



# HOLY BAPTISM

FROM  
THE LARGE CATECHISM

By Martin Luther

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Job #813600



## PART 4

### Baptism

Note: Baptism is not our work, but God's work. It is a priceless treasure God gives and faith receives or grasps. God's Word of Gospel-promise makes Baptism what it is. Baptism gives us great comfort and strength when our sins accuse us, when we realize how we stand guilty before God. Then, says Luther, the Christian is to say, "But I am baptized!" Luther comments about infant Baptism since, in his time as today, some Christians deny infants this precious Sacrament. Luther's defense of infant Baptism is interesting. He says simply that if God did nothing through Baptism, how do baptized children believe in Him? For Luther, the fact that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given even to very small children is proof enough that God works in and through Baptism. Luther also explains how Baptism encompasses what was known as "penance." So for Luther, Confession and Absolution are subsumed under Baptism and the proclamation of the Gospel. True repentance is daily returning to Baptism. Baptism is our daily garment, by which we suppress the old Adam and grow up in the new

Adam, being clothed with the righteousness of Christ. (See AC IX; SA III V.)

We have now finished the three chief 1  
parts of common Christian doctrine. Besides  
these we have yet to speak of our two Sacra-  
ments instituted by Christ. Every Christian  
also ought to have at least an ordinary, brief  
instruction about the Sacraments, because  
without them he cannot be a Christian. Un-  
fortunately, up to now, no instruction about  
them has been given. But, in the first place, 2  
we take up Baptism, by which we are first re-  
ceived into the Christian Church [John 3:5].  
However, in order that Baptism may be easi-  
ly understood, we will present it in an orderly  
manner. We present only what is necessary  
for us to know. We will leave to the learned  
the topic of how Baptism is to be maintained  
and defended against heretics and sects.

In the first place, we must above all things 3  
know well the words on which Baptism is  
founded. Everything refers to these words  
that must be said on the subject. The Lord  
Christ says in Matthew 28:19:

Go therefore and make disciples of all 4  
nations, baptizing them in the name  
of the Father and of the Son and of the  
Holy Spirit.

Likewise in St. Mark 16:16:

Whoever believes and is baptized will 5  
be saved, but whoever does not be-  
lieve will be condemned.

In the first place, you must note in these 6  
words that here stand God's commandment  
and institution. Let us not doubt that Bap-  
tism is divine. It is not made up or invented  
by people. For as surely as I can say, "No  
one has spun the Ten Commandments, the  
Creed, and the Lord's Prayer out of his head;  
they are revealed and given by God Himself."

- So also I can boast that Baptism is no human plaything, but it is instituted by God Himself. Furthermore, Baptism is most solemnly and strictly commanded so that we must be baptized or we cannot be saved. I note this lest anyone regard Baptism as a silly matter,
- 7 like putting on a new red coat. For it is of the greatest importance that we value Baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted. We contend and fight for Baptism chiefly because the world is now so full of sects arguing that Baptism is an outward thing and that outward
- 8 things are of no benefit. But let Baptism be a thoroughly outward thing. Here stand God's Word and command, which institute, establish, and confirm Baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be an empty thing. It must be a most precious thing, even though it looked like it had less value than
- 9 a straw. Up to now people could consider something great when the pope with his letters and bulls gave away indulgences and confirmed altars and churches, solely because of the letters and seals. So we ought to value Baptism much more highly and more precious, because God has commanded it. Besides, it is done in His name. For these are the words, "Go, baptize." However, do not baptize in your name, but in God's name.
- 10 To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore, although it is performed by human hands, it is still truly God's own work. From this fact everyone may readily conclude that Baptism is a far higher work than any work performed by a man or a saint. For what work can we do that is greater than God's work?
- 11 But here the devil is busy to fool us with false appearances and lead us away from God's work to our own works. For there is a much more splendid show when a Carthusian does many great and difficult works. We

all think much more of the things that we do and merit ourselves. But the Scriptures teach this: Even though we collect in one pile the works of all the monks, however splendidly they may shine, they would not be as noble and good as if God should pick up a single straw. Why? Because the person is nobler and better. Here, then, we must not judge the person according to the works, but the works according to the person [Matthew 7:16–20], from whom they must get their nobility. But our insane reason will not consider this. Because Baptism does not shine like the works that we do, it is valued as nothing.

From this now learn a proper understanding of the subject and how to answer the question of what Baptism is. It is not mere ordinary water, but water comprehended in God's Word and command and sanctified by them [Ephesians 5:26–27]. So it is nothing other than a divine water. Not that the water in itself is nobler than other water, but that God's Word and command are added to it.

It is pure wickedness and blasphemy of the devil when our "new spirits" mock Baptism, leaving God's Word and institution out of it. They look at Baptism in no other way than as water that is taken from the well. Then they blather and say, "How does a handful of water help the soul?" Yes, my friend, who does not know that water is water? (If tearing things apart is what we are after.) But how dare you interfere with God's order? How dare you tear away the most precious treasure with which God has connected and enclosed Baptism, and that He will not allow to be separated? For the kernel in the water is God's Word or command and God's name. His name is a treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth.

Understand the difference, then. Baptism is quite a different thing from all other water.

This is not because of its natural quality but because something more noble is added here. God Himself stakes His honor, His power, and His might on it. Therefore, Baptism is not only natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water, and whatever other terms we can find to praise it. This is all because of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word, which no one can praise enough. For it has, and is able to do, all that God is  
 18 and can do [Isaiah 55:10–11]. In this way it also gets its essence as a Sacrament, as St. Augustine also taught, “When the Word is joined to the element or natural substance, it becomes a Sacrament,” that is, a holy and divine matter and sign.

19 We always teach that the Sacraments and all outward things that God ordains and institutes should not be considered according to the coarse, outward mask, the way we look at a nutshell. But we respect them because God’s Word is included in them.  
 20 For we also speak of the parental estate and of civil government in this way. If we intend only to recognize that they have noses, eyes, skin, and hair, flesh and bones, they look like Turks and heathen. Someone might start up and say, “Why should I value them more than others?” Because this commandment is added, “Honor your father and your mother” [Exodus 20:12]. I see a different person, adorned and clothed with God’s majesty and glory. The commandment, I say, is the gold chain about his neck. Yes, that is the crown upon his head, which shows me how and why one must honor this flesh and blood.

21 So, and even much more, you must honor Baptism and consider it glorious because of the Word. For God Himself has honored it both by words and deeds. Furthermore, He confirmed it with miracles from heaven. Do you think it was a joke that, when Christ was baptized, the heavens were opened and the

Holy Spirit descended visibly, and everything was divine glory and majesty [Luke 3:21–22]?

I encourage again that these two—the  
 22 water and the Word—by no means be separated from each other and parted. For if the Word is separated from it, the water is the same as the water that the servant cooks with. It may indeed be called a bathkeeper’s baptism. But when the Word is added, as God has ordained, it is a Sacrament. It is called Christ’s Baptism. Let this be the first part about the holy Sacrament’s essence and dignity.

In the second place, since we know now  
 23 what Baptism is and how it is to be regarded, we must also learn why and for what purpose it is instituted. We must learn what it profits, gives, and works. For this also we cannot find a better resource than Christ’s words quoted above, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16]. Therefore, state it  
 24 most simply in this way: the power, work, profit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is this—to save [1 Peter 3:21]. For no one is baptized in order that he may become a prince, but, as the words say, that he “be saved.” We know  
 25 that to be saved is nothing other than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil [Colossians 1:13–14]. It means to enter into Christ’s kingdom [John 3:5], and to live with Him forever.

Here you see again how highly and pre-  
 26 ciously we should value Baptism, because in it we receive such an unspeakable treasure. This also proves that it cannot be ordinary, mere water. For mere water could not do such a thing. But the Word does it and, as I said above, so does the fact that God’s name is included in Baptism. Where God’s name is,  
 27 there must also be life and salvation [Psalm 54:1]. So Baptism may certainly be called a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water. Such power is given to Baptism by the Word

that it is a washing of new birth, as St. Paul also calls it in Titus 3:5.

28 Our would-be wise, “new spirits” assert that faith alone saves, and that works and outward things do nothing. We answer, “It is true, indeed, that nothing in us is of any use but faith, as we shall hear still further.” But  
29 these blind guides are unwilling to see this: faith must have something that it believes, that is, of which it takes hold [2 Timothy 1:13; Titus 1:9] and upon which it stands and rests [1 Corinthians 2:5]. So faith clings to the water and believes that in Baptism, there is pure salvation and life. This is not through the water (as we have stated well enough), but through the fact that it is embodied in God’s Word and institution, and that God’s name abides in it. Now, if I believe this, what else is it than believing in God as the One who has given and planted His Word [Mark 4:14] into this ordinance and offers to us this outward thing by which we may gain such a treasure?

30 Now, these “new spirits” are so crazy that they separate faith and the object to which faith clings and is bound, even if it is something outward. Yes, it shall and must be something outward, so that it may be grasped by our senses and understood, and by them be brought into the heart. For indeed, the entire Gospel is an outward, verbal preaching [Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21]. In short, what God does and works in us He intends to work through such outward ordinances. Therefore, wherever He speaks—indeed, no matter what direction or by whatever means He speaks—faith must look  
31 there. It must hold to that object. Now here we have the words “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16]. What else can these words refer to but Baptism, that is, to the water included in God’s ordinance? Therefore, it makes sense that who-

ever rejects Baptism rejects God’s Word, faith, and Christ, who directs us to Baptism and binds us to Baptism.

In the third place, since we have learned 32 Baptism’s great benefit and power, let us see further who is the person that receives what Baptism gives and profits. This is again most 33 beautifully and clearly expressed in the words “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16]. That is, faith alone makes the person worthy to receive profitably the saving, divine water. Since these blessings are presented here and promised through the words in and with the water, they cannot be received in any other way than by believing them with the heart [Romans 10:9]. Without 34 faith it profits nothing, even though Baptism is in itself a divine overwhelming treasure. Therefore, this single phrase, “Whoever believes,” does so much. It excludes and repels all the works that we can do, when we suppose that we gain and merit salvation by our works. For it is determined that whatever is not faith does nothing or receives nothing [Hebrews 11:6].

But if the “new spirits” say, as they are ac- 35 customed, “Still Baptism is itself a work, and you say works are of no use for salvation. What, then, becomes of faith?” Answer, “Yes, our works, indeed, do nothing for salvation. Baptism, however, is not our work, but God’s.” For, as was stated, you must completely distinguish Christ’s Baptism from a bathkeeper’s baptism. God’s works are saving and necessary for salvation. They do not exclude, but demand, faith. For without faith they could not be grasped. By allowing the water to be poured upon you, you have not yet received Baptism in a way that benefits you at all. But it becomes beneficial to you if you have yourself baptized with this thought: this is according to God’s command and ordinance, and besides, it is done in God’s 36



name. In this way you may receive the promised salvation in the water. Now, your fist cannot do this, nor your body; but the heart must believe it [Ezekiel 36:25–26; Hebrews 10:22].

37 So you see plainly that there is no work done here by us, but a treasure, which God gives us and faith grasps [Ephesians 2:8–9]. It is like the benefit of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross, which is not a work, but a treasure included in the Word. It is offered to us and received by faith. Therefore, the “new spirits” violate us by shouting against us as though we preach against faith. For we alone insist upon it as being so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed.

38 So we have these three parts, which must be known about this Sacrament, especially that God’s ordinance is to be held in all honor. The Sacrament alone would be enough, even though it is an entirely outward thing. It is like the commandment “Honor your father and your mother,” which refers to bodily flesh and blood. In these words we do not think about the flesh and blood, but God’s commandment in which flesh and blood are included, and on account of which the flesh is called father and mother. So even if we had only these words, “Go and baptize,” or such, it would be necessary for us to accept  
39 them and do them as God’s ordinance. Now there is not only God’s commandment and injunction here, but also the promise. Because of this, Baptism is still far more glorious than whatever else God has commanded and ordained. It is, in short, so full of consolation and grace that heaven and earth cannot understand it. But it requires skill to believe this, for the treasure is not lacking, but this is lacking: people who grasp it and hold it firmly.

41 Therefore, every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to do all his life. For he

has always enough to do by believing firmly what Baptism promises and brings: victory over death and the devil [Romans 6:3–6], forgiveness of sin [Acts 2:38], God’s grace [Titus 3:5–6], the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts [1 Corinthians 6:11]. In short, Baptism is so far beyond us that if timid nature could realize this, it might well doubt whether it could be true. Think about it. Imagine there was a doctor somewhere who understood the art of saving people from death or, even though they died, could restore them quickly to life so that they would afterward live forever. Oh, how the world would pour in money like snow and rain. No one could find access to him because of the throng of the rich! But here in Baptism there is freely brought to everyone’s door such a treasure and medicine that it utterly destroys death and preserves all people alive.

We must think this way about Baptism and make it profitable for ourselves. So when our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say, “Nevertheless, I am baptized. And if I am baptized, it is promised to me that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.” For that is the reason why these two things are done in Baptism: the body—which can grasp nothing but the water—is sprinkled and, in addition, the Word is spoken for the soul to grasp. Now, since both, the water and the Word, make one Baptism, therefore, body and soul must be saved and live forever [1 Corinthians 15:53]. The soul lives through the Word, which it believes, but the body lives because it is united with the soul and also holds on through Baptism as it is able to grasp it. We have, therefore, no greater jewel in body and soul. For by Baptism we are made holy and are saved [1 Corinthians 6:11]. No other kind of life, no work upon earth, can do this.

Let this be enough about Baptism's nature, blessing, and use, for it fulfills the present purpose.

### INFANT BAPTISM

47 Here a question arises by which the devil, through his sects, confuses the world: Infant Baptism. Do children also believe? Are they  
48 rightly baptized? Briefly we say about this, let the simple dismiss this question from their minds. Refer it to the learned. But if you wish to answer, answer as follows:

49 The Baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ, as is proved well enough from His own work. For God sanctifies many of those who have been baptized as infants and has given them the Holy Spirit. There are still many people even today in whom we perceive that they have the Holy Spirit both because of their doctrine and life. It is also given to us by God's grace that we can explain the Scriptures and come to the knowledge of Christ, which is impossible without the Holy  
50 Spirit [1 Corinthians 12:3]. But if God did not accept the Baptism of infants, He would not give the Holy Spirit nor any of His gifts to any of them. In short, during the long time up to this day, no person on earth could have been a Christian. Now, God confirms Baptism by the gifts of His Holy Spirit, as is plainly seen in some of the Church Fathers, like St. Bernard, Gerson, John Hus, and others. These people were baptized in infancy, and since the holy Christian Church cannot perish until the end of the world, the sects must acknowledge that such infant Baptism is pleasing to God. For God can never be opposed to Himself or support falsehood and wickedness, or for its promotion impart His  
51 grace and Spirit. This is indeed the best and strongest proof for the simpleminded and unlearned. For the sects shall not take from us or overthrow this article: "I believe in . . .

the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints."

Further, we say that we are not very concerned to know whether the person baptized believes or not. For Baptism does not become invalid on that account. But everything depends on God's Word and command. Now this point is perhaps somewhat difficult. But it rests entirely on what I have said, that Baptism is nothing other than water and God's Word in and with each other [Ephesians 5:26]. That is, when the Word is added to the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith is lacking. For my faith does not make Baptism, but receives it. Now, Baptism does not become invalid even though it is wrongly received or used. As stated above, it is not bound to our faith, but to the Word.

Suppose a Jewish person should come dishonestly today and with evil intent, and we should baptize him in all good faith. We must say that his Baptism is still genuine. For here is the water together with God's Word, even though the person does not receive it as he should. It is like those who go to the Sacrament [Lord's Supper] unworthily yet still receive the true Sacrament, even though they do not believe [1 Corinthians 11:27].

So you see that the objection of the sectarians is empty. As we have said, even though infants did not believe (which, however, is not the case), still their Baptism would be valid. We have now shown this. No one should rebaptize infants. Nothing is taken away from the Sacrament even though someone approaches it with evil purpose. So he could not be allowed to take it a second time the self-same hour on account of his abuse, as though he had not received the true Sacrament at first. That would blaspheme and profane the Sacrament in the worst way. How dare we think that God's Word and

ordinance should be wrong and invalid because we make a wrong use of it?

56 I say, if you did not believe then, believe now and say this: The Baptism certainly was right. But I, unfortunately, did not receive it aright. I myself also, and all who are baptized, must say this before God, "I come here in my faith and in that of others. Yet I cannot rest in this, that I believe, and that many people pray for me. But in this I rest, that Baptism is Your Word and command. It is just like when I go to the Sacrament trusting not in my faith, but in Christ's Word. Whether I am strong or weak, I commit that to God. But I know this, that He asks me to go, to eat and to drink, and so on, and He gives me His body and blood [Matthew 26:26–28]. That will not deceive me or prove false to me."

57 So we do likewise in infant Baptism. We bring the child in the conviction and hope that it believes, and we pray that God may grant it faith [Luke 17:2; Ephesians 2:8]. But we do not baptize it for that reason, but solely because of God's command. Why? Because we know that God does not lie [Titus 1:2]. I and my neighbor and, in short, all people, may err and deceive. But God's Word cannot err.

58 They are arrogant, clumsy minds that draw together such ideas and conclusions as these, "Where there is not the true faith, there also cannot be true Baptism." That's as if I would conclude, "If I do not believe, then Christ is nothing." Or "If I am not obedient, then father, mother, and government are nothing." Is that a correct conclusion, that whenever anyone does not do what he ought, the work that he ought to do shall become nothing and of no value? My dear, just invert the argument and rather draw this conclusion: For this very reason Baptism is something and *is* right, because it has been wrongly received. For if Baptism was not

right and true in itself, it could not be misused or sinned against. The saying is, "Abuse does not destroy the essence, but confirms it." For gold is not the less gold even though a harlot wears it in sin and shame.

Therefore, let it be decided that Baptism always remains true and retains its full essence. This is true even though a single person should be baptized, and he, in addition, should not truly believe. For God's ordinance and Word cannot be made inconsistent or be changed by people. But these people, the fanatics, are so blind that they do not see God's Word and command. They think about Baptism and those who administer it just like they think about water in the brook or in pots, or like any common person. Because they do not see faith or obedience in infants, they conclude that infant Baptisms are to be considered invalid. Here lurks a concealed rebellious devil, who would like to tear the crown from authority's head and then trample it underfoot [Matthew 7:6]. And in addition, he would like to pervert and reduce to nothing all God's works and ordinances. Therefore, we must be watchful and well armed [2 Corinthians 10:4]. We must not allow ourselves to be directed or turned away from the Word, in order that we may not think of Baptism as a mere empty sign, like the fanatic's dream [Jeremiah 23:25].

Lastly, we must also know what Baptism signifies and why God has ordained just this outward sign and ceremony for the Sacrament by which we are first received into the Christian Church. The act or ceremony is this: we are sunk under the water, which passes over us, and afterward are drawn out again. These two parts, (a) to be sunk under the water and (b) drawn out again, signify Baptism's power and work. It is nothing other than putting to death the old Adam and effecting the new man's resurrection

after that [Romans 6:4–6]. Both of these things must take place in us all our lives. So a truly Christian life is nothing other than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. For this must be done without ceasing, that we always keep purging away whatever belongs to the old Adam. Then what belongs to the new man may come forth. But what is the old man? It is what is born in human beings from Adam: anger, hate, envy, unchastity, stinginess, laziness, arrogance—yes, unbelief. The old man is infected with all vices and has by nature nothing good in him [Romans 7:18]. Now, when we have come into Christ’s kingdom [John 3:5], these things must daily decrease. The longer we live, the more we become gentle, patient, meek, and ever turn away from unbelief, greed, hatred, envy, and arrogance.

This is Baptism’s true use among Christians, as signified by baptizing with water. Therefore, where this is not done, the old man is left unbridled. He continually becomes stronger. That is not using Baptism, but working against Baptism. For those who are without Christ cannot help but become worse daily, just as the proverb says, which expresses the truth “Worse and worse—the longer a vice lasts, the worse it gets.” If a year ago someone was proud and greedy, then he is more proud and greedy this year. So the vice grows and increases with him from his youth up. A young child has no special vice. But when it grows up, it becomes unchaste and impure. When it reaches maturity, real vices begin to triumph. The longer the child lives, the more vices.

Therefore, the old man goes unrestrained in his nature if he is not stopped and suppressed by Baptism’s power. On the other hand, where people have become Christians, the old man daily decreases until he finally perishes. That is truly being buried in Bap-

tism and daily coming forth again. Therefore, the outward sign is appointed not only for a powerful effect, but also for an illustration. Therefore, where faith flourishes with its fruit, there it has no empty meaning, but the work *of mortifying the flesh* goes with it [Romans 8:13]. But where faith is lacking, it remains a mere unfruitful sign.

Here you see that Baptism, both in its power and meaning, includes also the third Sacrament, which has been called repentance. It is really nothing other than Baptism. What else is repentance but a serious attack on the old man *and that his lusts be restrained*, and an entering into a new life? Therefore, if you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism. For Baptism not only illustrates such a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. For in Baptism are given grace, the Spirit, and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and become strong [Romans 6:3–6].

Our Baptism abides forever. Even though someone should fall from Baptism and sin, still we always have access to it. So we may subdue the old man again. But we do not need to be sprinkled with water again [Ezekiel 36:25–26; Hebrews 10:22]. Even if we were put under the water a hundred times, it would still be only one Baptism, even though the work and sign continue and remain. Repentance, therefore, is nothing other than a return and approach to Baptism. We repeat and do what we began before, but abandoned.

I say this lest we fall into the opinion in which we were stuck for a long time. We were imagining that our Baptism is something past, which we can no longer use after we have fallen again into sin. The reason for this is that Baptism is regarded as only based on the outward act once performed *and completed*. This arose from the fact that St.

Jerome wrote that “repentance is the second plank by which we must swim forth and cross over the water after the ship is broken, on which we step and are carried across when we come into the Christian Church.” By this teaching Baptism’s use has been abolished so that it can no longer profit us. Therefore, Jerome’s statement is not correct, or at any rate is not rightly understood. For the ship of Baptism never breaks, because (as we have said) it is God’s ordinance and not our work [1 Peter 3:20–22]. But it does happen, indeed, that we slip and fall out of the ship. Yet if anyone falls out, let him see to it that he swims up and clings to the ship until he comes into it again and lives in it, as he had done before.

In this way one sees what a great, excellent thing Baptism is. It delivers us from the devil’s jaws and makes us God’s own. It suppresses and takes away sin and then daily strengthens the new man. It is working and always continues working until we pass from this estate of misery to eternal glory.

For this reason let everyone value his Baptism as a daily dress [Galatians 3:27] in which he is to walk constantly. Then he may ever be found in the faith and its fruit, so that he may suppress the old man and grow up in the new. For if we would be Christians, we must do the work by which we are Christians. But if anyone falls away from the Christian life, let him again come into it. For just as Christ, the Mercy Seat [Romans 3:25], does not draw back from us or forbid us to come to Him again, even though we sin, so all His treasure and gifts also remain. Therefore, if we have received forgiveness of sin once in Baptism, it will remain every day, as long as we live. Baptism will remain as long as we carry the old man about our neck.





