

# BORN AGAIN THROUGH BAPTISM?

## The Lutheran Teaching Compared with the Bible

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Is salvation by God's grace, through faith, or is it by man's works (his good deeds)? All devout Lutherans will answer, By grace, through faith. But the fact is that Lutheranism, while *claiming* to teach that salvation is by God's grace, teaches emphatically that a *work of man* is necessary for salvation (even though it denies that this work of man *is* a work of man!). And Lutherans *trust* in this work of man for their salvation. The work in which Lutherans trust is *baptism*.

Here is the *official teaching* of Lutheranism regarding baptism: "Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not *born again through Baptism* and the Holy Spirit" (The Augsburg Confession, Art. 2).

"What gifts or benefits does Baptism bestow? It works *forgiveness of sins*, delivers from death and the devil, and *gives everlasting salvation* to all who believe" (Luther's Small Catechism).

"Therefore... the power, the effect, the benefit, the fruit and the purpose of Baptism is to *save*" (Luther's Large Catechism).

"It is taught among us that Baptism is *necessary* and that grace is offered through it. Children, too, should be baptized, for in Baptism they are committed to God and become *acceptable* to Him" (The Augsburg Confession, Art. 9).

The question that has to be answered is this: *Is* baptism necessary for salvation, as Lutheranism claims?

If, indeed, men are "born again through Baptism", then it *is* necessary for salvation; for, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). If, indeed, baptism saves – "gives everlasting salvation to all who believe" – then of course it is necessary for salvation.

Let us compare the Lutheran doctrine of baptism with Holy Scripture. There are certain passages of Scripture which Lutherans use to support their doctrine of baptism. But do these, in fact, teach what Lutheranism claims they teach?

One of the favourite "proof-texts" is John 3:5: "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Lutheran doctrine is that "water" in this verse refers to baptism. But this is not so!

Firstly, according to Scripture, the new birth, or "regeneration", is the work of *God alone*. Man is *passive* in regeneration. He contributes nothing to it. Just as no man gives birth to himself physically, so no man can give birth to himself spiritually. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: *which were born*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of *God*" (John 1:12,13).

Now if (as Lutheranism teaches) one is "born again through Baptism", then the new birth *is* of the will of *man*: for baptism is something performed by men: it is a *work*.

But John 1:13 emphatically declares that the new birth is NOT "of the will of man, but of God."

Secondly, we must compare Scripture with Scripture, to understand the meaning of "water" in John 3:5. We find that the *only instrument* the Holy Spirit uses in regeneration is the *Word of God*: Ephesians 5:25,26 says that Christ gave himself for the Church (his chosen people), "that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word"; 1 Peter 1:23 says explicitly, "Being born again... by the word of God"; and James 1:18 says, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth".

We also find that, at times in Scripture, the Holy Spirit himself is compared with water: John 7:38,39 says, "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit...)"

See also Isaiah 44:3,4, and Ezekiel 36:25-27.

When, therefore, we compare Scripture with Scripture, we find that when Jesus said one must “be born of water and of the Spirit”, he meant the Word and the Spirit, or simply the Spirit working like water. He did NOT mean one must be born again by baptism!

Another verse used by the Lutheran institution is Titus 3:5: “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.” But does this “washing” refer to baptism? No, it does not.

Let Scripture interpret itself. John 3:5 speaks of “water and the Spirit”; *this* verse does as well. The “washing of regeneration” refers to the Holy Spirit regenerating the soul, the instrument he uses being the Word of God. Baptism is NOT this “washing.”

Another verse used to support the Lutheran doctrine of baptism is 1 Peter 3:21: “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ”.

This verse, however, does not teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. Consider these facts: a) Baptism is specifically called a “figure” here. It is *figurative*; it symbolises something. b) It is specifically said that baptism does NOT put away the filth of the flesh, but is merely the answer of a good conscience toward God.

Baptism, according to God’s Word, *symbolises* the death to the old life, and resurrection to new life, of one who has *already been* saved by the Lord (Romans 6:3-6). In other words, one must *first* be saved, being washed from one’s sins in Christ’s blood (Revelation 1:5), and *then* baptized. When one is saved, one is “baptized into Jesus Christ” (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27) – this is *spiritual* baptism. And then the new convert is to be baptized in water, to *symbolise* his spiritual baptism. It is Christ’s *blood* that washes away sin, not water. In Scripture, baptism always *follows* salvation; it does not save (Acts 2:38; 8:12,36-38).

Yet another verse Lutherans use is Mark 16:16: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

Once again, however, a verse of God’s Word has been incorrectly interpreted by Lutheran teachers. The verse does NOT teach that without baptism one cannot be saved. For if this was so, then *not* to be baptized would result in eternal *damnation*. And yet, as this verse says, it is “he that believeth not” that “shall be damned”. It does not say, “He that believeth not, and is baptized not, shall be damned”! And so the second part of the verse clarifies the first: the unbeliever shall be damned, the believer shall be saved. And this is in harmony with the rest of Scripture (e.g. Ephesians 2:8,9; Acts 20:21; Acts 16:31).

The reason for the words, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved”, is simply to show that baptism is to follow saving faith; as indeed it did in the New Testament. The *evidence* of true saving faith is that the believer obeys the Lord’s commandments (John 14:15); and this is one of them. The rest of the New Testament teaches that salvation is by grace through faith alone; and individual Scriptures must be interpreted in the light of all of Scripture. When this is done, Mark 16:16 is found to be in harmony with the rest of the Bible. Baptism is a *work*, performed by *man*. It is an ordinance of the Lord, to be kept by those who have *already been* regenerated, and have repented of their sins, and believed on Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation.

The plain fact is that Lutherans have faith in external rites (baptism, confirmation, etc.), and not in Christ alone. Even Martin Luther himself had faith in his baptism: he declared that, when (according to him) the devil assailed him, he would answer, “I am baptized.”<sup>1</sup> He looked to his *baptism* as that which had made him acceptable to God; and thus he looked to a *work*, and not to God’s grace. And yet, although the Bible makes it clear that baptism is a work, and therefore cannot save, or contribute to salvation, Luther believed that baptism was NOT a work. This is what he wrote: “This man (the “old man”, the old nature) must be put off... This is not done by... any laws or works, but by a *new birth*, and by the renewing of the inward man; which is done in *baptism*, as Paul saith: ‘All ye that are baptized, have put on Christ’... they which are baptized, are *regenerated* and *renewed* by the Holy Ghost...”<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, baptism *is* a work: it is performed by man. Secondly, baptism is NOT the new birth, as has been shown. Thirdly, the passage he refers to (Galatians 3:27) has to do with *spiritual* baptism (as was

pointed out previously): it is that spiritual baptism into Christ which occurs when one is saved, and is wrought by the Holy Spirit. This spiritual baptism is *symbolised* by baptism in water, which is to follow it – but the two are not the same.

And thus Luther erred greatly and tragically in his understanding of the new birth; and his followers have done so as well, to the awful detriment of their eternal souls. Like Luther himself, their faith is in their baptism, and not truly in Christ. They have believed a false “gospel.”

Two further points must be noted.

Even Luther had to accept that *faith* is necessary in order to receive baptism properly;<sup>3</sup> and yet this created two insurmountable problems. First, if faith must accompany baptism, and yet *regeneration* is by baptism (as he taught), then faith is necessary for regeneration. But according to God’s Word, all men are in a spiritually dead state by nature, and no man can exercise faith in the Lord until he is *first given* a new heart in regeneration (Ephesians 2:1,4,5; Ezekiel 36:26,27; John 6:44).

Faith is a *gift* of God, given to the regenerated soul (Ephesians 2:8). And thus saving faith *follows* regeneration; it is not necessary *for* regeneration, which it would be if regeneration is by baptism, as Lutheranism claims; since even Luther accepted that faith must accompany baptism. In Lutheranism, faith must exist before regeneration (baptism, according to Lutheran doctrine); but Scripture declares that regeneration comes first (and it is not by baptism, but a spiritual act of God alone), *then* faith as God’s gift. The biblical doctrines of regeneration and saving faith are terribly distorted in Lutheranism.

Secondly, if faith is necessary in order to receive baptism properly, then most Lutherans were *never* properly baptized (and thus are not Christians according to Lutheranism!), because most Lutherans were baptized as *infants* – and an infant cannot declare that he has faith in Christ! This is why, in the New Testament, baptism was *never once* administered to infants. Luther attempted to overcome this massive problem to his theology by teaching that faith is implicit in babies, comparable to the faith of a sleeping man; then later on, he taught that the faith of the infant’s *sponsor godparent* is sufficient.<sup>4</sup> But neither teaching is found anywhere in the Bible!

Doctrinal confusion abounds in Lutheranism. Man’s work is confused with God’s grace; baptism is confused with regeneration; etc. The tragic result is that Lutheran people are ignorant of the Gospel of the grace of God. A true Christian is a person who, having forsaken all attempts to *earn* his salvation by his own good works, has cast himself by faith upon Jesus Christ for his eternal salvation (Matthew 11:28). A true Christian is one who has come to Jesus Christ for salvation, because God the Father has *drawn* him (John 6:37,44,45). A true Christian is NOT one who trusts in his baptism, but one to whom God, by his infinite grace, has granted repentance unto life (Acts 11:18), and the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8), to believe savingly on Jesus Christ.

Dear Lutheran, you have been deceived by a false gospel: a gospel of works, of external ritual; a man-made “way of salvation.” It will do you no good, when you stand before the great God and Judge of all, to plead, “I am baptized.” He who pleads his baptism, or his confirmation, will find himself rejected, and cast into hell (Matthew 22:13).

Here, then, is the Gospel of the grace of God:

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the world to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21): those given to him by God the Father in eternity (John 17:2; Ephesians 1:4-6). He who was *God*, became man (1 Timothy 3:16; Philippians 2:6-8); being conceived in the womb of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, perfectly free from all stain of sin, most holy, harmless, and undefiled (Luke 1:31-35; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26). This spotless “Lamb of God” offered himself on the cross, “the just for the unjust”; he gave his life “a ransom for many” (John 1:29; 1 Peter 3:18; Matthew 20:28). He died in the place of those he came to save. He suffered for *their* sins. And he rose from the dead, victorious, and ascended to heaven once more: and thus was “declared to be the Son of God with power” (Romans 1:4). God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36); and there is salvation *ONLY* in him (Acts 4:12).

ALL men are sinners; and the wages of sin is death (Romans 3:10,23; 6:23). It matters not that you were baptized, or confirmed, or that you are a member in good standing of the Lutheran institution (or of any other, for that matter) – unless you repent, you shall die in your sins, and sink into hell.

Therefore I urge you to *repent* of your sins to God, and cast yourself by faith upon Jesus Christ for salvation (Acts 20:21); forsaking all your own attempts at *earning* your salvation by your works, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Receive him by faith. He has said, “I am the bread of life: he that *cometh* to me shall never hunger; and he that *believeth* on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Come, then – do not delay! He who comes, mourning over his sins, *will* be received. Forsake false religion, and cling to Christ alone.

**Shaun Willcock**

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*If you have repented of your sins and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, or if you would like to know more about Him, His Gospel, and the true Christian life, please contact us.*

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#### **ENDNOTES:**

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1. *Here I Stand*, by Roland Bainton, pg. 367. Lion Publishing, 1978.
2. *A Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, by Martin Luther. Robert Carter Publishers, N.Y., 1848.
3. *Here I Stand*, pg. 142.
4. *Here I Stand*, pg. 142.