

# LUTHER'S 'TAUFBÜCHLEIN'

## Part 2

### **Luther on Baptism**

In his consideration of the sacrament of Baptism, Luther was at pains to emphasize two aspects: the objectivity of God's declaration of forgiveness and remission of sins, and the apprehension of this by faith and symbolized in baptism.

For Luther everything depended on what God does, and this included baptism. The sacrament rests not on a human command but on God's command as contained in Mark 16:15-16.

Consequently, you must esteem baptism as something high, glorious, and excellent; for here there is a divine word and command which institutes and confirms baptism. (Sermons on the Catechism 1528)

The reason for its importance was that it was the outward sign of Justification. Thus in *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, 1519, Luther wrote:

The significance of baptism is a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so that the old man, conceived and born in sin, is there drowned, and a new man, born in grace, comes forth and rises. . . . Through this spiritual birth he is a child of grace and a justified person.

Indeed, baptism is the sacrament of Justification, bringing forth salvation, redemption from sin, liberation from the devil, and leading to Christ.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it was not the external ceremony itself which justified men, for unless faith is present, baptism profits nothing.<sup>7</sup> However, Luther was careful to avoid any charge of subjectivity, for he emphasized that this faith was faith in the promise of God to forgive sins. Thus he could write:

My faith does not make the baptism but rather receives baptism, no matter whether the person believes or not, for baptism is not dependent upon my faith but upon God's Word.<sup>8</sup>

Luther could also defend infant baptism on the grounds that infants were aided by the faith of others, namely those who brought them to baptism, on analogy with the faith of those who brought the paralytic to Christ.<sup>9</sup> (A better analogy would have been the centurion who besought the Lord on behalf of his servant.) For the word of

God is powerful enough to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant.

Regarding the administration of the sacrament, Luther emphasized both the divine and the human aspects. First the Divine Word which was added to the water. By this Luther did not have in mind a blessing of the water, but the Divine promise, Mark 16:16, and the authority to baptize in the three-fold name. The Divine promise guaranteed the reality of forgiveness, and the authority of Matt. 28:19 indicated that it was not the minister who baptized, but God himself. It seems that for Luther, just as at the Eucharist when the priest read the words of Institution, it was God himself proclaiming forgiveness, so too in the baptismal formula, God himself proclaimed forgiveness. With this went the sign, by which the promise was pledged, and by which man accepted the Divine forgiveness and justification. When the minister immersed the candidate in the water, this signified death, and when he drew him out, it signified life. 'Baptism then, signifies two things – death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification'.<sup>10</sup> This, for Luther, was the 'glory of baptism' which careless authors had obscured in the Medieval Liturgy. Clearly, any revision worthy of the name would concern itself with making this glory less obscure.

### **Luther's First 'Taufbüchlein' 1523**

Luther's first revision of the Baptismal Liturgy may be considered under three heads.

1. *Those features which added nothing to Baptism.* In the Epilogue of the first *Taufbüchlein* Luther carefully listed those ceremonies, which though retained, were of no importance to baptism:

Now remember also that in baptism the least importance attaches to these external things, namely, breathing under the eyes, signing with the cross, placing salt in the mouth, putting spittle and clay on the ears and nose, anointing with oil the breast and shoulders, and signing the top of the head with chrism, vesting in the christening robe, and giving a burning candle into the hand, and whatever else there is that men have added to embellish baptism. For certainly without all such things baptism may take place, and they are not the kind of devices that the devil shuns or avoids. He despises much greater things than these. Here is earnestness required.

These ceremonies were retained, for the sake of tender consciences, and to make clear that this was no newly invented baptism. Nevertheless, as far as Luther was concerned, they were not to be considered as an integral part of the Baptismal Liturgy.

2. *Those features which were an integral part of the Baptismal Liturgy.*

(a) The vows. These were of the utmost importance, being a complete confession of the Christian faith; indeed, Luther argued that all other vows should be abolished so that all men could be recalled to the vows of their baptism:

For we have vowed enough in baptism, more than we can ever fulfil; if we give ourselves to the keeping of this one vow, we shall have all we can do.<sup>11</sup>

The vow takes the form of the creed, for the creed teaches what we have received from God.<sup>12</sup>

(b) Immersion. The three modes of administering baptism in use at this time – *immersio*, *superfusio*, and *infusio* – were all allowed for in Luther's rubric.

'Then he shall take the child and dip him in the font and say.' Nevertheless, Luther was quite explicit that he himself preferred immersion; whatever the distinction made by modern scholars between submersion and immersion, by immersion Luther meant the total submersion of the body under the water:

Baptism (*Die Taufe*) is *baptismos* in Greek, and *mersio* in Latin, and means to plunge something completely into the water, so that the water covers it. Although in many places it is no longer customary to thrust and dip infants into the font, but only with the hand to pour the baptismal water upon them out of the font, nevertheless the former is what should be done. It would be proper, according to the meaning of the word *Taufe*, that the infant or whoever is to be baptized, should be put in and sunk completely into the water and then drawn out again.<sup>13</sup>

It would appear from this that for Luther, 'dip him in the font' meant complete submersion. The reason for its importance was that it was the Sign of baptism:

The sign consists in this, that we are thrust into the water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; however, we are not left there but are drawn out again. . . . The sign must thus have both parts, the putting in and the drawing out.<sup>14</sup>

Immersion fully symbolized the dying to sin and the rising to Christ; that is, Justification.

(c) The Triune formula. Luther retained the traditional (though not Roman in origin) Trinitarian baptismal formula, though he was quite prepared to accept the Greek usage, and baptism in the name of Christ. What was important was that baptism was administered in the name of God and not in the name of man.<sup>15</sup> When the priest pronounced the words it was as though he said

‘What I do, I do not do by my own authority, but in the name and stead of God, so that you should regard it just as if our Lord himself had done it in a visable manner. The Doer and the minister are different persons, but the work of both is the same work, or rather, it is the work of the Doer alone, through my ministry.’<sup>16</sup>

What the ‘Doer’ was doing was offering the recipient forgiveness.

These three features, the creedal vow or assent, immersion, and the baptismal formula were all important features in showing forth the ‘glory of baptism’.

### 3. *Omissions and alterations to make clearer the glory of baptism.*

(a) The Exorcism of Salt and the Blessing of the Water. It may be presumed that these were done beforehand according to custom, and certainly Luther’s well-known tolerance in such matters of worship would not preclude this. However, there is good reason to think that this represents a deliberate exclusion of these ceremonies on the part of the Reformer.

Luther appears to have been critical of the blessing of objects. In the *Babylonian Captivity* he had noted that the introduction of such blessings had helped to obscure the true meaning of the Sacraments. Such things as salt and vessels could be consecrated by the Word and by prayer as in 1 Tim. 4:4-5, but this must not be confused with a divinely instituted Sacrament. It would, therefore, detract from the sacrament of baptism to introduce into it any ecclesiastical exorcisms or blessings.

However, there was an even stronger reason for the omission of any blessing or consecration of the water. In a Sermon at the baptism of Bernhard von Anhalt, 1540, Luther dismissed the idea that to ‘add the word to the water’ was a blessing of the water:

For example, the magicians, witches, and weather prophets also employ a sign or creature, such as a root or herb, and speak over it the Lord’s Prayer or some other holy word and name of God. This they say is not an evil thing but rather both: a creation of God and precious words and holy names; therefore it should possess power and accomplish what it is used for; just as the Pope also juggles and conjures with his chrism, holy water, and salt. . . . Do you too have a word and command of God which says you should consecrate salt or water and speak such words over them?

For the Reformer, the word must be added to the water, but this did not consist of blessing the water; rather it was done by simply obeying God’s command in Holy Scripture. With natural water there was

God's word beside and with the water, which is not something we have invented or dreamed up, but is rather the Word of Christ, who said 'Go into all the world and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' When these words are added to the water, then it is no longer simple water like other water, but a holy, divine, blessed water. For when the word of God, by which he created heaven and earth and all things, is present, there God himself is present with his power and might.<sup>17</sup>

Thus to add the word to water is to obey God and baptize in water in the name of God. The water is divine only in so far as it has God's promise and command. Elsewhere Luther condemns Aquinas and Bonaventura for attributing power to the water, adding that 'Scotus speaks more correctly when he defines baptism as a divine covenant standing by the element' (*Lectures on Genesis*). To bless the water would be to imply that God's own word was insufficient.

(b) Differentiation between males and females. The medieval rite commenced with a rubric which required the males to be set on the right and the females on the left, and in the Liturgy itself different prayers were in some places provided for the females.

J. D. C. Fisher has pointed out that the opening rubric of the medieval rite represents a survival of a time when many candidates were expected for baptism, and suggests that Luther omitted it because he and his contemporaries would have expected only one candidate at any one time.<sup>18</sup> However, neither this suggestion, nor that of mere simplification, adequately explains why Luther also omitted the prayers provided for females, which could still have been used.

Although Luther did not believe that women were equal in glory and prestige to the male, he did affirm that they were joint heirs of redemption. Commenting on Gen. 1-27 he wrote:

However, here Moses puts the two sexes together and says that God created male and female in order to indicate that Eve, too, was made by God as a partaker of the divine image and of the divine similitude, likewise the rule over everything. Thus even today the woman is the partaker of the future life, just as Peter says that they are joint heirs of the same grace (1 Pet. 3:7).

In matter of redemption there is no distinction between male and female. Thus in his commentary on Galatians of 1519, with regard to 3:27-28, 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus', Luther appealed to Augustine that although distinctions remain in the body, they are removed in the Spirit through the

unity of faith. Commenting on the same verses in 1535 he wrote:

For in Christ Jesus all social stations, even those that were divinely ordained, are nothing. Male, female, slave, free, Jew, Gentile, King, subject – these are, of course, good creatures of God. But in Christ, that is, in the matter of Salvation, they amount to nothing, for all their wisdom, righteousness, devotion and authority.

In the matter of Salvation God made no distinction between male and female, for all had sinned in Adam, and all were offered redemption in Christ. The Liturgy of Baptism, which was very much the ‘matter of Salvation’, was not the appropriate place for any distinction between male and female. We suggest that this is the reason for Luther’s omissions.

(c) The substitution of the ‘Flood Prayer’ for the Prayer ‘God of our Fathers’. After the giving of the salt, which Luther retained, a prayer followed requesting that he ‘who tastes this first morsal of salt’ should hunger no more, and ‘that he may be filled with heavenly food’. After this came another short prayer and then the exorcism of the devil. Luther replaced the Prayer ‘God of our Fathers’ with the ‘Flood Prayer’, omitted the following prayer, and continued with the exorcism of the devil.

The source of the so-called ‘Flood Prayer’ is unknown: Ulrich S. Leopold commented on this collect that ‘In the absence of a comparable prayer in the Roman rite, we must consider it original with Luther’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the prayer found its way into Archbishop Hermann’s *Consultation* and the *Book of Common Prayer*, and is often styled in textbooks as ‘Luther’s Flood Prayer’. However, in the same year as the *Taufbüchlein*, the first Zurich reformed baptismal order appeared, being the work of Leo Judd.<sup>20</sup> In this Liturgy there appears a prayer very similar to Luther’s collect. A coincidence seeming unlikely, we are left with one of the following:

- (i) Luther borrowed from Judd.
- (ii) Judd borrowed from Luther.
- (iii) It is a pre-reformation prayer.

The present writer, having no evidence for (i) or (ii), concludes that the collect is a pre-reformation prayer.

However, the question must now be asked as to why Luther used this prayer. Scholars have pointed out that the themes of this prayer, the Flood and the Red Sea, are patristic ‘types’ of baptism. Luther may or may not have been aware of this fact, but in any case this alone would not account for its use by the Reformer. The significance of this prayer for Luther is that its themes were for him types of Justification. Thus in his lectures on Gen. 9, concerning allegories, with reference to Rom. 6:3 and Mark 10:39, he wrote:

In accordance with this meaning, the Red Sea is truly a baptism, that is, death and the wrath of God, as is manifest in the case of Pharaoh. Nevertheless, Israel, which is baptized with such a baptism, passes through unharmed. Similarly, the Flood is truly death and the wrath of God; nevertheless, the believers are saved in the midst of the Flood. Thus death engulfs and swallows up the entire human race; for without distinction the wrath of God goes over the good, and the evil, over the godly and the ungodly. The Flood that Noah experienced was not different from the one which the world experienced. The Red Sea, which both Pharaoh and Israel entered, was not different. Later on, however, the difference became apparent in this: those who believe are preserved in the very death to which they are subjected together with the ungodly, but the ungodly perish. Noah, accordingly, is preserved because he has the ark, that is, God's promise and Word, in which he is living; but the ungodly, who do not believe the word, are left to their fate.

It will be seen that from Luther's point of view these themes were more appropriate to baptism than a prayer concerning salt. Thus the collect prays that the recipient may have a right faith in the Spirit, that the old Adam may be drowned, and that separated from the unfaithful he may be preserved in the Holy ark of Christendom. And because the recipient had been brought to baptism because of faith in God's word, then it was appropriate that exorcism of the devil should follow, for

Certainly when the devil sees baptism and hears the word sounding, to him it is like a bright sun and he will not stay there, and when a person is baptized for the sake of the word of God, which is in it, there is a veritable oven glow.<sup>21</sup>

Our conclusion is then that the first *Taufbüchlein* consists of three things: those ceremonies which add nothing to baptism; those parts which are integral to the Liturgy of Baptism; and those omissions and alterations which were in order to show God's redeeming work and power in the sacrament, or, to use Luther's words, the 'glory of baptism'.

### **Luther's Second 'Taufbüchlein' 1526**

In 1526 Luther revised his Liturgical work of 1523, namely, the *Formula Missae* and the first *Taufbüchlein*. In the same way that the 1526 *Deutsche Messe* represented a simplification and perfection of the earlier service, so too the 1526 *Taufbüchlein* makes clear the nature of the earlier baptismal Liturgy.

Although there are a few minor alterations to some of the prayers, the most striking feature of the Second *Taufbüchlein* is, as might be

expected from the analysis of the first *Taufbüchlein*, the omission of most of the ceremonies which 'men have added to embellish baptism' the exsufflation and the first of the two opening prayers, the giving of salt, the first of the two exorcisms, the prayer after the exorcism, the Effeta, the two anointings before and after baptism, and the placing of a lighted candle in the child's hand.

Thus in the 1526 order, the officiant demands the unclean spirit to give way to the Holy Spirit. The child receives the cross on its forehead and breast, a sign of the cost of the redemption now being offered. A prayer is asked for regeneration, followed by the 'flood prayer', with the types of Justification. Again the unclean spirit is called out. Then follows the Gospel, the Lord's Prayer, the renunciations, confession of faith and baptism in the name of the Trinity. A white robe is still put on the infant, both because it was the custom, and because it represented the new life of the justified person.

Here, then, Luther removed all things which distracted from or obscured the 'glory of baptism'.

### **Confirmation**

It has already been noted that the existence of the rite of Confirmation as a separate and distinct episcopal rite was the result of certain theological and pastoral factors, and that originally it was an integral part of the Baptismal Liturgy. This fact has been increasingly recognized and reflected in many of the recent revisions of the Baptismal Liturgy in several churches. In the light of this better understanding of the early Baptismal rite, Luther's removal of the rite of Confirmation might appear to the modern scholar as an unforgivable act.

However, given the fact that Luther was a pioneer in Liturgical reform, he had good reason for his action. Firstly, in so far as Christian Initiation gave remission of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit, both Luther and his contemporary Catholic theologians agreed that both of these were given in baptism. Confirmation was interpreted as a giving of grace and strengthening of baptism.

In the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther rejected the idea that Confirmation was a sacrament, for it had no divine institution. Instead he placed it in the same category as the blessing of objects, a churchly rite. The Sacrament of Baptism gave remission of sins and the Holy Spirit, and strengthening came not through confirmation, but the reception of the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> Even so, Luther was prepared to allow it to continue, provided it was openly acknowledged that it had only the authority of the church behind it. And in a sermon of 1523 Luther said:

Confirmation should not be observed as the bishops desire it. Nevertheless we do not find fault if every pastor examines the faith of the children to see whether it is good and sincere, lays hands on them, and confirms them.<sup>23</sup>

It remains, however, that as far as Luther was concerned, confirmation added nothing to baptism and was a man-made rite. As such it was to be classed with the blessing of salt, water and other objects; as with these, Luther saw no point in providing a Liturgical form for it.

### Conclusion

From this survey of Luther's *Taufbüchlein*, we may conclude with Bachmann that Luther did indeed use the contemporary Roman rite as the basis of his reform. He was in no position to be a 'patristic fundamentalist', nor was he favourable towards liturgical novelty and experimentation. What we do find, however, is not 'minor modifications' followed by 'abbreviating it drastically', but a gradual reform of the existing rite with the intention of making less obscure the 'glory of baptism'. For Luther's concern was to give Liturgical expression to the theology of baptism as the sacrament of salvation. His criterion was theology, or the Word of God. Many modern liturgists would do well to follow the Wittenberg reformer's example.

### NOTES TO PART 2

6. *Sermons on the Catechism 1528*. Baptism.
7. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. *Sermons on the Catechism* (1528) The Creed.
13. *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519)
14. Ibid.
15. *The Babylonian Captivity*.
16. Ibid.
17. *Sermon on Matt. 3:13-17 at the Baptism of Bernhard Von Anhalt* (1540).
18. *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period*, p. 9, note 1.
19. Luther's Works, Vol. 53, p. 143.
20. Text in Fisher, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period*.
21. *Sermons on the Catechism*. Baptism.
22. *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519).
23. *Predigt am Sonntag Latare Nachmittags*. Cited by J. D. C. Fisher, op. cit., from the translation in A. C. Repp. *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis 1964).

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