

STUDY 12

Faith Receives It All

Rod James

THE FAITH OF THE BAPTISED

Much that has been written in recent decades about Christian baptism has been written in the context of denominational churches reassessing and restating their doctrine and practices of baptism. Predictably, this material deals with the subject within a particular tradition and with pragmatic issues in mind. Beasley-Murray has reflected frankly upon this process within his own and other denominations:

We have looked at the statements about baptism in the New Testament through spectacles manufactured by trusted Baptist opticians, and we are oblivious to the fact that in so doing we act in the same way as other groups towards whom we feel and act so superiorly, only they get their spectacles from different firms—worthy Anglican, Lutheran, and Presbyterian manufacturers, who supply luxurious frames and bifocal lenses!¹

There is little in these denominational reports and restatements that empowers the ordinary believer with heart-warming faith. Amid all the literature on baptism, the work of Martin Luther is refreshingly warm and helpful in that he continually has in mind the Christian believer and his/her life of faith and battle with the accuser. Luther had discovered this link between his own baptism and his life of faith at a time when the church had neglected it for a long time. A Lutheran professor of pastoral ministry, John T. Pless, explains:

While baptism was featured quite prominently in the early church, [its] place was diminished in the middle ages. There was little catechetical literature to tutor the faithful on the significance of baptism. In fact, the chief feature of baptism seemed to be that of initiation. Baptism was the beginning point on the sacramental continuum but it had little significance for the ongoing spiritual life as the eucharist and especially penance overshadowed baptism. By way of contrast Luther did not limit baptism to the moment of the rite, but asserted the enduring benefits of baptism both for daily life and finally for the approach of death itself. For Luther baptism is no mere rite of initiation on the spectrum of sacramental acts, but the basis and content of the Christian's life that is brought to completion only in the resurrection of the body.²

¹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, MacMillan, London, 1966, pp. 89–90.

² John T. Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, Seminar Presentation: Tenth International Congress for Luther Research, Copenhagen, August 2002, p. 1. Accessed 14 June 2009 on: <http://www.ctsfw.edu/academics/faculty/pless/luther_baptism.pdf>.

Faith Receives It All

The status of baptism in Luther's day has parallels in our times as in many churches today, to use Pless's words, there is 'little catechetical literature to tutor the faithful on the significance of baptism'.

From Font to Grave—'I am Baptized'

Drawing heavily on the writings of Martin Luther, Pless counsels his readers:

Baptism is present tense. It is not simply that 'I was baptized' but that 'I am baptized' . . . 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.³

Pless quotes from Luther's *Large Catechism* to expand this important truth:

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.⁴

The Power of God, Effective through Faith

Baptism is not to be understood as having power *ex opere operato*;⁵ the power is God's power effective through faith. Adrio König helps us to speak of 'the rich meaning of baptism' without attributing exclusive and automatic power to it:

. . . the rich meaning of baptism cannot be ascribed to baptism in isolation from the other means of grace as though on its own it has this rich meaning. It is always to be viewed in the closest connection with the death and resurrection of Christ, the work of the Spirit, the proclaimed word, and faith.

As an example we read i.a. in Romans 6:3–4 and Colossians 2–3 that we are united to Christ through baptism. This does however not mean that baptism on its own automatically unites us to Christ. The means of grace are interrelated in different ways. One could e.g. say: We *believe* that the *Spirit* through *baptism* unites us to Christ by virtue of *his death and resurrection*. Or one could say: Through the proclamation of the *gospel* the *Spirit* assures us that we can accept through *faith* that *Christ's work of redemption* applies to us and that we participate in it through *faith* and *baptism*. Consequently we see that baptism functions in close connection with all the other means of grace.⁶

³ John T. Pless, quoted from an article in *For the Life of the World* entitled: 'I Am Baptized: What Does This Mean?' Accessed 14 June 2009 at:

<http://www.lifeoftheworld.com/lotw/article.php?m_vol=6&m_num=2&a_num=4>.

⁴ Luther's *Large Catechism*, IV:41, trans. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 461. Quoted by Pless in *For the Life of the World*.

⁵ The following definition is from Believe Religious Information Source website, accessed 14 June 2009 at <<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/exopere.htm>>:

Ex Opere Operato means that if the communicative nature of the Christian sacraments is acknowledged, a sacrament properly performed is seen to convey God's grace independently of the faith or moral character of the celebrant or recipients. Its value springs from its divine institution, 'from the work already done' (Latin *ex opere operato*), in which the sacrament participates. The opposite position has been maintained by some—that the value of the sacrament does depend in some way on those who celebrate and receive, *ex opere operantis* ('from the work being done').

⁶ Adrio König, unpublished work on baptism, p. 4.

Faith Receives It All

As Luther wrote in his best-known baptismal hymn, ‘Not simple water, but the Word, and Spirit without measure’:

So hear ye all and well perceive
What God doth call a Baptism
And what a Christian should believe
Who error shuns and schism:
That we should water use the Lord
Declareth is His pleasure,
Not simple water, but the Word
And Spirit without measure;—
He is the true Baptizer.⁷

Having been encouraged by Luther to ‘believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings’, let us look at the way the life of faith figures as an outworking of our baptism. In our baptism the following realities are signified and celebrated:

1. Incorporation into Jesus Christ, that is, into his death, resurrection, ascension and reign;
2. Purification and forgiveness of sin;
3. Receiving the Spirit and new life; and
4. Ordination into the ministry of Christ.

Beasley-Murray puts it this way:

At baptism the convert learns that his participation in the redemption of Christ is the means of his deliverance, the pattern of his living, the fount of his renewal, and the anticipation of the goal for which he was created. The end is enshrined in the beginning. And the beginning, continuance, and end is Christ.⁸

As Günther Bornkamm says, ‘Baptism is the appropriation of the new life, and the new life is the appropriation of baptism’.⁹

The Faith of the Baptised in the New Testament

Having been thus alerted to the significance of baptismal faith for the whole of Christian life and not just its beginning, let us return to familiar passages in the New Testament which have shaped our understanding of who and what we are in Christ. While these passages have been familiar ground-stays of our faith, we may not have been as conscious as we could have been that the realities they speak of are the content and outworking of our baptism.

Romans 6:3–11

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was

⁷ The second verse of ‘To Jordan came our Lord, the Christ’, hymn 401 in *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1927), pp. 374–6.

⁸ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 78–9.

⁹ Quoted by Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, p. 72.

Faith Receives It All

raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life . . . ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

Some translations of verse 11 say, ‘reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus’. Such ‘dead-reckoning’ is clearly the outcome of our having been baptised into Christ. As the word-event of our baptism defines us, so by faith we hold to that self-definition.

Galatians 2:19–20

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This confessional statement by Paul has been precious to Christians in all generations because it gives voice to the personal reckoning of our faith. In the present study we note that such reckoning is possible because ‘I am baptized’.

Philippians 2:5–11

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This passage is sometimes called ‘the Philippian hymn’ because scholars see in it the form of a liturgical hymn or recitation. The ‘mind’ (v. 5) which it expresses is ours for the simple reason that we have been baptised into Christ. The exhortation to ‘have this mind among yourselves’, and the exhortations of verses 1–4 are essentially exhortations to live in and live out our own baptism.

Colossians 2:9–14

For in him [i.e. Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Preachers are often heard exhorting their Christian brothers and sisters to press on to seek or to enter into the deeper or fuller things of God. It is good to seek God. However, one has to ask, ‘Is it really possible to acquire any greater fullness than what Paul says we have in our baptism into Jesus Christ?’ It seems that evangelical pietism never tires of earnestly asking God for what He has already given us. By subtle contrast, faith thankfully lays hold of the fullness that God has already given us

¹⁰ Bible quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

Faith Receives It All

in Christ and in our baptism into Christ. In this sense, as the title of this study asserts, faith receives it all, and receives it all in baptism.

Colossians 3:1–5

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

The assessment, ‘For you have died’, is based upon the fact that Paul’s readers have been baptised into Christ. The exhortation, ‘Put to death therefore what is earthly in you’, is not an invitation to go on a killing spree. The word ‘therefore’, in this context, gives the sense, ‘that which is earthly in you died in baptism, therefore let it be as dead to you as Christ has made it in his cross’.

There are very many more New Testament passages in which we will find reference to some implication of our baptism. The above serve to whet our appetites to discover others for ourselves as ‘we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is’:

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.¹¹

Baptism as Ordination into the Ministry of Christ

The significance of baptism as ordination into the ministry of Christ has been largely overlooked in many recent writings that describe the meaning of baptism. Likewise it has not been adequately emphasised in the preparation for and the practice of baptism. I have often noticed how young people in believers’ baptism congregations have come to faith but have put off being baptised, believing perhaps that they are not ready for it. Could it be that these young people have sensed something about the meaning of baptism which they need more help to come to terms with? That ominous but exciting meaning is that coming to Christ and being baptised into his death and resurrection means that the believer is immediately set apart for participation in the ministry of Christ in the church and in the world.

A thorough discussion of this meaning of baptism can be found in a helpful article included in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, edited by Ray S. Anderson. The article quoted below is from a periodical called *Encounter*, and is called ‘Christ’s Ministry through His Whole Church and Its Ministers’. It makes the threefold point that to be baptised is to live in and for Christ, to live in and for the church, and to live

¹¹ Luther’s *Large Catechism*, IV:83–86, pp. 466–7, quoted in John T. Pless, *For the Life of the World*.

Faith Receives It All

in and for the world. It is in relation to this aspect of baptism that we can see the strong and direct link between Christ's baptism and our own. The *Encounter* article uses quotes from a Faith and Order Report on 'The Meaning of Baptism' to articulate this link:

Thus 'the baptism of Jesus was consecration to his vocation as the Messiah who was the Servant of the Lord . . . His baptism anticipated, so to speak, his entire life, from the moment of baptism right on to death . . . It was also the way to resurrection and exaltation.'

Similarly through our baptism Christ incorporates us and ordains us for participation in his ministry. 'The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is the counterpart of what happened to Jesus at his baptism . . . The same Spirit who remained on Jesus for his messianic ministry has ever since Pentecost dwelt in the church, which is the temple of his body.' 'For Jesus baptism meant that he was consecrated as Messiah. For us baptism means that we are consecrated as members of the messianic people . . . 'The life of which baptism is the starting point is a life "in Christ" . . . 'So our baptism anticipates our entire life,' and therefore 'Paul's ethics are essentially "ethics of baptism."' The one business of our life is to realize, to give effect to, what was given to us in our baptism . . . 'What happens in baptism is that my little life is taken up into God's plan of salvation, the mighty movement of salvation history whereby it is carried along towards its eschatological fulfilment at the "*parousia*" (the second coming) of Christ.'¹²

Paul's description of apostolic life in 2 Corinthians 4 has his characteristic intimation of Christian life as a perpetual baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection. The baptised community cannot avoid, and should be taught, that we are:

. . . always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor. 4:10-12).

If this important meaning of baptism as the taking up of one's cross were held more consciously by parents and congregations than infant or covenant baptism would proclaim its meaning more clearly and credibly as the participation of children in the body of Christ rather than just the bonhomie of God for babies.

PASTORAL APPLICATIONS OF BAPTISMAL FAITH

Luther preached at least 23 sermons on baptism. His writings as a pastor in the *cura animarum* (cure of souls) are most valuable to our work in the same field. There is no horror of hell, no depth of despond, no stickiness of sin that Martin himself had not experienced, and with love for his fellow sinners/saints he eagerly and joyfully showed them the blessings of their own baptism into Jesus Christ, that they might know the same cleansing, regeneration, assurance, and love that he himself had found in Christ. Repeatedly he directs people back to the significance of their baptism into Christ as the ever-present reality in which their faith resides:

¹² *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1979, p. 432. The quotations are from the 'Faith and Order Report on "The meaning of Baptism"', in *One Lord, One Baptism* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1960), pp. 53ff.

Faith Receives It All

This blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort.¹³

Ah, dear Christians, let us not value or treat this unspeakable gift so halfheartedly. For baptism is our only comfort and the doorway to all of God's possessions and to the communion of all the saints. To this end may God help us.¹⁴

In his pastoral letters and other writings Luther ministered to many people in relation to a variety of life issues. Here are some in which he refers people to the efficacy of their baptism.¹⁵

Impatience in Suffering

The realization that you have been called by this Man, that you have been blessed by a knowledge, desire, and love for his Word, and that you have been sealed therein by his Baptism and Sacrament should surely make you more cheerful. What more do you expect of Him who has inwardly given you such love toward him and outwardly given you such seals and such a testimony of his grace?¹⁶

Lack of assurance

If only we are able to believe that the promises have been spoken by God and see behind them the one who has spoken them, we shall magnify that Word. But because we hear it as it comes to us through the lips of a man, we are apt to pay as little attention to it as to the mooing of a cow.¹⁷

For just as the truth of the divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us in baptism.¹⁸

Worries about Predestination

God did not come down from heaven to make you uncertain about predestination or cause you to despise the Sacraments. He instituted them to make you more certain and to drive such speculations out of your mind . . . these speculations about predestination are of the devil. If they assault you, say: 'I am a son of God. I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for me. Let me alone, devil.'¹⁹

Falling into Sin

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,

¹³ *The Book of Concord*, p. 373, quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *The Book of Concord*, p. 373, quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 1.

¹⁵ For a fuller treatment of these pastoral applications of baptism see John T. Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*.

¹⁶ Theodore Tappert (ed.), *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Regent College Publ., Vancouver, 1995), pp. 37–8, quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, p. 122, quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, pp. 133f., quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 4, n. 18.

Faith Receives It All

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.²⁰

The Stricken Conscience

Luther disagreed strongly with Jerome in the latter's elevation of penance. While maintaining that the Christian remains *semper penitens* (always penitent), Luther called on believers to live continually in the great realities of repentance, faith and regeneration that were theirs in their baptism. John T. Pless observes:

For Luther, the medieval penitential practices are replaced by a renewed emphasis on the baptismal life as the life of repentance and faith. Confession and absolution remain but are now envisioned in connection to baptism and a return to the forgiveness of sins bestowed in baptism.²¹

The Approach of Death

The 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.²²

Thus Luther does not merely console us in the face of death, but redefines death in terms of the final stage and completion of our baptism. The radical elements of cross and resurrection in our baptism find their more complete expression in our mortal death and our departure to be with the Lord. Finally our baptism into Christ is joyfully consummated in the resurrection of the body:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:20–21).

FAITH RECEIVES IT ALL

Luther's pastoral care and exhortations centred on a call to believers to receive by faith all that God had given them in their own baptism:

No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no work on earth can acquire.²³

²⁰ *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (trans. Charles M. Jacobs, revised E. Theodore Bachmann), para. 11. Accessed 14 June 2009 at: <http://www.vasynod.org/files/BibleStudy/GreatestHits/Vol%2035%20THE%20HOLY%20AND%20BLESSED%20SACRAMENT%20OF%20BAPTISM.pdf>.

²¹ John T. Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 12.

²² John T. Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 5.

²³ Luther's *Large Catechism*, IV:46, p. 462, quoted in Pless, *Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care*, p. 11.

Faith Receives It All

There have been many fine baptismal hymns written to assist believers to confess by faith the fullness of all that their baptism contains, and the following one is an example:

God's own child, I gladly say it:
I am baptized into Christ!
He, because I could not pay it,
Gave my full redemption price.
Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any
That brought me salvation free
Lasting to eternity!

Sin, disturb my soul no longer:
I am baptized into Christ!
I have comfort even stronger:
Jesus' cleansing sacrifice.
Should a guilty conscience seize me
Since my baptism did release me
In a dear forgiving flood,
Sprinkling me with Jesus' blood?

Satan, hear this proclamation:
I am baptized into Christ!
Drop your ugly accusation,
I am not so soon enticed.
Now that to the font I've traveled,
All your might has come unraveled,
And, against your tyranny,
God, my Lord, unites with me!

Death, you cannot end my gladness:
I am baptized into Christ!
When I die, I leave all sadness
To inherit paradise!
Though I lie in dust and ashes
Faith's assurance brightly flashes:
Baptism has the strength divine
To make life immortal mine.

There is nothing worth comparing
To this lifelong comfort sure!
Open-eyed my grave is staring:
Even there I'll sleep secure.
Though my flesh awaits its raising,
Still my soul continues praising:
I am baptized into Christ;
I'm a child of paradise!²⁴

²⁴ Erdmann Neumeister (1671–1756), 'God's own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized', from *Christian Worship Supplement*, No. 737 and *Lutheran Service Book*, No. 594 (Concordia Publ. House, St Louis, 2006).