

# Holy Baptism

A sacrament of Life



By  
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# ***H O L Y B A P T I S M***

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In this little book about Baptism we follow the teaching given by Doctor Martin Luther in his Large Catechism. A few of his points have been omitted, a few have been somewhat extended. A few points have also been added from other documents of the Lutheran confession. The teaching is, however, rendered in such a way as to be easily understood by readers of today.

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## **1. Holy Baptism was instituted by Christ**

It is necessary for every Christian to know what Baptism means. This knowledge can start with the words spoken by Jesus Christ himself, when he instituted Holy Baptism: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:18-20).

In the gospels we read about baptisms performed even before this institution: "Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized" (Jn 3:22). But to this it is also added, that "Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples" (Jn 4:2). Up to that time baptism was voluntary. It means that anybody, who wanted to be baptized, could ask for the baptism. Baptism was not yet ordered as the way of salvation for all people. But after his resurrection from the dead, when Jesus was about to leave his disciples and ascend to heaven, he made the institution of Baptism. Even before that he had told them that Baptism would be the only way of entering the Kingdom of God: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5).

## Christ's order

From all this we learn that Baptism was really ordered and instituted by God through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Therefore it is impossible to think that it was invented by man. Baptism belongs to our Christian faith as other things do. The Ten Commandments, the Apostolic Creed and the Lord's Prayer were not invented by human brains. They were revealed and given by God himself. So is Baptism. It was not a human idea. Instead it was commanded by God himself that we should be baptized or fail to obtain salvation. Since Baptism was ordered and instituted by God it is a great and glorious thing. When we become baptized, it is not a small thing that happens, like putting on another coat or dress. Of course the act of Baptism has an outward side. That outward side is the water and the use of water. But even so it is God's work. It was ordered in that way by God in his Word, and what God has ordered cannot be useless. Whatever God has given and ordered must be great and good, even if to us it would seem to be plain and simple like a piece of straw.

## Christ's promise

Holy Baptism rests on God's commandment. But it also rests on a promise: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20). Because of that promise Baptism is a thing more beautiful and precious than anything else that has been commanded by God. In Baptism there is salvation, consolation and grace. Heaven and earth cannot grasp the greatness of God's word and promise which is given in Baptism. But if we cannot grasp it, we still have to believe it. If we do not understand the greatness of this treasure, it is not the fault of the treasure. The fault then rests with ourselves, since we do not understand it or appreciate it.

## **2. Holy Baptism is a sacrament**

Strictly speaking we are not baptized by men, but by God himself. Even if we can see a human hand performing the baptism, the work in Baptism is God's work. But how is it done? Baptism has to be performed with water, and without water there is no baptism at all. But this does not mean to say that Baptism consists in the sprinkling of water or in submersion in water. First of all, then: water is needed for a Christian baptism. Secondly: Baptism is not a matter of water only. How could water accomplish such great things by itself? The powers at work are the word of God and the name of God. Because, wherever you find God's name, there salvation and life will be found also. Through the power of God's word and the power of God's name the water of Baptism becomes "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). That means that in it there is "a washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Tit 3:5). The meaning of these words is that the water of Baptism can cleanse us from our sins and re-generate (give birth to) a new being in us and create in that new being such new things that are the work of the Holy Spirit. All that is done by God's word and promise. But as an outward sign and element water is needed and has to be used.

## The water

From this we can also make a certain conclusion about the water itself.

The water used in Baptism is not different from other water, until it is used for this purpose. When it is used in the act of Baptism *it is sanctified so as to become a true divine water*. Therefore it is mockery of God to say: "How can a handful of water save the soul?" In Baptism there isn't a handful of ordinary water. But the water of Baptism would be such ordinary water, *if it were separated from the word of God*. Now it is not separated from the word. The water and the word of God are united to make one: *a sacrament*. When they are united in that way, how could we tear from Baptism that precious jewel, the word of God, the promise, which is connected with the water? But the word is not a word only or just an ordinary promise.

With God's word and promise we find his own name and authority connected. That is a treasure greater than heaven and earth.

## The water becomes different

Thus it is clear that Baptism is something different from ordinary water and from the ordinary use of water. It is not because the water used in Baptism is of a different strength or quality. Baptismal water may be taken from any well or stream, having clean water. That means that for baptism we can use such water that is commonly drawn for drinking, cooking and washing purposes. But this same water is different, when it is used in Baptism, because in Baptism something of a greater quality and strength is added to the water. At Baptism God imparts to the water his own glory, his own power and authority. This comes from his holy word, that means from his promises in Holy Scripture, promises spoken at the performance of a Christian Baptism. After that the water is not water only. It is a divine, heavenly, holy and blessed water. In it we find God's riches and power. When the word and promise of God are added to the natural element (the water), *the result is a sacrament: a holy, divine thing and work, by which we obtain invisible, heavenly gifts through outward means.*

## Invisible, heavenly gifts

Which are these invisible, heavenly gifts in Baptism? They are forgiveness of sins, Holy Spirit, and citizenship in the Kingdom of God. But why are we given all this?

How can a sinner, who is "dead through his trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1) be made a citizen of the Kingdom of God? The secret is that to the one, who becomes baptized, is transferred and given all that happened to Jesus Christ, when he died for us because of our sins. As he died and was buried and raised again from the dead, so we die in Baptism, and something new is raised, to live for ever with Christ: "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead ... God made alive together with him" (Col 2:12-13).

### Outward and visible things

When we look upon the sacrament of Holy Baptism, the same rule should apply, as when we look upon other holy things, commanded to us by God. When looking upon them we should not consider the outward things only, e.g. bread and wine in Holy Communion, or water in Baptism. We have to remember that the word of God is working inside and by means of the outward and visible things. To understand this better we can take our parents as an example. If we think of our parents as ordinary human beings only, such as have bodies, i.e. noses, eyes, ears, skin, hair, etc., such a description of them would apply to all human beings, not to parents only. Then we could say: "There is no difference between my parents

and other human beings. After all they could all be my parents, or I have no parents at all." But when we think of our parents in connection with God's commandment and promise: "Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you" (Ex 20:12), our parents will be different from all other people. This is not because they are extraordinary people in themselves. It all depends on God's commandment and promise concerning them. For the purpose of being parents they have become decorated with the glory of God and dressed with his majesty. There is an interior and spiritual connection between these ordinary people and God's word and promise.

### God's honour

Now the same applies to Baptism as a sacrament. God has given it his honour and dressed it with glory and majesty. How could we, then, disregard it because of the plain and simple appearance of the water? For this reason we have to be careful, in order not to separate the water from the word of God. If you remove the word of God from the water in Baptism, the water will become ordinary water. But *when the water and the word of God are kept together, it is a holy sacrament, a Christian Baptism.*

### **3. The purpose of Holy Baptism is to give us salvation**

When Jesus instituted Holy Baptism, why did he do so? This question may be answered with a few words from the gospel according to S:t Mark: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (16:16). That is the same as to say: The purpose of Baptism is to save us. When a person is baptized, it is not done in order to make him or her something great in this world. It is done in order to help that person to be saved. Yes, Baptism even *is* salvation. We are saved at the time of Baptism, and we will be saved for ever if we remain in the grace of Baptism. To remain in the grace of Baptism is to remain in the Kingdom of God. It also means to remain under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who was given in Baptism. It is the same as to continue being a child of God. This can be explained in other words also: It means to be delivered from all sins, from evil and death, and to live forever under the rulership of Christ in his eternal Kingdom.

#### **After the time of baptism**

Thus it will be clear that the importance of Baptism is not restricted to the day of baptism or the day of being united with the Christian Church. By its influence and work Baptism has to cover every day of the life of a Christian.

Because of being baptized he has to fight and strive every day in order to gain victory over devil and sin and death. A Christian has to ask for the forgiveness of his sins every day. But how can he do that, and why should he do that? Because in Baptism he has already been admitted to the grace of God and been taken up as a child of God. Therefore he is coming back to the Father's house, asking to be readmitted and forgiven: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Lk 15:21). That is to ask for forgiveness for Christ's sake, who has died for us and commanded us to become children of the Father's house by way of being baptized. To come back to God in that way also means that we ask for the fullness of Christ and for the Holy Spirit together with all his gifts.

## The future

To remain in the grace of Baptism we must try to understand it more and more. We also have to appreciate it as a great gift, and continue to make use of it. If we do that, it will continue to give us consolation and strength. When we are troubled by our sins and whatever seems to be wrong with us, Baptism will show us that there is still a road open to our Father's house. That means that we can say to ourselves: "In spite of all I know, that I am baptized. When that grace was shown to me, God also told me that he wants me to be saved in spite of all failures and shortcomings on my side" or, in other words: "I will

arise and go to my father" (Lk 15:18).

Salvation concerns both body and soul. Because of this fact, Baptism is performed in such a way as to deal with both: water is poured on the body, and the word of God is spoken to deal with the soul. Thus water and the word of God make one Baptism. In the same way body and soul are taken together to be promised salvation and to be taken into the Kingdom of God. Therefore, there is no jewel more precious to body and soul than Holy Baptism. Through this holy sacrament we can be completely holy and blessed. We cannot do that in any other way, e g. by trying to perform good works or by trying to make ourselves holy.

#### 4. The importance of faith in connection with Holy Baptism

When Baptism is a matter of grace, then that question will arise: What about faith? Isn't faith necessary after all? Isn't it necessary to believe in order to be saved? Of course faith is needed in some way, and even strongly needed, but faith is not at all the foundation on which our salvation rests. First of all, faith cannot exist all by itself. It does not come into existence from nowhere. Faith must be created by somebody, and it must have something to rest on and believe in. We cannot just believe, whether there be any ground for such belief or not. When we think and speak about *salvation in the Christian way*, there must be a true and firm ground for it. That foundation is God's work, what he has done, what he has promised, and what he has arranged and commanded for us. That foundation is one only: the life and work of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Further, Jesus ordered that we should be baptized. That is the way he has shown us, if we want to obtain salvation. And still more, he has ordered a certain way of performing that Baptism. He has ordered that *water* should be used, *together with the word of God*. We cannot play with this, e.g. by inventing other forms of "baptism". When Baptism is

performed with water and the word of God, we have to use the name of the Tre-une God, that means the name of God who is three-in-one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:18-20). Faith has to rest on this. It will believe what Jesus has commanded and promised to give. In that belief we can be sure that when being so baptized our sins are forgiven and we are born again, justified before God, taken into the Kingdom of God, and given the Holy Spirit.

### Where faith comes in

From this we find that our faith never comes first. First comes God's commandment and promise. Our faith will come next, believing in God's word and promise, and resting upon what he has done for us and given to us.

But when everything in Holy Baptism depends on God's word and work, why is faith necessary after all? In one way it is not needed. It is not needed at all, if we think of the work done and of the strength and validity of the promises given. All those things depend on God, and on him only. In those matters our faith can do nothing, and it has nothing to add. To understand this better we can take an example. If somebody offers you a certain amount of money and even holds it in front of your eyes, your faith has nothing to do with the existence of the money or the strength of the promises. Even if you don't believe one

word of what is said in connection with that amount of money, the money still exists in front of your eyes, and the promise is valid, either you believe it or not. But your faith may come in exactly at that point: when that person offers that amount of money to you, faith is needed if that gift is ever going to be yours. Do you believe in the promise as far as to stretch out your hand to receive the gift and allow it to become yours?

This is also the point where faith comes in, when we are dealing with Holy Baptism. A gift, offered by somebody, will always have to be accepted. A gift can never be accepted personally without faith, although before that it has already been offered. *If it is not accepted personally so as to become an accepted gift, it will become a rejected gift.* Faith, therefore, is very important in connection with Holy Baptism. This will be clear, if we look at these words once more: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mk 16:16). But from these words one cannot make the conclusion, that a person must believe first and be baptized after that, because at other places in Scripture things are mentioned in the reverse order: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ..., teaching them" (Mt 28:19). The faith of the person concerned is not the foundation he rests on, when he is being baptized.

## Faith is the purpose of Baptism

Faith is what God aims at, and faith is the proper way of resting on this foundation. This means that one cannot receive the grace and gift of Baptism without having faith. Baptism is a gift, given by God's love. To receive that gift is to believe in God's love. Once more we can compare this gift with something given to us by another person. He gives it to us free of charge, out of love for us, and for no other reason. That means that it is not given to us as a payment for anything we have done for him or given to him. What then, if we refuse to receive his free gift? In one way it would spoil the friendship between him and us. It would also mean that we despise both himself and the gift he wishes to give to us. On the other hand, to receive it will show that we believe in him, in his love and kindness, and also that we wish to uphold that good relationship. All what has been said about this example will apply to Baptism and faith also. To believe in our Baptism is to believe in Him who wished to give such a great gift to us.

## 5. Baptism of children

This question has been brought forward many times, particularly at such periods that wish to call themselves "modern" or "enlightened". Then people use to ask: is it in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament to baptize children? In the olden times of the Christian Church there was no discussion or even doubt about the practice of baptizing children. At a certain period there was only one question discussed in these matters: *which is the best age of baptism with regard to children*, can they be baptized at any time after their birth or should it be left to, say, the age of three years?

All doubts about the baptism of children have their origin in a certain way of thinking: a person should have a full understanding of what Baptism means; he should also decide for himself if he wants to follow the way of God; he should be converted first and have a personal faith in Christ; when these conditions are fulfilled he can ask for baptism. Then his personal baptism will serve as a mark and sign that he belongs to God and the Christian congregation and Church.

From that standpoint there must be a strong criticism against baptism of children. That criticism is often expressed in this way: children cannot understand what it is about, if they are baptized; children cannot decide for themselves on such an important step to be taken; children cannot become converted; if children are baptized, other people will have to decide for them and have the responsibility for everything.

How can we defend the baptism of children against these arguments? There are three ways in particular of defending it.

### The first answer

How could the Christian Church be completely wrong about Baptism for about 1500 or 1600 years? How could it be completely blind right from the time of the apostles, until some clever and clearsighted men discovered what was right? And these questions force us to ask another one: who could know best what Christ has said and ordered? There is only one answer to that question: the apostles! If we do not believe in their leadership and practice for about 70 years (i.e. up to the years round 100 A.D., when John the apostle died), how can we believe in what they have written in their gospels and epistles? And what about the accounts given in the history of the old

Church (from 100 A.D. and forwards) about baptism of children? In that Church there was a firm practice and a strong and definite conviction about these matters. They were practising baptism of children in all provinces of the Church. No province, no bishop, no local church, no single minister is known to have been against it. Why? They were all convinced in the matter, since they had a firm tradition that "baptism of children is from the time of the apostles". They were also convinced that the gospels have told us about "the blessing of children" (Mt 19, Mk 10, Lk 18) just to show us that the question has been settled once and for ever about the small children, and therefore also about their baptism: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:14).

This word, spoken by Jesus himself, will help us, therefore, to understand what Baptism means: "The Kingdom of heaven belongs to them (the children)." Thus there is no rule, given in the Bible, that people should grow up first and become adults, before they can belong to the Kingdom of God. What the Bible tells us is the opposite thing: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3).

## The second answer

The question about Baptism and children can also be answered in this way: to postpone the baptism of children until they are "grown up" or "mature" will be the same as leaving them outside the Christian Church and the Kingdom of God. But where are they going to stay, until they reach the time of being "grown up" or "mature"? In the New Testament we are never told of such waiting. Instead we are told about complete "households" being baptized and thereby included in the Christian Church (Acts 16: 15,31,33,34). We are never told about any other way of admittance to the Kingdom of God than by the way of Baptism. Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he can not enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). This expression, "being born of water and the Spirit", stands for Baptism. How can a child be left outside, then? The answer, given by those who deny baptism of children, is mostly twofold. Either they say: the children are taken up as Christians through their parents, without being baptized, or they say: the children have not committed any wilful sin, and therefore they belong to God right from the time of their birth and so there is no need of baptism in their case.

Both answers must be considered to be wrong, if compared to the teaching of the New Testament. There is

no exception of children with regard to the need of Baptism. We have already seen that there is no way leading to the Kingdom of God "unless one is born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). Furthermore, the belief that there is no need of Baptism, because the child has not committed any wilful sin yet, is against the Christian teaching about *original sin*. This doctrine says: *we are all sinners, right from the time when we were born. And much more than that: all of mankind are sinners right from the time of Adam*: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5). "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). This means that if we go wrong in our teaching about original sin (all of mankind being sinners right from birth), we will go wrong in our teaching about Baptism also. Since all children are sinners from the very beginning of their life, they all need Baptism as "a washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Tit 3:5).

### The third answer

Speaking about Baptism in terms of "knowledge", "understanding", "decision" etc. will be the same as going against the teaching of the New Testament. There the main points are *what God has done for us before our baptism* and *what he is doing with us in our baptism*. What *we* have done or what *we* are doing or thinking is

of less importance. This is very clear from words like this: "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Tit 3:4-5).

Holy Baptism, therefore, in the first instance is something done by God. As a sacrament, performed among us, it is a holy action, intending to show and administer God's grace. Thus arguments like "personal liberty", "understanding", "personal development", "choice" etc. are not at all natural in the New Testament environment. Instead they have come in very late, particularly where people have been *thinking in worldly terms*, and not before such times that have described themselves as "enlightened" or "modern".

But one thing must be very clear all the time, when we are dealing with the baptism of children. On one side it is right to say that God's action comes before ours, and that even small children can be baptized. On the other side it would be completely wrong to say: all children can be baptized or must be baptized. We cannot go round baptizing children without considering the circumstances where we find them. The children can be baptized *only when they belong to a family or "household", where there*

*is a possibility of the teaching Jesus has ordered us to give to them: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).*

### A comparison

To understand the difference between the worldly way of thinking and the Biblical way it is helpful to compare Baptism with the circumcision in the Old Testament. By the sign of circumcision boys were admitted to the community of Israel when being only seven days old: they had to be circumcised "on the eighth day" (Lev 12:3). Therefore their circumcision was not a matter of their own "liberty" or their "personal choice". If they were to belong to the community of Israel and the covenant with God, they had to be treated according to the way commanded by God.

Now, in the times of the New Testament, there are no commandments about circumcision in the Christian Church. Instead circumcision has been replaced by Baptism. Furthermore, the sacrament is not restricted to boys. It is instituted for all, boys and girls, young and old. It is also said in very clear words in the New Testament that *Baptism is the new circumcision*. That means, among other things, that *it does not follow the ways of worldly thinking or philosophy*. Therefore there

is not a word about what we have done or what we are doing or thinking. There was no word of that kind in connection with circumcision, and there is none about Baptism either. In Baptism it is all about God's grace and his work: "In him /Christ/ also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in Baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:11-12).

### What about faith here?

Faith has to come in at two points. Faith can be there, already at the time of Baptism, even if the one baptized is a small child. There is no time limit, before which it would be impossible for a child to have faith or trust. Often we find, when taking a small child into our arms, that it has trust in us. Trust does not demand a certain amount of brain work. It is trust to rely on somebody. Jesus himself has told us that small children can have such faith: "These little ones who believe in me" (Mt 18:6). He also gave his benediction to such little ones and said that the Kingdom of heaven belonged to them (Mt 19:14). Who can say, after hearing this, that there is no possibility for little children to have faith and believe?

The second point about faith is that it does not create the validity of our Baptism. What God is doing is right and good in itself. His giving is effective and valid, even if we do not believe or make use of his gift all the time when it is given. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13). Faith does not come before the gift, given by God, but faith is needed to receive the gift, at whatever time that faith appears. This shows us that the grace of Baptism will be the same, either we believe at the time of baptism or start to believe later.

## 6. How can the grace of Baptism be lost?

In almost all cases where this grace is lost Baptism has not been respected or honoured as God's work or as an act of grace. The person who was baptized earlier in his life perhaps has been tempted to honour other things more than holy Baptism. But when Baptism is not honoured or respected it will soon be neglected and despised. When we have understood this in general it will be easier to understand how it works in detail.

The first result of such non-respect of Baptism is *doubt*. The person starts to doubt that in Baptism he was elected and called by God to be his child and to be a disciple of Christ. He goes on to think that perhaps Baptism is not very effective, and also to think that there might be other ways leading to a good Christian life, quite as good as Baptism or even better. Then he goes on to look for other things, persons or works, in order to find what is best, if we wish to become good Christians. Then he finds, perhaps after having tried several of these ways, that they do not help him at all. He can see for himself that he is not a better Christian in any way, whatever he has tried. And now there is a strong feeling of failure in his heart. And his doubt is spreading further. He goes on by

thinking that God has left us in uncertainty about the way and about what to do. After that there is a general disbelief about everything. The greatest disbelief prevails with regard to God's Word, his promises and the way of salvation. He says to himself: "I have tried everything, and now I do not know what to believe. Everything seems to be so uncertain. Nothing remains firm, and perhaps there isn't anything we can do about that." – All arguing of this kind is a struggle against the Holy Spirit, given to us in Baptism. If we go on in that way it might end by the Holy Spirit leaving us.

This disbelief and uncertainty easily spreads from one person to another. When a Christian is living together with other people who disregard the Word of God, Baptism, etc., he may start to doubt the same things also. He will start to ask the same questions as they do. "How can I know that there is salvation in a handful of water? How can the Word of God and the Holy Spirit give such power to ordinary water so as to carry forgiveness of sins and membership of the Kingdom of God?" If a Christian starts to give room in his heart to such thoughts and doubts, he might soon have them spread on to other Christians again and so cause their defeat and failure.

## A danger from another side

But the doubt and disbelief may come for another reason also. Let us take the example of a Christian who is living in faith. But although he is using the Word of God and leading a life of prayer etc., one day he is taken by surprise in a certain temptation and falls into a bad sin. Well, that should be the time and the situation where Baptism could help him and should help him. He ought to be reminded by his Baptism that there is forgiveness of sins and that there is a way back for him. "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). But now the person in question makes the terrible mistake of saying to himself: "Now I am finished. Everything is lost. I cannot be a child of God, since I have sinned in this bad way. So there is no way back for me."

– This is how many get lost. They think that after committing a bad sin they have lost the grace of Baptism for ever. Their mistake is: they forget that by their Baptism God has already called them back to their Father's house (Lk 15:20). The prodigal son, who was a bad sinner, could return to his father's house from which he had gone away. In the same way there is a way back to the Father's house for every sinner.

## Other dangers

It is amazing, but there is a completely different way of thinking, when somebody has fallen in sin. The sinner might say: "This is nothing, compared to what others have done and are doing all the time." Or he might say: "When I have done this, I can quite as well do more, the guilt will be the same, I am a sinner anyway. And when I have sinned more, I can always ask for forgiveness later." And so he goes on. But one day, and it does not take long to come to that point, there is no need of repentance or forgiveness. *The sinner has got stuck in his sins.* The Holy Spirit has left him and will not return to him, unless he returns to God in a true repentance. This shows us clearly that everybody who believes in the grace of Baptism must fear the dangers of sin and take the fight against sin seriously. We can also describe the dangers in this way: every Christian must recognize the treacherous ways of his own heart.

Another way again, leading away from the grace of Baptism, is a wrong understanding of what faith means or what it can do. When somebody has committed a grave sin he might think: "Now the grace of Baptism is finished. If I am to come back to God I must repent and believe, only faith can do it for me." This is to mix it up altogether. Repent on what ground? Believe in what? The

repentance must be there, because the sinner has fallen from the grace of Baptism. He must believe that God's promises in Baptism are still valid and that he keeps the door of his house open even for the one who has "squandered his property in loose living" and come down to the very point of feeling envy at the happiness of the swine (Lk 15:13,16,20).

In these matters it is necessary to put faith at its right place. We do need faith to believe in God's grace, shown to us in Baptism, and later shown to us in many other ways. For "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6). But it is possible to stress the need of faith in a wrong way. That happens, when we think that our faith is strong and efficient enough, or when we think that it can open the way to God. Then faith takes the place of God's grace in Baptism. Then it believes in itself instead of believing in God and what he has done and given and promised.

## **7. What it means to live in the grace of Baptism**

Our life as Christians must be a continuous exercise and fight against temptations, sins, and spiritual and worldly enemies. If we do that, we are practising our baptism and living the life of a Christian. In one way this is easy to do. God is on our side, and he has given us great promises. He has also given us all help we need, all gifts and weapons that we have to use. But in one way it is very difficult. There are so many enemies against us, and even in our own hearts there is a tendency to go against God and collaborate with his enemies.

### **A danger within ourselves**

One enemy in our own hearts is sometimes called "old Adam", i.e. the one who left the good way and became the enemy of God (Gen 3:6; Rom 5:12). This old Adam is very much inclined to do such things that are called "the works of the flesh" (Gal 5:19). Among these we find anger, hatred, envy, laziness, greed, and unbelief. Since in Baptism "old Adam" is stifled and killed, our own

of "the new man" who was raised in Baptism. But old Adam rises again every day, and therefore he has to be stifled and killed every day. And that is exactly what our Baptism has called us to do: "to put off our old nature which belongs to our former manner of life... and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24).

All this means that we have to make use of the tools and weapons that God has put at our disposal (Eph 6:10-20). Above all things we have to mention the Word of God, the sacraments, and prayer. Nobody, who is a grown-up person, can live without these things. Christians also have to help one another in these matters. That is one of the secrets of "the fellowship of the saints" (Eph 2:17-22).

## Help from our Baptism

Baptism will always remind us that we belong to God and to his "household", the holy family of all Christians. It will also remind us about the promises for our life, about the weapons for our fight, and about the duties we have as members of the body of Christ (Rom 12:1-8). If we live in that way, we will not "think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think", but instead be humble

and "think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned to us" (v 3).

And what happens, then, if we fall in sin? Then the main thing is to come back to God, not "as soon as possible" as the Tempter might make us think, in order to delay us, but *immediately*. This is done by true repentance and confession. "Confession" here can mean two things. In the first instance confession is our way of speaking to God in our private and secret prayers, by which we show that we have seen and understood our faults and sins and also ask to have them forgiven. Secondly, confession is the holy institution, made by Christ himself, that we can turn to the pastors of the Church, the keepers of "the office of the keys", or "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 16:19; Jn 20:23). When we confess our sins before one of these office-bearers, he can give us the forgiveness of sins. He can even ask us: "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" (Luther's Small Catechism). This is done to strengthen the faith of the person confessing, so as *to make him believe truly that his sins are really forgiven*. This holy and precious thing, the "confession", has been given to us, because we are baptized and belong to God's family, his household. This institution has sometimes been called "the third sacrament". It is a great help to us to live as Christians, and therefore we ought to use it often and well.

## Looking forward

Our sins often make us look backwards, in order to find out what we have done wrong, to repent of it and to confess it. We also look back, when we wish to consider the great gifts which God has given to us in Baptism. In that way it is needed, good and helpful, if we look backwards.

But in one way Baptism should help us still more to look forward. By being baptized, and because of having been given great promises we belong to the Kingdom of God. Because of that we are allowed to think: The past is already behind us, ahead of us is Christ's eternal Kingdom and his glory in heaven. That is our future. That is what we belong to. "Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Heb 13:14). And so the blessed call is given: to that city, to that eternal and glorious future we are stretching forward. Not that we have already obtained this or are already perfect; but *we press on to make it our own, because Christ has made us his own* (Phil 3:12).

GLORY BE TO THE FATHER, AND TO THE SON,  
AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT, AS IT WAS  
IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW, AND  
EVER SHALL BE, WORLD  
WITHOUT END.  
AMEN