

The Relationship between Faith, Repentance, and the Sacraments

In Luther and the Lutheran Confessional Writings

“We are baptized only once, by which we gain the life of Christ, even though we often fall and rise again. For the life of Christ can be recovered again and again, but a person can enter upon it only once...this expression ‘once for all’ (semel) does not determine the number of acts of repentance, but rather it is a commendation of the eternal nature of grace...The eternal nature of righteousness...in this life can often be lost and regained without conflicting with its’ eternal nature.” Luther’s Commentary on Romans. (6:10)

“There are Christians who think they are Christians because they have been baptized. They relax their reigns. They are not concerned about conquering sins.” Luther’s Commentary on 1 John. (3:4)

“To be born of God and to sin are incompatible...He can, of course, lose his birth and commit sin, but so long as the seed of God is in us, it does not permit that sin to be with it...To walk in smugness is to live in sin after Christ and the birth have been lost. May God protect us from this!” Luther’s Commentary on 1 John. (3:9)

“Those who have fallen after baptism can obtain the forgiveness of sins whenever and as often as they are converted.” Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Article XII, p. 182

“When holy people...fall into open sin...faith and the Spirit have departed from them...The Holy Spirit represses and restrains [sin] so that it does not do what it wishes. If sin does what it wishes, then the Holy Spirit and faith are not present, for St. John says, ‘No one born of God commits sin; he cannot sin.’ Smalcald Articles. III, p. 310

“We also reject and condemn the teaching that faith and the indwelling Holy Spirit are not lost through malicious sin, but that the holy ones and the elect retain the Holy Spirit even though they fall into adultery and other sins and persist in them.” Formula of Concord. p. 477:19

“If those who have been baptized act contrary to their conscience and permit sin to rule in themselves and thus grieve the Holy Spirit within them and lose him, they dare not be baptized again, though they must certainly be converted again.” Formula of Concord. p. 534:69

We must begin by earnestly criticizing and rejecting the false Epicurian delusion which some dream up that it is impossible to lose faith and the gift of righteousness, once it has been received.” Formula of Concord. p. 556:31

“A promise is useless unless faith accepts the promise...It is sheer Judaism to believe that we are justified by a ceremony without a good disposition in our heart, that is, without faith...Words cannot describe the abuses which this fanatical notion about the sacraments, ‘ex opera operato,’ without a good disposition in the one using them, has spawned in the Church.” Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Art. XIII, p. 213, 14

It follows that it is a most pernicious error to say that the sacraments of the new law are efficacious signs of grace in such a way that they do not require any disposition in the recipient except that he should put no obstacle in the way.” Commentary on Hebrews. (5:1)

“For that very commonly known and completely established statement is true, that it is not the sacrament, but faith in the sacrament that justifies.” Luther’s Commentary on Hebrews. (5:1)

“Many people “having received faith by baptism and penitence...now think they are personally pleasing to God even without Christ, when actually both are necessary, namely, to have faith and also always to possess Christ as our mediator in this faith...the Apostle is speaking against those who rely too heavily on Christ and not enough on faith, as if they were to be saved through Christ in such a way that they themselves had to do nothing and show no evidence of faith.” Luther’s Commentary on Romans. (5:2)

“Peter teaches why we should do good works, namely, that we confirm our calling, that is, that we do not fall from our calling by lapsing again into sin. He says, ‘Do good works that you remain in your heavenly calling, lest you fall away and lose the Holy Spirit and His gifts, which you have not received because of your subsequent works by which have come to you by grace through Christ and which you retain through faith! Faith, however, does not remain in those who lead a wicked life, lose the Holy Spirit, and reject repentance.’ Formula of Concord. p. 556:33

Thus the Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and ever continued. For we must keep at it incessantly, always purging out whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new man may come forth.” Large Catechism. P. 445:65

“Therefore baptism remains forever. Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man. But we need not again have water poured over us. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless be only one baptism, and the effect and signification of baptism would continue and remain. Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to baptism, to resume and practice what had earlier been begun but abandoned.

I say this to correct the opinion, which has long prevailed among us, that our baptism is something past which we can no longer use after falling again into sin. We have such a notion because we regard baptism only in the light of a work performed once for all. Indeed, St. Jerome is responsible for this view, for he wrote, ‘Repentance is the second plank on which we must swim ashore after the ship founders’ in which we embarked when we entered the Christian Church. This interpretation deprives baptism of its value, making it no further use to us. Therefore the statement is incorrect. The ship does not founder since, as we said, it is God’s ordinance and not a work of ours. But it does happen that we slip and fall out of the ship. If anyone does fall out, he should immediately head for the ship and cling to it until he can climb aboard again and sail on it as he had done before.” Large Catechism. P. 446:77-82; also Baylonian Captivity of the Church. (v. 36) p. 61.

“A man can believe even though he be not be baptized; for baptism is nothing more than an outward sign that is to remind us of the divine promise. If we can have it, it is well; let us receive it. If, however, we cannot receive it, or it is denied us, we will not be condemned if only we believe the Gospel...Condemnation follows no sin except the sin of unbelief.” Martin Luther. Missionary Sermons (1522) on Mark 16:14-20. p.195f.

“If good works do not follow our faith is false and not true.” Smalcald Articles pt. III Art. 12 no.3,

Compiled by Pastor Gary Jensen

