

THE BAPTISM OF JOHN

An Examination

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INTRODUCTION:

Was John's baptism a sacrament in the narrow sense? Did it forgive sins? Or did it merely signify a person's repentance and spiritual preparation for the coming Messiah?

The debate over John's Baptism has been fought both within and without the parameters of Lutheranism. Indeed, the debate has lingered on for many centuries with "orthodox" representatives on each side of the debate.

This brief paper will attempt to summarize the major viewpoints relating to this issue. Of particular interest will be Luther's perspective, as well as that of his predecessors and progeny.

In preparing this summary, the writer acknowledges the great contributions from several key sources including David P. Loeschen's monograph *Luther's Understanding John's Baptism* (Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, Unpublished B.Div. Dissertation) from which a major portion of this examination has been "lifted"; Dr. Wm. Arndt's *The Life of Jesus*; and Dr. Martin Franzmann's *Essay to the 1954 South Nebraska District Convention*.

LUTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Martin Franzmann, in his 1954 essay to the 1954 South Nebraska District Convention, did something rather unique in his excursus of John the Baptist's Baptism. What did he do? He quoted Luther.

Luther is often not quoted or considered as a major source in this debate. In fact, Luther's position is contrary to almost every major Lutheran theologian since the Lutheran Reformation. Lutheran Dogmaticians such as Chemnitz, Quenstedt, Baier, Pieper all tend to omit references to Luther in their discussions of John the Baptist's baptism. Why? Is it, perhaps, because they disagree with him?

Though the vast majority of Lutheran dogmaticians do not agree with Luther, there is a broad and vast array of major Church Fathers--and Romanists--whose position he echoed. The Lutheran theologian Baier, in his *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, described the Romanist position in the words of Balarmino.

"The Baptism of John was not a sacrament nor did it forgive sins. And those that were baptized by John had to be rebaptized." (11)

Luther, in his *Theological Discussion of the Baptism of the Law, John and Christ* (1520) listed twelve points relative to John's baptism. The points included the following:

- 1) ...John's is a baptism of repentance, and Christ's is of Grace.
- 2) ...Christ's baptism alone is a sacrament.
- 7) ...John's baptism did not impart grace but rather made the hearts fearful and despairing until Christ's baptism came to them.
- 10) [John baptized] so that he may lead repentant souls to Christ.
- 11) ...Christ did not invalidate John's Baptism, rather, more importantly, he established the added words of promise (as to make it more complete).
- 12) Therefore, the people who were already baptized by John needed once more to be baptized by Christ. (8)

In his discussion as to why Luther denied the sacramental character of John's baptism, Lutheran Dogmatician Werner Elert explained that Luther saw John's baptism as merely as a "baptism unto repentance," a washing in which the word of God was not "operative" as in Christ's Baptism.

PREDECESSORS INFLUENCING LUTHER'S POSITION

Luther, as is commonly known, was influenced by several early Church Fathers. Luther himself indicated that Hilary and Augustine were "the two great lights of the church" (13). Luther's familiarity with Peter Lombard steered him to a familiarity with other early church writers. Studying early church writers, he found himself in agreement with those who held that John's Baptism did not forgive sins, nor did it impart the Holy Spirit (Loeschen, p. 46).

St. Basil (329-379), in his tome entitled "*Concerning Baptism*," spoke of the difference between Christ's Baptism and John's baptism in a way which Luther mirrored.

"The doctrine concerning Baptism according to the Lord's Gospel...has an authority superior to the baptism of the blessed John."

Jerome (349-420) demonstrated the difference between Christ's and John's baptism in one of his sermons.

"The baptism of John preceded the baptism of the Savior. Even as John the Baptist was the precursor of the Lord Savior, so was the baptism of John the Baptist a precursor of the baptism of the Savior. The former was given in repentance; the latter, in grace." (II.3)

THE ROMANIST POSITION

ope Leo's writing indicates that Holy Baptism did not have its origin in John's Baptism but "rather in the death and resurrection of the Lord." (L. 18) The Council of Trent, held after Luther's death, also reaffirmed the Romanist position relative to John the Baptist.

"Canon I- If anyone saith, that the baptism of John had the same force as the baptism of Christ; let him be anathema." (L. 2)

Thus it appears that Luther was squarely in agreement with the Romanists and many ancient church fathers when he stated his position relative to John the Baptist's baptism.

LUTHER'S WRITINGS

Scholars often make a distinction between the "young" and "later" Luther. Often this distinction is a valid approach to trace the development of Luther's theological development.. Unfortunately, in the discussion at hand, Luther left no formalized, systematic theological treatment of John's Baptism which can be easily placed in a chronological progression.

Though of what is known about his beliefs in this area have come from his students' or associates' transcripts of his lectures or from his sermons, it appears that Luther's position relative to the nature and efficacy of John's baptism remains largely unchanged throughout his life.

Luther wrote twenty-one sermons dealing with the Baptism of John. In both his early and later sermons, Luther maintained his contention that John's baptism was *not* a sacrament but *only a sign of one's repentance*. Volume Twenty-Two of Luther's Works (American Edition), records several of Luther's sermons from 1537-1539. In his sermon on John 1:32-34, Luther said,

"...In the second place, he [John] told his hearers to wait for the forgiveness of sin, which would be brought by One [Jesus] who was yet to come."(4)

This view was repeated again in 1541 in Luther's public speech regarding Infant Baptism at Dessau, Germany (129, II27). Even in 1544, near the end of his life, Luther reiterated his view in his sermon on John 1:19-28 for the Fourth Sunday in Advent. What was this view? Simply that John's baptism was merely a water baptism to signify one's repentance and preparation for the Messiah. He wrote,

"[John] replied, 'I am a voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord. When I preach, Listen carefully, for soon He [Messiah] will come. He was before me and will baptize with the Holy Ghost. I baptize only with water, since I am only a servant (I.6).'"

In *Luther's Works* (Walch edition I.7), we find what may be one of the best summaries of Luther's later—and life-long—position on this issue.

"...the distinction between Christ's and John's baptism is that John [says], 'I baptize you with water; I do not forgive sins, rather my preaching refers to that man repents, for the Lord is at hand, who would [if he were here in person] forgive sins.'"

David Loeschen, in his thesis on this subject concludes,

"We see rather clearly that Luther understood John's baptism as not imparting the Holy Spirit, as not forgiving sins, and that it was not a sacrament."(L.. 12)

OTHER LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVES

It is interesting that Luther's position runs counter to virtually all other major Confessional Lutheran theologians including the likes of Chemnitz, Melancton, Quenstedt, Calov, Baier, Pieper, Franzmann, Arndt, Schlink and numerous others.

Philip Melancton wrote,

[Regarding] the difference between the baptism of John and that of Christ...The clearest thinkers on this matter have felt that the baptism of John is simply a sign of mortification, whereas that of Christ is a sign of vivification, because to it was added the promise of grace or the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, they call the washing of John a 'baptism of repentance' and that of Christ a 'baptism for the remission of sins.'" (II.13)

The baptism of John was a sign of grace to be preached a little later through Christ, and... the baptism of Christ was a sign of grace already bestowed. Each baptism is a sign of the same thing, but with this difference: the baptism of John is the sign of grace to come a little later, and the baptism of Christ is the pledge and seal of grace already conferred. So each baptism signified the same thing, mortification and vivifications (II.14)

Testimony of Lutheran Dogmaticians fall in step with Melancton. Martin Chemnitz, through agreeing there was difference between the two baptisms, seemed to believe that John's baptism was indeed "sacramental". Francis Pieper, in his *Christian Dogmatics* (II.32), not only disagreed with Luther but said,

"...such as refuse to acknowledge the baptism of John as a means of grace reveal faulty conceptions of the remission of sin and salvation."

5) Matthew 21:23-27

a) From where did John the Baptist's baptism come? From God or from men?

b) In what ways does Jesus refusal to answer this question influence/shape this discussion?

6) Did John the Baptist ever circumcise? Was his baptism a replacement of circumcisions?

7) Acts 19:1ff. Paul at Ephesus.

a) If John's baptism was a "sacrament", then why did those in Ephesus who were baptized by John need to be, at Paul's authority, re-baptized into Christ?

b) What is the significance of the special manifestation of the Holy Spirit which was given after these disciples had been re-baptized?

8) Lutheran Criteria for Sacrament

a) How does John's Baptism "stack up" to the three Lutheran criteria for a sacrament?

Visible Means?

Forgiveness of Sins?

Commanded by God?

b) If any of these are in doubt, can John's Baptism still be called a "sacrament"? (Or, can we at least appreciate Luther's denial of the sacramental nature of John's Baptism?)

9) Other Comments:

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps we will never get unanimous agreement on the true nature of John's baptism. Martin Chemnitz, in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* wrote,

"The disputes of the ancients about the baptism of John are certainly not unknown to us; but they neither agree altogether among themselves nor do they condemn those who think differently." (II. 5)

Is this question still relevant? St. Augustine, Chemnitz noted, did not think so (II.12). Philip Melancthon best answered this question,

"The dispute between the baptism of John is not equally necessary, for no one is now baptized no has been baptized with the baptism of John; but the question is only about the ceremony of the time, now long past, and practiced very briefly even then." (L 24, II.18)

Even Francis Pieper acknowledged that discussion of this issue today is no longer of any real practical value "inasmuch as no one today receives that baptism."

Thus, the following conclusions are presented for discussion and consideration:

- 1) Whatever our perspective regarding the nature of John's baptism, it is necessary for our salvation that we uphold the efficacious and salvific action of God in Christ's baptism;
- 2) Those who claim that to deny the sacramental nature of John's baptism may rightly call such persons "Romanists". However, in doing so, the one making the accusation ought to exercise a great deal of restraint in that this "Romanist" position was Luther's life-long belief.
- 3) All Old Testament Means of Grace (e.g. Circumcision, et. al) are, necessarily, inferior to the New Testament sacraments in that they have been superseded by the "reality" which has appeared in Christ. If John's baptism was indeed a sacrament, then it would be granted that though it did convey God's means of grace, it is still inferior to Christ's Baptism. Thus, even in this case, the centrality of the New Testament Sacraments is--and must be--maintained.
- 4) We ought to give God thanks for His gracious action among us in Word and Sacrament through His Son, Jesus Christ.
- 5) Other Comments/Insights?