

A REFUTE OF MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY
REGARDING BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

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INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther has often been considered a champion for the Protestant church. His influential writings which include the *95 Thesis*, *the Small Catechism*, *the Large Catechism*, and *the Bondage of the Will* were the primary writings which shaped theological thought at the time of their publication as well as for centuries later.¹ Theologians have debated the many challenges that Luther has put forth to the Christian church. In order to truly understand Luther's writing, it is important that the reader must understand his background

Luther was born in Eisleben in 1483 to a hardworking family. Shortly after his birth, his parents Hans and Margaret Luder (as they pronounced it) moved to Mansfeld where Martin would spend the remainder of his childhood.² Upon his graduation from primary education, Luther attended a school in Erfurt, which is about 30 miles from his home. It was upon graduating from this institution that Luther realized his calling into the Catholic Church. He would be ordained as a priest in 1507 and thus began his investigation of faith, Scripture, and the Catholic Church.³

¹Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, John Dillenberger, ed. (New York, NY; Anchor Books, 1962).

²John M. Todd, *Luther: A Life*, (New York, NY; Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), 1.

³*Ibid.*, 41.

Luther had many influences during his early years as a theologian. Most of Luther's teachers adhered to the theology of William Ockham.⁴ Upon further investigation, however, Luther realized that Ockham's views of salvation were not accurate nor did they coincide with Augustine's writings. As Luther continued in his studies, he realized that Augustine's views on salvation were not accurate either. There were three primary areas within salvation that Luther disagreed with in Augustine's writings which include: (1) the cause of justification; (2) the nature of righteousness; (3) how righteousness is given.⁵ It was this disagreement that ignited inside of Luther what would ultimately lead to his excommunication from the church. The culmination of his new theology would be described in several documents one of which is the famed "95 Thesis". It is in this document that Luther chastised the Catholic church for its misuse of power and failure to interpret Scripture correctly. Luther would spend the remainder of his years refining his theology and attacking the church for its inability to support its theology.

Many times it is necessary to understand someone's past in order to understand his theology and it is very evident that Luther's early years helped to dictate the formation of his revolutionary ideas. With the necessary introductions completed, however, it is now possible to investigate those revolutionary ideas that Luther put forth.

⁴David C. Steinmetz, "What Luther Got Wrong." *The Christian Century* 122 (2005):23-26.

⁵Matthew C. Heckel, "Is R.C. Sproul wrong about Martin Luther? An analysis of R.C. Sproul's *Faith Alone: The evangelical doctrine of Justification with respect to Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Catholic Luther Scholarship.*" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47(1) (2004) 89-120.

Anyone who has cracked a history book knows that Luther's primary argument against the Catholic Church was that salvation came by faith alone (*sola fide*). This was a very different theology than the Catholic Church's salvation by works. Luther's justification by faith theology was the primary cause for the protestant reformation and Luther's ultimate break from the Catholic Church. Inside this theology, however, is the subject for this paper. Within his newfound theology, Luther retained some of his Catholic practices. One of these practices was the sacrament of baptism. Luther understood baptism to be a sacrament and thus a requirement for salvation. This is termed "baptismal regeneration" which can be defined "a means by which God imparts saving grace."⁶ This principle taken to its logical conclusion would mean that the sinner is not saved by faith alone, but by faith and baptism. The remainder of this paper will consist of two parts: (1) Luther's argument for the necessity of baptismal regeneration and (2) a Biblical argument refuting Luther's concept of baptismal regeneration. Through a careful study of the Scripture it will be shown that the believer is saved by faith alone and that baptism, although a very important aspect of a believer's salvation experience, has no soteriological value.

⁶Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Books, 1998), 1100.

CHAPTER 1
MARTIN LUTHER'S ARGUMENT FOR THE VALIDITY
OF BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

Luther presents his arguments for baptismal regeneration in several documents. The most important documents are “The Large Catechism”, “The Small Catechism”, and “The Smalcald Articles”. Luther used these documents to teach others his theology and to lead the Protestant Reformation. Each one contains a plethora of information too large to be discussed in one paper, therefore discussion will be limited to the topic of baptism and its effects on the believer. These were originally presented as sermons to the church and preached in series to the congregation. Each of these documents will now be discussed in order to put forth Luther’s argument for baptismal regeneration.

Martin Luther’s Large Catechism

Luther boldly states his intentions in this document by saying “I can boast that Baptism is no human trifle, but instituted by God Himself, moreover, that it is most solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we cannot be saved.”⁷

Luther bases his conclusions about baptism on two main Scriptures which are found in Matthew and Mark. Matthew 28:19 states: “¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach^b all nations,

⁷Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism.” *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (1921): 565-773. Accessed at: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/catechism/web/cat-13.html>.

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”⁸ Mark 16:16 states: “¹⁶ He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” These two verses serve as the cornerstone for Luther’s argument. These two verses are spoken by Jesus and therefore can be interpreted as commands from God. First, in Matthew, Christians are commanded to go to all the nations and teach them about Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross following and then to baptize them in the Holy Trinity. Second, in Mark, this verse which is also stated by Jesus is tying belief in Jesus and baptism to salvation. The conjunction “and” makes these two necessary for the effect of salvation. Luther uses these two verses to show that baptism is more than a ritual, it is a command from God and should not be taken lightly.

In his argument for the necessity of baptism, Luther identifies the three honors that baptism encapsulates. These are identified in Dillenberger’s book containing the writings of Luther.⁹ First, Luther explains the composition of the water used for baptism. The water is not water alone, but water and the Word of God. The water has no special powers, but the baptism in the water demonstrates the power of God. The person being baptized is bathed in the Word of God. Next, Luther explains the benefit of baptism. The fruit, as he calls it, is the salvation of the believer. It is here that the reader learns that the believer is not saved by faith alone, but must also be baptized. The fruit of baptism is salvation for the believer. Thirdly, Luther identifies the recipient of baptism. He states that the believer is the one who is worthy of baptism. These three points can be

⁸*The Holy Bible : King James Version*. 1995 . Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA. All scripture passages are taken from this version unless documented otherwise.

⁹Martin Luther, *Selections from his Writings* , 231.

summed up best in this statement from Luther, “The first point, therefore, is that baptism is water connected with God’s Word. The second is the fruit, and the third is that the person who believes is the one who is worthy of baptism.”¹⁰ There are many conclusions that can be drawn from this statement by Luther. First, Luther’s description of the water in baptism would appear to make baptism a sacrament. Although he broke from the Catholic church in many other areas, Luther did retain some of the Catholic theology. Second, by describing the “fruit” of baptism, it is very clear that baptism imparts some sort of grace onto the believer. This grace has soteriological value and thus is necessary for salvation. Third, he seems to be making the claim for a believer’s baptism. This was very different from the traditional Catholic infant baptism. Luther proves to be inconsistent in this belief, however, because later in this same argument he claims that “infant baptism pleases God”¹¹ It would appear that through his arguments Luther does not include the faith of the believer in the validity of the baptism and thus he theorizes that baptism is from God’s Word and not dependent on the individual. This would appear to make baptism a dispensation of Grace and thus a sacrament.

Upon his conclusion that baptism is indeed a sacrament, Luther moves forward to show that regeneration occurs through baptism. He identifies Titus 3:5 as his Scriptural proof that this is indeed the case. This verse states: ⁵ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” It would appear that Luther interprets this scripture in a literal sense and believes that the physical baptism has spiritual

¹⁰Ibid, 231.

consequences. Luther's argument that baptism has regenerative powers is best summed up in this quote from his "Large Catechism" work: "Thus faith clings to the water, and believes that it is Baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life; not through the water (as we have sufficiently stated), but through the fact that it is embodied in the Word and institution of God, and the name of God inheres in it."¹² Therefore, it can be concluded that the water itself is not special, but what exists within the water (Word of God). So the regeneration and salvation of the believer is not found in the water, but in the Word of God which is present in the water because it is commanded in the Scriptures that man should be baptized.

It can be concluded, then, that Luther posed two main arguments in "The Large Catechism". The first is that faith alone does not complete the salvation of a believer but must be accompanied by baptism because baptism is commanded in conjunction with belief in the Scripture. The second is that baptism has regenerative power in the believer but not from the water itself but from the Word of God which is present in the water. These two conclusions have very important effects on the salvation of the believer and are still a subject of debate amongst theologians today.

Martin Luther's Small Catechism

It is now necessary to discuss another work by Luther which is "The Small Catechism of Martin Luther."¹³ This work by Luther was a much simpler discussion of

¹¹Ibid, 231.

¹²Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*. 567

his theology. If the Large Catechism was written for the theologian than the Small Catechism was written for the layman. This could be thought of as a tract for the necessity of baptism for salvation. In his section on baptism, Luther poses and answers four basic questions which are: (1) What is Baptism?, (2) What does Baptism give? What good is it?, (3) How can water do such great things?, (4) What is the meaning of such a water Baptism? Luther's reply to each of these questions will now be discussed in the appropriate order.

The question: "What is Baptism?" can be answered in volumes of books or in one sentence. Remembering his audience, Luther answers this question in a very short, simple statement: "Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water contained within God's command and united with God's Word."¹⁴ Luther uses Matthew 28:19 as his Scripture proof for this answer. It is his interpretation that the Lord commands us to baptize and thus the baptismal water is connected to God's Word.

The next question is: "What does Baptism give? What good is it?". Luther answers this question and thus states the soteriological necessity for baptism in the life of a believer. He states: "It gives the forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the Devil, gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, just as God's words and promises declare."¹⁵ Luther uses Mark 16:16 as his support for this statement. It is very clear in this statement that Luther considers it absolutely necessary for every believer to be baptized in order to achieve salvation in the Lord. According to Luther, baptism by itself,

¹³ Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism." *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (1921): Accessed at: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/little.book/web/book-4.html>

¹⁴Ibid, 1.

however, does not save. The person baptized must believe in Christ and that the Word of God is saving them through baptism.

The third question addressed by Luther is “How can water do such great things?”. He answers this question with the following statement: “Water doesn’t make these things happen, of course. It is God’s Word, which is with and in the water. Because, without God’s Word, the water is plain water and not baptism. But with God’s Word it is a Baptism, a grace-filled water of life, a bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul said to Titus in the third chapter.”¹⁶ To be exact, it is Titus 3:5 that Luther uses as support for his claim. It is evident through this statement that Luther considers the act of baptism to be much more than a symbol of a change within the believer. Luther considers the actual baptism to hold very significant power. The water itself does not have any spiritual power, but the water infused with the Word of God does. The immersion of the believer in this heavenly concoction bathes the believer in the Word of God and regenerates him into a new being.

The fourth question addressed by Luther is “What is the meaning of such a water Baptism?”. He answers this question with the following statement: “It means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, in turn, a new person daily come forth and rise from death again. He will live forever before God in righteousness and purity.”¹⁷ This statement is the culmination of the preceding questions and answers from Luther. He supports this claim with Romans 6:4. This statement claims that our sins are taken away in baptism and the

¹⁵Ibid, 1.

¹⁶Ibid, 2.

¹⁷Ibid, 2.

believer is forever changed to be in the image of Jesus Christ. The believer is regenerated by baptism.

Smalcald Articles

The Smalcald Articles were a series of statements made by Luther to be presented to the church council. Article five pertained to baptism and made two very important statements. Following his statement regarding the true meaning of baptism, Luther dissociates himself from two different groups: the monastic preachers and the Franciscan monks. Each of these statements have been reproduced and will be discussed.

The first statement reads: "...we do not hold with Thomas and the monastic preachers [or Dominicans] who forget the Word (God's institution) and say that God has imparted to the water a spiritual power, which through the water washes away sin."¹⁸ This indicates that Luther is breaking with the traditional Catholic believe that the water itself is changed into a holy instrument of God or that the water itself saves the believer, independent of the Word of God.

The second statement reads: "Nor [do we agree] with Scotus and the Barefooted monks [Minorites or Franciscan monks], who teach that, by the assistance of the divine will, Baptism washes away sins, and that this ablution occurs only through the will of God, and by no means through the Word or water."¹⁹ According to Luther, this particular group has failed to realize the importance of the Word of God and depends solely on the

¹⁸Martin Luther, "The Smalcald Articles." *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (1921): 453-529. Accessed at: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/smc-03e.html>

¹⁹Ibid, 1.

Will of God. The actual baptism is not regenerate, but God decides to regenerate the believer. He wills it to occur.

Luther's Argument Concluded

These three separate works from Luther are more than sufficient to indicate his view of salvation and what is required by man to achieve it. This argument appears to be very well thought out and supported by Scripture. It can definitely be said that Luther was taking a step in the right direction in his defiance of the Catholic church and its salvation by works mentality. Luther's theology in baptism, however, is not accurate and his interpretations of Scripture are indeed in error. The remainder of this paper will define these errors and propose a more accurate theology for baptism.

CHAPTER 2

A BIBLICAL ARGUMENT REFUTING LUTHER'S CONCEPT OF BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

Luther's concept of baptismal regeneration is certainly very persuasive and it is not surprising that many scholars have adopted this theology in the past and will no doubt believe that it is true in the future. He basically uses four different Scripture passages to support his claims for baptismal regeneration. These passages include: Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16, Titus 3:5-8, and Romans 6:4. In the final pages of this work, each passage will be carefully studied and broken down into parts to show that Luther's conclusions about baptism are inaccurate and do not have a foundation in Scripture.

Matthew 28:19: The Command From God

Matthew 28:19 states: “¹⁹Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:” This verse, which is part of the great commission by Jesus is very clearly not indicating that baptism is regenerative. A word study of the original Greek language indicates that the original word for teach is μαθητεύω. This word actually means to make a disciple.²⁰

²⁰James Strong, “Teach,” in *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.) (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.: Ontario 1996).

Therefore, Jesus is ordering His disciples to go out and make other disciples, or lead others to salvation. Once each person has believed in Christ, then he is to be baptized. This command by Jesus does not in any way indicate that baptism is regenerate, but is something that each believer should do in order to obey Christ's commands. Within the context of this verse, it seems as if Jesus is ordering baptism as a proclamation of a change. That the disciples are to go out and tell others the good news and when each person believes in Christ they are to be baptized which shows that they have been claimed by Jesus.

Mark 16:16: Baptism and Salvation

Mark 16:16 states: “¹⁶ He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” This verse provides the strongest support for Luther's idea that the believer must be baptized in order to achieve salvation. There is no argument that Jesus stated that a person who is believing and is baptized will be saved. That statement is quite clear. The focus, however, should be on the second part of the verse. What condemns a man to hell? Is it not his failure to profess Jesus as Lord? Because Jesus follows his first statement with an additional statement that indicates what condemns a man to damnation it can be concluded that believing in Christ is of primary importance and being baptized is secondary. This does not mean that baptism is not important, it just means that it is not necessary for the salvation of the believer.

There are also a greater majority of verses in Scripture that state that belief is all that is necessary to have salvation (John 3:16, Romans 3:23-31, John 3:36). It is reasonable to assume that if baptism were necessary for salvation than it would have been included in the majority of Scripture passages describing the salvation of a believer.

Titus 3:5-8: A Spiritual Regeneration

Titus 3:5-8 states: “⁵ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; ⁶ Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; ⁷ That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸ *This is* a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.” Luther uses these verses to support his claim for justification by faith and not by works as well as a baptismal regeneration. These verses very clearly support a justification by faith in Jesus Christ, but do not support a baptismal regeneration. It is through the coming of Jesus Christ that salvation is possible. These verses indicate that our faith in Christ saves us and this salvation is possible by the “washing of regeneration” which occurs when we turn to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit enters us “renewing of the Holy Ghost.” To put it simply, regeneration is given to man through Christ Jesus which man can actualize by faith in Christ.

Romans 6:4: A Symbol of Change

Romans 6:4 states: “⁴ Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” This scripture written by Paul is written to instill in believers the necessity for them to completely change their lifestyle and live according to the Will of God. It is a reminder that the believer should not try to take advantage of the grace of God, but be thankful for it and aspire to be like Christ. Surely, Paul is not

indicating that when a person is baptized they are physically placed with Christ on the cross, put to death, and raised to life again. The symbolism that Paul is using here is to help the believer understand that because he has believed in Christ, he is regenerated and reborn, raised to a new life in Christ. Baptism is a symbol of the change that has occurred in the believer previous to baptism. This symbolism is apparent also in the circumcision of the Jew in Old Testament times. Romans 2:28-29 states: “²⁸ A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.” The outward act of circumcision was merely a symbol of a circumcision that occurred inside a person, a “circumcision of the heart.” Therefore, it is evident that man is regenerated the instant that he believes in Christ, a baptism of the heart if you will.

CONCLUSION

It has been shown that baptismal regeneration is not a Biblically verifiable theology. It is very easy to understand why Luther believed in this type of baptism when his past is understood. His break from the Catholic church would never be totally complete because of the impressions that were left on him during his formative years of study.

The three honors that Luther spoke about in his “Large Catechism” work were the addition of the Word to the water, the fruit of baptism, and the recipient of baptism. It is evident through a further investigation of the Scripture that Jesus’ command to baptize believers did not necessarily mean that baptism held some special spiritual power or was a sacrament. It is also evident that baptism is not a requirement for salvation in Christ Jesus, so the fruit of baptism is the outward claim made by the believer that he has a relationship with Christ and has experienced a spiritual regeneration because of that belief. Finally, Luther was correct in stating that the believer is the participant in baptism, although he also claims that infants should be baptized as well, which seems to be illogical in his argument.

Luther’s “Small Catechism” and the four questions posed in that work have been shown to be incorrect as well. It is not supported by Scripture that the water in baptism is joined with the Word of God, that baptism is necessary for the salvation of the believer,

that baptism brings about the regeneration of the believer, or that it is necessary to experience death and subsequent life in Jesus Christ.

The “Smalcald Articles” are, however, very encouraging because Luther declares the traditional Catholic views of baptism as inaccurate and unbiblical. He was right in breaking away from the catholic views of baptism, but just came to the wrong conclusions himself.

It is much easier to take advantage of five hundred years of technology and thinking and point out the mistakes that Luther makes in his theological writings. His belief in baptismal regeneration is inaccurate, but this aside the reader must remember what was gained from Luther. He took a stand and began the Protestant reformation which paved the way for new thinking and more accurate theology. Luther’s new idea of justification by faith opened a doorway for theologians in the future that has provided the foundation for many Protestant denominations. The theology developed by Luther is invaluable and will always be a gainful area of study for any student of the Scripture.

In conclusion, through the study of Luther’s work on baptism and applying the Scripture to his work it can be stated that baptism is not regenerative but only a symbol of a spiritual change, a rebirth that has already occurred inside of the believer. Because baptism is a symbol of a rebirth that has already occurred it must only be performed on believers. Baptism is not necessary for salvation, but it is a command from Jesus, so the believer should complete it with great anticipation as he is committing his first act of obedience to the Lord and proclaiming the wonderful act that the Lord has done for him.

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