das Sacrament der Heiligen Taufe* . Edited by Joachim Heubach (Erlangen: Martin Luther-Verlag, 1997), 21-39; Jetter, Werner. *Die Taufe beim jungen Luther* (Tuebingen: Mohr, 1954); Lohse, B. *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 298-305; Peters,A. *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen Band IV* (Goettingen:Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 71-126; Sasse, Hermann. *We Confess the Sacraments*

(St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 36-48; Scaer, David. *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics XI: Baptism* (Cresbard, South Dakota: Luther Academy, 1999); Schlink, Edmund. *The Doctrine of Baptism*. Translated by Herbert J.A. Bouman (St.Louis,: Concordia Publishing House, 1969); Spinks, Bryan. "Luther's Timely Theology of Unilateral Baptism" in *Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 1995), 23-46; Tranvik, Mark. "Luther on Baptism" in *Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 1999), 75-90; Trigg, Jonathan. *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994).

³ . Trigg, 170. Also see Robert Kolb, "God Kills and Makes Alive: Romans 6 and Luther's Understanding of Justification" in *Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 1998), 33-56. For a helpful treatment of this theme suitable for use with parish Bible study groups, see Harold Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994) and John T.Pless, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness- A Study Guide* (Cresbard, South Dakota: Logia Books, 1994).

⁴ . See Nagel, 285-286.

⁵ . *The Lutheran Hymnal* and *Lutheran Worship* each contain only six baptismal hymns. Luther's great catechism hymn on baptism, "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord" (LW 223) is in LW but not in TLH. *Hymnal Supplement* 98 contains six new baptismal hymns. In this collection, "God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It: I am Baptized into Christ" (844) is especially worthy of note. Another excellent hymn from HS98 that focuses on baptism but is in the Epiphany section of HS98 is "To Jordan's River Came Our Lord" (816). Additional baptismal hymns can be found in *Christian Worship* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, especially "We Praise You, Lord" (301) and in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod's *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, especially "The Power of Sin No Longer" (243), "At Jesus' Feet Our Infant Sweet" (245) and "Now Christ, the Sinless Son of God" (248). Hopefully, the corpus of baptismal hymnody will be expanded in the projected hymnal of 2007.

⁶ . Luther's "Baptismal Booklet" of 1526 was included in the second edition of the *Small Catechism* published in 1529 and in all subsequent editions published in Wittenberg during Luther's lifetime. It is included in the Kolb/Wengert edition of the *Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 371-375. The "Baptismal Booklet" contains both Luther's preface and an order for baptism. Luther's order is being used as a "template" for the baptismal liturgy for the 2007 hymnal. The preface is a powerful statement of what God does through His Word in the water of baptism, the comfort that baptism brings, and the importance of prayer on behalf of the baptized.

⁷ . See William Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). Willimon comments "Christian preaching brings out or brings into view the mystery inherent in the waters of baptism. Baptismal preaching names the reality to which we have been exposed, that is, the peculiar salvation of this crucified God" (5). Also see Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 166-170.

⁸ . Andrew Pfeiffer, "A Comparative Study of Ephesians, Colossians and First Peter: Implications for the Evangelisation of Adults" in *Lutheran Theological Journal* (August 2000), 71.

⁹ . See Robert Jenson, "Catechesis for Our Time" in *Marks of the Body of Christ*. Edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 137-149. Jenson notes "Catechesis was born as the instruction needed to bring people from their normal religious communities to an abnormal one. That is, it was born as liturgical rehearsal and interpretation, moral correction, and instruction in a specific theology. Apart from need for these things, it is not apparent that the church would have to *instruct* at all" (140). Also see Andrew Pfeiffer, "Christ and the Catechumenate" in *Mysteria Dei: Essays in Honor of Kurt Marquart*. Edited by Paul McCain (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 2000), 207-224; John T. Pless, "Catechesis for Life in the Royal Priesthood" in *Logia* (Reformation 1994), 3-10; Wagner, Meryn. "Luther's Baptismal Theology: Implications for Catechesis" in *Lutheran Theological Journal* (December 1997), 105-114; Yeago, David. "Sacramental Lutheranism at the End of the Modern Age" in *Lutheran Forum* (Christmass 2000), 6-16. On the revival of the catechumenate see William Harmless, *Augustine on the Catechumenate* (Collegetown, Minnesota: Pueblo Press, 1995) and the Fall, 1998 issue of *Lutheran Forum*.

¹⁰ . For models of this catechesis see Peter Bender, *Lutheran Catechesis* (available from Peace Lutheran Church, PO Box 123, Sussex, Wisconsin 53089); John T.Pless. *Didache* (available from University Lutheran Chapel, 1101

University Ave SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414). Also see *We Believe: Essays on the Catechism* (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 2000).

¹¹ . See John T.Pless, "Your Pastor is Not Your Therapist: Private Confession-The Ministry of Repentance and Faith" in *Logia* (Eastertide 2001), 21-26.

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