

In What Sense is Baptism “Necessary?”

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By Paul Meitner

In the years that I have worked in Christian retail, I am always surprised at the gap between doctrinal statements by various church bodies and their buying habits. In other words, I am always surprised at what a church body boldly proclaims and how they practice their belief. For example, a Pentecostal group buys the WELS *Training Christians for Ministry* series for use in their church. A local Presbyterian USA church buys *Christ-light* for their Sunday School curriculum. A Baptist minister assures me that he is in full agreement with the *People’s Bible Teaching* series volume on Baptism.

In the area of Baptism especially, I am always surprised. In school I learned that Reformed churches despise Baptism as a means of grace, and Roman Catholics look upon it as a moment of infused grace that gets the ball rolling for the process of justification. If these perceptions were true, as I believed, then we should get relatively few Roman Catholics in a Lutheran baptismal gift section and absolutely no Reformed Christians. However, the opposite was true. Many Reformed Christians and Roman Catholics express their appreciation of the sacrament by their many purchases of baptismal gifts in the store. In fact, it is a rare occasion to find someone who will say that Baptism is not a necessary part of the Christian’s life.

Why is this? Why do members of these branches of Christendom take Baptism so seriously when, at least on paper, only Conservative Lutherans still understand the nature and value of the Sacrament? In what sense do the various visible branches of the Holy Christian Church value the meaning and practice of Baptism? In what way do they see Baptism as “necessary?”

It is this last question that seems to be at the heart and core of the issue: How do various Christians understand and use the word “necessary” in connection to the sacrament of Baptism? In order to answer this question, it is important to establish how Roman Catholicism and Reformed Christianity view the sacrament of Baptism, use the word “necessary” in connection to it, and the implications of each theology on the Biblical teaching. Next, these views will be contrasted with the one set forth by conservative Lutheran theology. Finally, it will be shown that a proper understanding of the word “necessary” is needed to preserve the meaning of Baptism in the minds and hearts of Christians.¹

I. Roman Catholic view of the term “necessary” in connection with the doctrine of Baptism

One night, while discussing religion with some non-Lutheran friends, I happened to find myself discussing Baptism with a lapsed Lutheran named Jeremy and a nominal Roman Catholic named Pete. During the discussion, I strongly emphasized to Jeremy that Baptism was an integral part of God’s plan of salvation. At this, Pete strongly agreed with me. Pete went on to say that Baptism is necessary. To this, I agreed. Then, as an aside, Pete said to me, “Baptism wipes out original sin, right?”

¹It should be noted that the sources used to answer and support the theses of this paper are given from so-called mainline denominations. There are literally dozens of interpretations of the word “necessary” in regard to the doctrine of Baptism.

While Pete had not been in a Catholic classroom since his days at Hill-Murray Catholic High School in St. Paul, Minnesota, the teachings of his Jesuit professors were still indelibly marked on his mind. What Pete articulated was a perfect summation of what Roman Catholicism teaches about Baptism and why they see it as necessary.

First, it must be pointed out that Baptism is seen as a means of grace² by the Roman Catholic Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church writes the following as an introduction to the sacrament of Baptism,

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 342)

In contrast to the Reformed (as will be shown later), Roman Catholicism holds Baptism as a valid means of grace. In this, Lutherans and Catholics agree. However, the concord on this doctrine soon comes to an end upon closer examination of the word “necessary.”

One will not have to look long and hard to find the word “necessary” used in connection with the sacrament of Baptism. The *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* read, “If anyone says that Baptism is free (optional), that is, not necessary unto salvation; Let him be anathema.”(Waterworth 56) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* writes, “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation.”(Catechism of the Catholic Church 352) Vatican II similarly uses the word “necessary” in regards to Baptism, “[Christ] himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism.”(Flannery 365)

How does Rome understand this usage? I must admit, when I first read through the Catholic Catechism, I was initially pleased to find words and phrases that I thought sounded very Lutheran. However, upon deeper examination, it was shown that the use of the word “necessary” had a connotation that reflected a mistaken biblical understanding and, therefore, a mistaken theology in regards to Baptism.

The term “necessary” to a Roman Catholic means the following: without the sacrament of Baptism one cannot enter into the church³ and receive the grace and benefits that it bestows upon its members. In other words, without Baptism, there is no place you can go other than hell or limbo. The Reverend Francis Spirago explains “necessary” this way,

Every newborn infant has the stain of original sin attaching to him, and every adult has, in addition, actual sin...And since Baptism is of such urgent necessity for salvation, it follows that infants dying unbaptized cannot attain eternal felicity. For every child coming into the world has the taint of original sin, and has

²There is a difference in definition between Lutherans and Catholics on what is meant by “grace.” Lutherans understand “grace” as God’s undeserved love for sinners that is shown in the vicarious atonement of Christ Jesus. To a Roman Catholic, grace is understood as the work of God that gets you working toward salvation.

³Rome understands church as referring to the visible Roman Catholic Church.

*not the sanctifying grace, without which no man can enter heaven.
(Spirago 378-379)*

The term “necessary” has an absolute sense in Roman Catholic theology. In the mind of the Roman Catholic things unfold in this manner: #1.) All individuals are born with original sin. #2.) This condition, or “taint” as some writers call it, prevents one from doing the right thing to make God happy. These things, coincidentally, can only be done in and connected to the Roman Catholic Church. #3.) Baptism gets rid of original sin, thus allowing the person access into the church and to receive sanctifying grace. #4.) Therefore, Baptism is necessary. Again, the Rev. Spirago illustrates the above syllogism:

Everyone knows that in the natural order, water cleanses the body, puts out fire, and recalls to consciousness one who has fainted; that it invigorates the human frame and gives fertility to the soil. The water of Baptism does the same in the spiritual order. Every newborn infant has the stain of original sin attaching to him, and every adult has, in addition, that of actual sin. These sins vanish at the laver of regeneration as a spark disappears if it falls into the ocean...And since the person baptized receives the Holy Ghost, and with him sanctifying grace, a new life for him begins, the life in God. Thus Baptism is the birth of the soul, whereas the other sacraments are its food or its medicine...When the water is poured on the exterior, an interior change takes place; the individual becomes a new creature - from sinful he becomes just. (Spirago 578)

Baptism, therefore, is absolutely necessary. Without it one can never start “becoming” just. The necessity of Baptism fits right in line with Rome’s view that justification is a process. Baptism has been called by a number of writers the sacrament of initiation. If one wants to apply himself to grace fully, Baptism is not optional, it is absolutely necessary. Baptism, in essence, obliterates original sin. In other words, original sin no longer remains to hinder man.

The picture of Noah’s Ark is used time and time again by Roman Catholic writers. However, the picture is askew. To Rome, Baptism is the door that gets you into the real Ark, the Church. Baptism is the entrance into the vessel (the Roman Church) which saves. Without Baptism, sinful man can only look wistfully at the ship in harbor. Baptism gets him on the ship that saves.

One of the clearest examples of this understanding of the “necessity” of Baptism, this writer saw while touring Norway. At one of the famous stave churches, the tour guide invited us all to go outside, lie flat on the ground, and peer under the church. When we did so, we saw twenty or so small wooden boxes. The tour guide informed us that these were coffins of unbaptized infants. The thought among the laity of that part of Norway during the Middle Ages was, “If we can’t get the spiritual ticket on board the ship of salvation, maybe we can physically sneak them on board.”

What is the basis for this doctrine? Biblically speaking, this doctrine appears to be based largely on John 3:5. “Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God

unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” All official publications of the Roman Catholic Church list this as the foundation for their understanding of Baptism as an absolute necessity. The *Decrees and Canons of the Council of Trent* say, “If anyone says that true and natural water is not of necessity for baptism, and on that account, wrests, to some sort of metaphor, those words of our Lord Jesus Christ; *Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost*; let him be anathema.”(Waterworth 56) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation in John 3:5.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 352) Vatican II reaffirms this,

[Christ] himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (CF Mk 16:16), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door. (Flannery 366)

While space does not allow for a thorough discussion of the history of Roman Catholic baptismal doctrine and practice, it must also be noted that much of the doctrine of the absolute necessity of Baptism is based upon the writings of the church fathers and the decrees of the councils. Spirago mentions that much of the interpretation of the words of Scripture comes from the interpretations of the church fathers, especially St. Basil and St. Augustine. Even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lists in its footnotes the Council of Florence, St. Gregory, Justin Martyr, and others as sources of authority for the church’s interpretation of the term “necessary.”

The implications of this interpretation are indeed grave. First, this interpretation of the word “necessary” in regard to Baptism leads one to a superstitious view of the sacrament as some sort of magical act that gets us onto the boat to heaven. In that boat one can begin his work toward heaven. Once you have Baptism, it is tough to go to hell, but there is a lot of work left to merit heaven. Somehow, just by having the act performed upon us, we have a ticket that magically guarantees us passage on the boat to heaven. Werner Franzmann comments, “He [Esau] was like the son of a godly pastor who had lived for 50 years like an ungodly worldling, but who could stand before his father’s old church and recall, with tears in his eyes, ‘My dad baptized me...in that church’” (Franzmann 150).

A second implication of this understanding is that salvation is a process. The emphasis on Baptism as a “door” leads one to a work righteous attitude. Baptism becomes God’s nudge in the right direction. In Baptism, God sets us on the right path and, if we follow it, we will find ourselves in heaven one day.

Finally, this understanding of “necessary” leads one to see his/her salvation ultimately attached to membership in a visible church. Baptism is a “door,” but make sure that you enter through the right door. Vatican II underlines this concept,

Thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence, they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or remain in it. (Flannery 366)

While Roman Catholics try very hard to avoid the error of Donatism, such statements imply that the prospective believer needs to be on the right boat. Pete, therefore, understood Baptism as an absolute necessity. For him, as a member of the Roman Catholic Church, Baptism completely removes original sin. It gets him on board the real vessel of salvation, the church. For a Roman Catholic, Baptism is absolutely necessary.⁴

II. Reformed view of the term “necessary” in regard to the doctrine of Baptism.

One Saturday, I was helping a woman look for a gift for her niece. She said to me, “My niece is being dedicated this Saturday, I’m looking for a good gift.” I suggested to her that she look in our baptismal gift section. I found an appropriate gift for her and said, “This is an excellent gift for a Baptism.” To this she replied in a polite, polemic manner, “We don’t have Baptism. We have dedication.” While I was tempted to press the issue with the response, “What’s the point then?”, level thinking and tact prevailed.

While I did not find out which church body she belonged, her thinking was obviously influenced by Reformed theology. Yet, her insistence at the importance of this event in the life of the child led me to ask myself the question, “In what sense does Reformed Christianity understand the term ‘necessary’ in connection to the doctrine of Baptism?”

Before we can answer this question, it is important that we distinguish between the three main theological lines in Reformed Christianity: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Pentecostalism.⁵ While all primarily understand the term “necessary” in the same light, how each arrive at this definition is quite different. Each has a major preoccupation (or misunderstanding) that taints not only their understanding of the term ‘necessary’ but also the entire topic of soteriology. For the Calvinist, that preoccupation is the sovereignty of God. For the Arminian, it is the will of man. For the Pentecostal, it is the direct working of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of people without any external means. It is these three preoccupations that bring each branch to their understanding of the term ‘necessary’ in connection to Baptism. What is surprising is that all three branches understand the term ‘necessary’ in the same way.

What is the meaning of ‘necessary’ to a Reformed Christian? Reformed dogmatician Millard Erickson clearly states,

[Baptism] is an initiatory rite - we are baptized into the name of Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). Since it was ordained by him, it is properly understood as an ordinance rather than a sacrament. It does not produce any spiritual change in the one baptized. We continue to practice baptism simply because Christ commanded it and because it serves as a form of proclamation of our salvation.

⁴There is a slight loophole in the Roman Catholic understanding of Baptism as an absolute necessity for salvation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also talks about a Baptism of Blood and a Baptism of Desire. Since this idea of Baptism (the complete obliteration all sin) had appeared rather early in the church, people postponed Baptism until right before they died. Some of these pious Christians were, however, martyred before they could be baptized. Roman Catholic dogma has, accordingly, worked an unnecessary loophole in their dogma for such people.

⁵Pentecostalism is really an offshoot of Arminianism.

(Erickson 360)

The *Handbook of Evangelical Theology* agrees with Erickson's understanding of 'necessary.' Robert Lightner of Dallas Theological Seminary (Baptist) concurs,

An ordinance refers to an outward rite appointed by Christ to be ministered by the church as a visible sign of the saving truth of the gospel...Believer's baptism is a public testimony of one's union with Christ. The act symbolizes a believer's identification with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. The act is a solemn reminder to the individual and to all who observe that there is no turning back. (Lightner 234)

Baptism, therefore, is necessary only in that it was commanded by Christ. The ordinance (a more common term than "sacrament" in Reformed theology) of Baptism is therefore something that must be kept and practiced. In contrast to Lutheran and Catholic theology, which views Baptism as a means of grace, the Reformed simply view Baptism as a command by Christ to do something that represents saving grace. Notable German theologian Hermann Sasse aptly describes the distinction between Lutheran, Catholic and Reformed definition of 'necessary' when he says,

*Baptism is indeed instituted by Christ - Calvin accepts the institution of Baptism by Christ in agreement with Luther and with the whole ecclesiastical tradition of the Eastern and Western church - and it must be done in the church as an ordinance of Christ, but Baptism is not necessary for salvation. One can...speak only of a necessity of command [*necessitas praecepti*], not a necessity of means [*necessitas medii*]. (Sasse 42)*

How do the Reformed come to this conclusion? As stated before, each strain of Reformed Christianity (Calvinistic, Arminian, and Pentecostal) comes to this conclusion from a misunderstanding of soteriology. For a strict Calvinist, salvation comes by divine decree. In other words, Baptism cannot change what God has already ultimately decreed. For the Arminian, salvation hinges on you making a decision to accept Christ. It is, therefore, impossible for infants to make this cognitive decision or for water to work such a decision in an adult.⁶ For the Pentecostal, salvation hinges upon the direct working of the Holy Spirit. Water baptism, therefore, is merely a symbol of what the Holy Spirit does directly.

Each branch of Reformed Christianity, however, all do share a common theological motif. They all hold fast to the belief that conversion and forgiveness of sins can only be gained through direct spiritual effect. For the Calvinist, it is a divine decree. For the Arminian, it is a cerebral understanding and an emotional decision to accept Christ. For the Pentecostal, it is direct influence of the Holy Spirit. They all, however, despise the idea that water (or bread and wine for that matter) can deliver a spiritual effect. Sasse makes the following observation,

⁶Most Reformed writings distinguish between "water baptism" and "Spirit baptism." The former is the act of baptism that is in keeping with the command Christ. The latter refers to the moment when the Holy Spirit enters the person at the moment of their conversion. Many also view Spirit baptism as a later, special outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

At the bottom of all this lies the antipathy...against the idea that an external, physical action can produce spiritual effects, such as the forgiveness of sins. (Sasse 40)

What is the Biblical basis for such an understanding of ‘necessary?’ As the Roman Catholic theologian takes the Noah’s Ark analogy too far, the Reformed theologian takes the comparison between Baptism and Old Testament circumcision too far. Millard Erickson uses circumcision to show that Baptism is only a sign or seal of a covenant with God. He writes,

The situation of believers both in the New Testament and today is to be understood in terms of the covenant made with Abraham. A key step in the argument now occurs: As circumcision was the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament, baptism is the sign in the New Testament. Baptism has been substituted for circumcision. (Erickson 360)

According to Erickson’s argument, Baptism is just a new sign. He is not alone in his assessment. William Shedd agrees whole-heartedly with his statement, “Baptism is Christian circumcision.” (Shedd 574) To them, the parallel is clear. (While space is not permitted here to discuss their arguments in full, it is safe to say that both have some clear exegetical and theological misinterpretations of both circumcision and Baptism.)

What are the implications of such an understanding of the term “necessary?” First, Baptism merely becomes a stage play which acts out what Jesus did for us rather than a means by which grace is conferred upon us. It simply becomes a command, indistinguishable from any other of Christ’s imperatives in the Gospels. In short, Baptism becomes a law, rather than Gospel.

Secondly, it robs Christians of the assurance that Baptism brings with it. Reformed churches flatly deny that there is any spiritual effect in Baptism (Erickson 351). It is always difficult to state with certainty the fate of the unbaptized stillborn. How much more horrendous must it be for any parent whose child dies before the age of discretion!

Finally, it puts the assurance of salvation entirely on the person rather than on the objective means of grace. The moment of conversion, the struggle with God in prayer, your sanctified life, your Spirit-baptism - these are the things that assure you of your salvation. It is utterly despised to look to water for that kind of assurance.

III. The contrasting Lutheran understanding and usage of the term “necessary” in connection to the doctrine of Baptism.

It was not until my junior year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary that I wrestled with the question, “In what sense is Baptism ‘necessary?’” It was during our study of Article IX of the Augsburg Confession that Professor Panning, in his soft-spoken yet thought-provoking manner posed this question to us. I must admit, I had really never thought much about the question. I simply assumed that Baptism was necessary. It became evident in the discussion that followed that a more concise definition of the word was needed in order to avoid the errors of both Rome

and Geneva.

The term ‘necessary’ is used a number of times in the Lutheran Confessions. It appears first in Article IX of the Augsburg confession. “Of Baptism they teach that it is **necessary** to salvation and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God” (Tjernagel 124). Likewise, the Apology repeats the usage of the term. “The Ninth Article has been approved, in which we confess that Baptism is **necessary** to salvation” (Tjernagel 124).

The confessors had no problem using the term “necessary” to describe salvation. The question remains, though, “in what sense do they understand ‘necessary’?” Is it in the sense of Rome, in that it gets rid of original sin and buys you a ticket on board the real vessel of salvation, the Church? Or is it in the sense of the Reformed, that we should do this as an ordinance given by Christ, an outward sign of Christ real work?

The answer is neither. The answer is both. The Lutheran Church defines the term “necessary” according to the clear Biblical doctrine of Scripture. This means that the Lutherans do define “necessary” the same as the Roman Catholic and the Reformed in so far as each speaks in line with Scripture. However, it is also plain to see that the definition of “necessary” according to Biblical, Lutheran writers goes far beyond what any Catholic or Reformed Christian can stomach.

Does the Lutheran Church view Baptism as a means of grace? Of course! This is in keeping with the clear Scriptural teaching (John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Romans 6:3-4). Martin Luther repeats this Biblical doctrine in his Small Catechism,

What does Baptism give or profit? - Answer: It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. (Tjernagel 123)

In so far as Baptism is a means of grace, we would agree with the Roman Catholic. Where we depart, and hence change our meaning of the term “necessary,” comes in the effects and meaning of Baptism.

As we recall from earlier in this paper, Rome teaches that Baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation. Roman Catholic theology bases this interpretation almost entirely on John 3:5, “*No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*” To the Roman Catholic theologian, there can be no clearer mandate for understanding Baptism is an absolute necessity. A closer look at the passage and the immediate context, however, reveals that this passage does not teach that Baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation.

Francis Pieper gives a very sound, Lutheran and Biblical answer to this assertion by Rome,

Those who teach the absolute need of Baptism quote John 3:5 as proof...But the scope of this passage is reproof of the Pharisees and scribes, who rejected God’s counsel of salvation appointed for their day....We too would have to tell a despiser of Christ’s Baptism: “Except a man be baptized, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Luther and Lutheran theologians appropriate Augustine’s word: “Contemptus sacramenti damnat, non privatio.” They teach that while faith in the remissions of sins purchased by Christ, or regeneration, is absolutely necessary, Baptism is not absolutely necessary, since this faith, or

regeneration, can be brought about also by the Word of the Gospel alone. (Pieper III 281)

Lutherans reject the notion of absolute necessity because the Bible only ascribes absolute necessity to the preaching of the Gospel. Indeed, Luther himself underscores this when he writes, “*It is not water indeed that does them, but the word of God, which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts the Word of God in the water.*” (Tjernagel 123) Baptism is necessary in so far as it is the Word of God that creates saving faith in our hearts and teaches us to daily drown out our sin in repentance.

Baptism does not obliterate original sin. Rather, it pushes it out of the way so a new self can be created by water and the Word (Romans 7:7-25). Baptism is necessary in so far as it is a life long reminder of the daily contrition and repentance over sin. Baptism is not a one time magical act (*ex opere operatum*) whereby we’re automatically saved for the rest of our lives. It is true that Baptism does truly save and forgive sins, but Baptism is also something that we live in and return to every day of our life. Scripture reminds us that in Baptism we are united in the life and death of Christ through faith (Romans 6:3-4). President Gaylin Schmeling of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary (ELS) writes,

A simple illustration may help clarify Paul’s point. Take an apple and put it in a jar. Now place the jar on the table. Where is the apple? It is in the jar and, therefore, on the table. Wherever the jar is, there the apple will be....In the same way, through Baptism we are united with Christ. We are in Christ, so whatever Christ has experienced is counted as happening to us. Having been united with Christ, we have died with him and rose again. (Schmeling 98)

Lutherans also do find agreement with the Reformed that Baptism is necessary in keeping with the command of Jesus. In the Large Catechism, Luther writes, “In these words (Mark 16:19, Matthew 28:19) you must note, in the first place, that here stand God’s commandment and institution...”(Tjernagel125). Pieper also concurs, “Baptism is not a matter of choice (an adiaphron), but a divine ordinance” (Pieper III 280).

Lutherans, however, cannot limit the definition of “necessary” as a simple ordinance because Scripture does not define Baptism as necessary only in regard to a mere ordinance.

One can hardly read the treatment of Baptism in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions and regard Baptism as only necessary because Jesus commanded it. Not only does Scripture command that we practice Baptism, but in almost every instance, a promise of salvation is attached to it. Mark 16:16 says, “He that believe and is baptized *will be saved.*” 1st Peter 3:21 states, “and this water symbolizes baptism that *now saves you also...*” Luther, in his Large Catechism, speaks directly against those who would rob Baptism of its power and reduce it to a mere ordinance when he writes

For it is of the greatest importance that we esteem Baptism excellent, glorious, and exalted for which we contend and fight chiefly, because the world is now so full of sects clamoring that

Baptism is an external thing, and that external things are of no benefit. But let it be ever so much an external thing, here stands God's Word and command which institute, establish, and confirm Baptism. (Tjernagel 125)

Baptism is not an ordinance we do because we love Jesus. It is a command that has the promises of God attached to it. Baptism is not a mere sign of the Gospel. It is the Gospel itself. For a Lutheran, Baptism is necessary because it has the Gospel attached to it. Therefore, a fight for the power and necessity of Baptism is, in truth, a fight for the necessity and power of the Gospel. Hermann Sasse notes this truth in Lutheran theology when he comments,

Where Baptism is rightly taught, there the Gospel is rightly proclaimed, for the whole Gospel is contained in this sacrament: Christ's death and resurrection, our dying and rising with him in repentance and faith, the bestowal already now of future heavenly treasures, eternal righteousness, innocence and blessedness....This is one of the Reformer's profoundest theological perceptions. Because this sacrament is the Gospel, the struggle over the sacrament was at the same time the struggle for the Gospel, and vice versa. That alone can explain Luther's stubbornness and obstinacy, his inflexible seriousness on just this question. (Sasse 23)

Baptism, then, according to Lutheran theology, is necessary for three reasons. First, it is necessary in the sense that we dare not reject Baptism as a means of grace, as did the Pharisees of Jesus day and Reformed Christianity of our own day. It is a means of grace that offers us all the blessings of the Gospel. The second reason why it is necessary is because it contains the forgiveness of sins, not in a magical, *ex opere operatum* manner, but in a manner that drowns out our old man, creates a new man, and leads us to cling to the cross and merits of Christ. The final reason it is necessary is because our Lord has commanded us to do it, not in the sense of a mere ordinance, but connected to the power of the Gospel. This is the proper, Biblical, and Lutheran understanding of the term “necessary” in connection with Baptism. Only with this understanding do we avoid the errors of Roman Catholic and Reformed theology.

IV. Why is a proper understanding of the term “necessary” so important?

As this paper has tried to show, a misunderstanding of the term necessary can have dire consequences. If one understands “necessary” according to the Roman Catholic definition, one will turn the Gospel and power of the Word into a magical ticket on the boat to heaven. If one errs on the side of Reformed theology, then the comfort given in Baptism is taken away. It turns Baptism into a law rather than the Gospel.

Only by keeping to that narrow Biblical, Lutheran road does one find the true comfort and peace that God bestows on his children in Baptism. Lutheran Theology does not try to define “necessary” according to the history of the Church's baptismal practice, the writings of the church fathers, or reason. They simply let Scripture speak for itself and, with a childlike faith, grab hold

of it. This is not to say that Lutheran theology is simplistic and shallow. Rather it plumbs the depths of Scripture, rather than reason and pious opinion, for the basis of its definition of “necessary.” Let us look to Luther’s great baptismal hymn for elucidation and comfort in our defense of the term “necessary” in regard to the doctrine of Baptism,

*All that the mortal eye beholds
is water as we pour it.
Before the eye of faith unfolds
the power of Jesus’ merit.
For here it sees the crimson flood
to all our ills brings healing;
The wonders of his precious blood
the love of God revealing
assuring his own pardon. (LW 223)*

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