

# Martin Luther on Baptism and Communion

by Reverend Dr. Arnold Isidore Thomas



## Martin Luther's Unsettled Views about Baptism

Martin Luther firmly believed that the sacrament of baptism was the means by which one entered into the fullness of life in Christ and through which one's salvation was completely justified. Contrary to the position of the Roman Catholic Church and Thomas Aquinas, which stated that *Baptism rescued us from the fall of original sin of disobedience to God, but penance rescues us from the daily acts and tendencies to sin*, Luther held that baptism needed no supplemental acts of penance to sustain us. Baptism signified the "death and resurrection, the fulfilling and completion of justification." (Mark Tranvik, *Luther on Baptism*, p.79)

Luther also believed that this regenerative power was apparent in infant baptism as well, though the infant is incapable of comprehending faith. However, faith is something that neither infants nor adults acquire through their own volition, but by the grace of God, lest we boast that even faith is a chosen and earned achievement. In baptism Christ both speaks and

administers faith, as he did in Mary's womb when she came to the home of her cousin Elizabeth and John, her unborn child, "leaped for joy" when she heard Mary's greeting. Luther further writes, "In baptism he can speak as well through the mouth of the priest, as when he spoke through his mother. Since then he is present, speaks, and baptizes, why should not his Word and baptism call forth spirit and faith in the child as when it produced faith in John? He is the same one who speaks and acts then and now." (Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p.308)

Still, these views about baptism contend with both his and our belief that by faith alone we are saved. The questions we then ask, which Luther seems to contradict himself in answering, is:

- 1) If we are justified by faith alone, why must we then be baptized?
- 2) Is baptism an essential ingredient of salvation and justification or an outward and visible expression of an essential spiritual salvation?
- 3) Is there any element of human will or volition involved in baptism?
- 4) Is baptism a physical or spiritual event?

## FAITH

Faith in God, through Christ, is a spiritual revelation by which our lives are completely transformed from the sinner we were to the awareness that we are, and always were, offspring of God through God's grace.

**So, what is grace?** Grace is defined as an unmerited or undeserved gift from God. We do nothing, according to Luther, to earn this gift. Grace is initiated by God's love for us and not by whatever feelings we have for God.

This definition raises the question concerning **free will**. If we have no choice in the matter of God's grace and our salvation; if our faith in God is caused solely by God's love for us, then we have no free will and are predestined by God for either divine salvation or divine wrath.

Before we can fully appreciate Luther's theology about baptism or communion, we must grasp the fundamental premise that upholds them both, which is his doctrine of free will elaborated in his debate on this matter with the Catholic scholar and theologian Desiderius Erasmus.

## ERASMUS

Though himself a critic of abuses in the Roman Catholic Church, Desiderius Erasmus preferred gradual reform rather than the radical course chosen by Luther. But he also differed with Luther's fundamental theological beliefs on human nature and free will.



Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus by Hans Holbein the Younger (1523)

In his work *On Free Will*, Erasmus argued that all humans possessed free will and that the doctrine of predestination, held by Luther, was not in accord with the teachings contained in the Bible. He argued against the belief that God's foreknowledge of events was the cause of events, and held that the doctrines of repentance, baptism, and conversion depended on the existence of free will. He also believed that grace was the revelation that enabled humans to come to the awareness of God's love and supported them as they exercised their free will to choose between good and evil.

### **LUTHER'S RESPONSE**

Luther responds to Erasmus in his work *On the Bondage of the Will*, in which he contends that sin robs human beings of any capacity for working out their own salvation and obtaining an awareness of God's presence and love. As such, there is no free will for humanity because any will they might have is blinded by the power of sin.

Luther concludes that the fallen state of humanity is dominated by the lordship of Satan over the world; a rule that will never let go of its grip upon our lives unless overpowered by a stronger force, which is the power of God. When God redeems a person, the entire soul is set free, including the will, which then is liberated to serve God. No one can achieve salvation or redemption through his or her own will. People, according to Luther, do not choose between good or evil, because being dominated by evil, they are incapable of such a choice. Salvation is, therefore, a product of God alone, unilaterally changing a person's heart to God's will. Were it not so, Luther adds, God would not be omnipotent and omniscient, and would lack total sovereignty over creation. Luther held that arguing otherwise would insult the sovereignty of God. As such, Luther concluded that Erasmus was not actually a Christian.

### **QUESTIONS REGARDING LUTHER'S SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

If God is so sovereign, as Luther acknowledges, how and why does Satan exist as a usurper of God's authority and reign, who conquers earth and the hearts of humanity, the crowning jewels of God's creation? Was God asleep at the wheel? Did God predestine and ordain such evils as our betrayal and fall and utter obliviousness to God's presence and nature to occur? There are so many questions that naturally arise from one's outrage at the notion of God's sovereignty, so defined by Luther, if God's sovereignty sanctioned the present state of affairs, and we were never able to do anything about it.

This is the dark and desolate region of Christian adherence to the notion held by Luther and other reformers of his day that God's sovereignty denies human free will. Even if humanity occupied a favored place prior to the fall and our disobedience, the notion that our rebellion was foreseen by God's omniscience negates the notion that we even had the freedom and capacity to rebel against God; for belief in God's foreknowledge dictates that whatever God knows will happen must happen. The fall of humanity, therefore, is not an act of the human will, but an act of God, if one is wedded to the notion of God's omnipotent and omniscient sovereignty.

### **BAPTISM**

**Question:** Should the sacrament of baptism be required before a person can receive communion?

**Answer:** It is nowhere stated in Scripture that a person must be baptized before being receiving the Lord's Supper. However, the same requirement for both baptism and partaking of the Lord's Supper is salvation through faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are not sure when the Church decided that baptism was required before communion, but most likely it became a requirement as a means to assuring the safety of its members from informants who would reveal them to Roman authorities as outlaws and from those who sought to undermine its beliefs and way of life. Baptism became the sacramental rite that occurred after an extended process of instruction (or catechism) about the way of Christ.

## **COMMUNION**

Luther believed that the Body and Blood of Christ are "truly and substantially present in, with and under the forms" of consecrated bread and wine, so that communicants eat and drink both the elements and the true Body and Blood of Christ himself in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, whether they are believers or unbelievers. The Lutheran doctrine of the Real Presence is also known as the sacramental union. This theology was first formally and publicly confessed in the Wittenberg Concord (1536). It has also been called "consubstantiation," but most Lutheran theologians reject the use of this term as it creates confusion with an earlier doctrine of the same name concerning the union of the Trinity. Lutherans prefer the expression "in, with and under the forms of consecrated bread and wine" and "sacramental union" to distinguish their understanding of the Eucharist from those of other Reformed traditions.

So, to accept the premise that one must first be baptized to receive communion, according to Luther, is to accept that, with the exception of extreme circumstances, God's salvation and justification is only received through the sacrament of baptism, therefore, qualifying the believer to be further strengthened and sustained through the sacrament of communion.