

Martin Luther's Sacramental Gospel

by Dwight Oswald

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". . . you have this baptismal regeneration, preparing stepping stones to make it easy for men to go to Rome I pray you never rest upon this wretched and rotten foundation, this deceitful invention of antichrist." -- Charles Spurgeon (From his sermon titled *Baptismal Regeneration*)

"The fact that Christianity is a religion of salvation is expressed in the sacramental life of the Church Baptism and the Eucharist [are] sacraments which create in man the seed of eternal life. -- Pope John Paul II (Quoted from *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 74-75)

"To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save. No one is baptized in order to become a prince, but as the words say, to 'be saved.' To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever." -- Martin Luther (Quoted from *The Large Catechism*)

The false sacramental gospel of "Baptismal Regeneration," as proclaimed by Martin Luther and others, has probably (God only knows) led more people to hell than any other error propagated and tolerated within the ranks of professing Christianity.

Background

"More books have been written about Luther [1483-1546], the great German Reformer, than about any other figure in history, except Christ" (*The History of Christianity*, Lion Publishing, p. 368). Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany. The next day he was baptized as a Roman Catholic at St. Ann's Church in Eisleben. As a young man he attended the University of Erfurt in preparation to become a lawyer. One night [1505] on his way to his parent's home he was nearly struck by lightning. In terror he vowed that if Saint Ann would save him he would become a monk. Following this, much to the consternation of his father, Luther joined himself to the Cloister of Augustinian Friars in Erfurt. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. During this time, Luther desperately tried to earn favor with God through a life of rigid asceticism. It brought no peace. On a business trip to Rome in 1510, Luther was shocked by the corruption and worldliness he witnessed in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1511, his Augustinian order sent him to the University of Wittenberg, where he completed his doctorate of theology. Shortly thereafter, he was given the position "Chair of Biblical Theology" at Wittenberg, which he maintained for the rest of his life. Sometime between 1512 and 1515, Luther supposedly came to realize that man is not justified by his own works but rather by faith alone. On October 31, 1517, he placed his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. For the most part, they challenged the practice of selling "indulgences." Initially, Luther's desire was for REFORMATION to take place within the Roman Catholic church. In 1521, the Pope excommunicated Luther. In 1525, Luther married a former nun by the name of Katherina von Bora. They had six children. Luther died in the same town he was born--Eisleben, Germany in 1546.

An Evangelical Reputation—A Sacramental Gospel

Luther is quoted favorably by just about everyone in professing Christianity. Evangelicals and Fundamentalists often refer to him as a champion of "Justification By Faith ALONE." However, that is only half the story. It is absolutely amazing that very few seem to realize that Luther in fact believed that we are saved by "faith alone through baptism." However, you can't have it both ways at the same

time--"Faith Alone" and "Faith through Baptism." The addition of "through baptism" in effect contradicts "faith alone."

In reality, Luther did not hold to JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE! If he had really held to this, he would have rejected the doctrine of "baptismal regeneration." He did not! In fact, Luther called for the death of those (Anabaptists) who outspokenly believed in JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE and practiced BELIEVER'S BAPTISM. To get away from a gospel of works salvation, Luther referred to baptism as "God's Work" and not a work that man does. However, the OBJECT of Luther's faith was not Christ ALONE, but CHRIST plus BAPTISM. That is ANOTHER GOSPEL!

Luther's Catechism

Luther wrote down the "essentials" of the faith as he saw them in what is known as Luther's Catechism. There was the SMALL CATECHISM geared toward children and his LARGE CATECHISM geared toward adults. Both Catechisms deal with five things: The Ten Commandments; The Apostles Creed; The Lord's Prayer; Baptism; and Communion. Luther himself said:

"In the catechism, we have a very exact, direct, and short way to the whole Christian religion The catechism is the most complete and best doctrine, and therefore should continually be preached; all public sermons should be grounded and built thereupon the catechism, I insist, is the right Bible of the laity, wherein is contained the whole sum of Christian doctrine necessary to be known by every Christian for salvation We should esteem and love the catechism, for therein is the ancient, pure, divine doctrine of the Christian Church" (*Table Talk* — Martin Luther, translated by William Hazlitt, pp. 139-140).

"Luther said that he would be glad to have all his works perish except the reply to Erasmus and the catechism" (*Here I Stand*--Roland H. Bainton, p. 263).

Luther in His Own Words from *The Large Catechism* (All from *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert Fischer)

"It remains for us to speak of our two sacraments, instituted by Christ. Every Christian ought to have at least some brief, elementary instruction in them **because without these no one can be a Christian** . . . First we shall take up Baptism through which we are first received into the Christian community. . . . Moreover, it is solemnly and strictly commanded **that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved**" (pp. 80-81). (Bold added.)

"Hence it is well described as a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water, **forthrough the Word Baptism receives the power to become the "washing of regeneration,"** as St. Paul calls it in Titus 3:5. . . . **Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life. . .**" (p. 84). (Bold added.)

"'He who believes and is baptized will be saved,' that is, **faith alone makes the person worthy to receive the salutary, divine water profitably.** . . . But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God's command and ordinance, **so that, baptized in the name of God, you may receive in the water the promised salvation**" (pp. 84-85). (Bold added.)

"He always [the Christian] has 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 . . . Now here in Baptism there is brought free to every man's door just such a priceless medicine which swallows up death and saves the lives of all men. To

appreciate and use Baptism aright, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort, "But I am baptized! And if I am 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 obtain perfect holiness and salvation, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire" (pp. 85-86). (Bold added.)

"Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in Baptism . . ." (p. 90). (Bold added.)

Further Quotes from Luther on Baptism

"The Anabaptists cavil as to how the salvation of man is to be effected by water. The simple answer is, that all things are possible to him who believes in God Almighty" (*Table Talk*, p. 180).

"Just so, when we are baptized into everlasting life and the kingdom of heaven . . . Therefore it is necessary that we should be baptized into Jesus Christ and His death" (*Commentary on Romans—Martin Luther*, translated by J. Theodore Mueller, p. 10 1).

". . . made children of God . . . by a new birth, and by the renewing of the inward man, which is done in baptism . . . For, besides that they who are baptized are regenerate and renewed by the Holy Ghost to a heavenly righteousness, and to eternal life . . . And this is to put on Christ truly, according to the gospel . . . This is diligently to be noted, because of the fond and fantastical spirits, who go about to deface the majesty of baptism, and speak wickedly of it. Paul, contrariwise, commendeth it, and setteth it forth with honorable titles, calling it, 'the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.' And here also he saith, that 'all ye that are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.' **Wherefore baptism is a thing of great force and efficacy**" (*Commentary On Galatians —Martin Luther*, translated by Erasmus Middleton, pp. 221-222). (Bold added.)

". . . so, it is to be observed, must you also be saved in baptism. Just as that water swallowed up all that was then living, of man and beast, so baptism also swallows up all that is of the flesh and of the corrupt nature, and makes us spiritual (*Commentary On Peter & Jude--Martin Luther*, Kregel Publications, p. 169). (Bold added.)

"Luther attached great importance to his baptism. When the Devil assailed him, he would answer, 'I am baptized'" (*Here I Stand — Roland Bainton*, p. 287).

Excusing Luther's Sacramental Gospel

Many make excuses for Luther, claiming that since he had just come out of Roman Catholicism, he couldn't be expected to have all of his theology correct. One could concede this on so-called "secondary" issues, but the issue here is not secondary but PRIMARY! (1 Tim. 2:4) The issue is HOW Christ is received. That is ESSENTIAL! It should again be pointed out that the Anabaptists did have their doctrine correct concerning baptism, yet Luther called for their death. It is not that Luther did not give careful thought to the issues. He did!

"If anyone after my death should say: If Dr. Luther were living right now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not sufficiently consider it, against this I say now as then, and then as now, that, by God's grace, I have most diligently compared all these articles with the

Scriptures time and time again, and have gone over them, and would defend them as confidently as I have now. . ." (*Luther's Works*, by Robert H. Fischer, p.360).

Therefore, "faith alone" for Luther meant believing God saved one through the ritual of Baptism. He said it many times. He said it clearly! And yet today many Evangelicals and Fundamentalists do not really understand that Luther dogmatically held to "Baptismal Regeneration." In fact, if one did not believe in the Sacrament of Baptism for salvation, then Luther held that your faith was in vain--even if you were baptized:

". . . the Anabaptists [reject] baptism, and therefore they cannot efficiently baptize . . ." (*Table Talk* - p. 180).

Luther held that those who believed water baptism was only a symbol and not a sacrament (means of grace) were not saved:

"In 1527, he wrote with regard to the Anabaptists: . . . 'Let everyone believe what he likes. If he is wrong, he will have punishment enough in hell fire.'... Most emphatically he believed that the wrong faith would entail hell-fire . . ." (*Here I Stand*, Roland Bainton, p. 294).

Luther and the Lord's Supper

Luther believed that through baptism one becomes a Christian. And, thus, it resulted in salvation on the basis of "faith alone." Communion was for maintenance. Luther taught that through communion, one received forgiveness of sins that threatened one's relationship with Christ and strength for Christian living:

"For here in the sacrament [Communion] you receive from Christ's lips the forgiveness of sins, which contains and conveys God's grace and Spirit with all his gifts, protection, defense, and power against death and the devil and all evils" (*The Large Catechism* —p. 98).

Not Far Removed from Roman Catholicism

"Luther taught that the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper are vehicles that communicate the grace of God . . . Luther's concept of baptism did not differ markedly from the Roman Catholic view; he retained much of the Roman ceremony connected with the rite. **Luther taught baptism is necessary to salvation and, in fact, produces regeneration in the person . . . Luther also upheld infant baptism, teaching that although infants are unable to exercise faith, God through His preeminent grace, works faith in the unconscious child.** He based the baptism of infants on the command to baptize all nations (Mt. 28:19)" (Paul Enns in the *Moody Handbook of Theology*, pp. 452-453). (Bold added.)

Luther and Evangelicals Today

Today, ecumenism reigns! Lutherans are embracing unity with other "baptismal regeneration" denominations and also embracing reconciliation with Roman Catholics. Tragically, many "Evangelicals" also see a place for spiritual fellowship with those embracing a sacramental gospel. In fact, some of the leading "champions" of the "Evangelical" faith clearly hold to the same basic sacramental gospel espoused by Martin Luther. Michael Horton would be one example. He is currently president of Christians United for Reformation and vice-chairman of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. He writes:

"In Baptism, we have been swept into the new creation and in the Supper we are actually fed with the body and blood of Christ as pilgrims on the way to the Promised land . . ." (Michael Horton in the May/June 1997 issue of *Modern Reformation*, p. 14. See BDM's report on Michael Horton for further details on his sacramental gospel.)

The Sacramental Gospel is another Gospel

One would have to agree with Luther that only the right kind of faith will get you to heaven. However, the OBJECT of your FAITH must be Christ ALONE and not baptism! I would earnestly contend that the Scriptures teach that your FAITH must be directly in CHRIST ALONE! (Gal. 1-3) To rest in a Sacrament (even partially) is to deny the reality of the ONE mediator who is Jesus Christ HIMSELF (1 Tim. 2:5).

The Gospel is that Christ died for our sins and rose again (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is distinct from baptism (1 Cor. 1:17). John 3:16 promises "whosoever believes in Him [Christ] should not perish." . . . Jesus said the one who believes has "passed from death into life" (Jn. 5:24). John's essential purpose (20:31) was to write so "believing you may have life in His name." John completely left out New Testament church baptism! Are we to believe John didn't get the GOSPEL right?

Paul explains that the one "who does not work but believes on Him . . . his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). Again, Paul says that "with the heart one believes unto righteousness" (10:10), and the promise is WHOSOEVER "shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13). TRUE believers are those who "have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). They have counted all things loss to gain Christ and acquire the righteousness "which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (3:7-9). Just as Abraham was saved by faith alone (Gen. 15:6), so are we (Rom. 4; Gal. 3)! The "just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38)! All that believe are justified from all things (Acts 13:39). Our hearts are purified by faith (Acts 15:9).

Ordinances have always been symbols. In the Old Testament, they looked forward to Christ (Heb. 8-10). In the New Testament, they look back to Christ (1 Cor. 11). Symbols can never save--only the substance which is Christ can save. *Dwight Oswald*



The Bible warns what happens when the works of Ordinances are mixed with the Gospel of salvation by the grace of Christ's work alone:

Galatians 5:1-4 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, (*or baptism, or Communion*) **Christ will be of no benefit to you.** And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, (*or baptism, or Communion*) that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. **You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.**

Romans 4:1-8 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." **Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as**

what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. “BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.”

It is obvious that if Martin Luther died believing what he wrote, he is lost and in flames right now.