

**Baptismal Liturgies in Lutheran History and Practice**  
Sarah Hinlicky Wilson + Trilateral Dialogue + January 2014

Luther said very little of baptism in his pre-Reformation career, but by 1519/1520 with his new understanding of justification it had taken on a much more central role in his thought. One of his first comments in this new period was the importance of using plenty of water, ideally in the form of immersion, in order to depict more powerfully what was really happening: death with Christ and rebirth. At the same time, he began to move away from blessing the water as such. The central point of baptism was the promise of God offered through the words and accompanied by the water – and all water had already been made holy by Christ’s own baptism. Late in life, feeling more afflicted by Zwinglians and Anabaptists than by Romanists, Luther re-emphasized the importance of the sign of baptism and the impossibility of severing the sign from the thing signified. God’s promise, the rite with water, and faith all belong to one unbreakable whole.

Luther’s first written revision of the baptismal rite appeared in 1523. In keeping with his initially modest approach to liturgical change, he retained everything he didn’t find to be in outright conflict with the gospel. As such, he kept such practices as “breathing under the eyes, signing with the cross, placing salt in the mouth, putting spittle and clay into the ears and nose, anointing the breast and shoulders with oil, signing the crown of the head with the chrism, putting on the christening robe, placing a burning candle in the hand...”<sup>1</sup> However, the exorcism of the salt and blessing of the font were deleted, the latter being replaced by the *Sintflutgebet* of Luther’s own composing (see below). In his perspective, the most important elements of the traditional rite to be retained were the exorcisms, the vows spoken by the godparents on behalf of the baptizand and the reading from Mark 10 (both clearly showing the orientation toward infant baptism), the water which was to be administered ideally by immersion or dipping, and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The only significant change in these retained elements was to reject separate exorcisms for males and females and to replace them with one single exorcism for all. Naturally, the rite itself was in German, not Latin.

Luther’s second revision of the baptismal rite appeared in 1526. This one further trimmed down the service, eliminating the breathing under the child’s eyes, one of the opening prayers, the salt, one of the exorcisms, the prayer after exorcism, the salutation before the Gospel reading, the Ephphatha (from Mark 7), the anointings, and the lighted candle. This new rite was very popular and widely used in the emerging Lutheran churches. The flood prayer, some variation of which is often still found in Lutheran liturgies, reads as follows:

Almighty eternal God, Who according to Your righteous judgment condemned the unbelieving world through the flood, and in Your great mercy preserved believing Noah and his family, and Who drowned hardhearted Pharoah with all his host in the Red Sea and led Your people Israel through the same on dry ground, thereby prefiguring this bath of Your baptism, and Who through the baptism of Your dear Child, our Lord Jesus Christ, has consecrated and set apart the Jordan and all water as a salutary flood and a rich and full washing away of sins: We pray through the same Your groundless mercy, that You will graciously behold this N. and bless him with true faith in the Spirit, so that by means of this saving flood all that has been born in him from Adam and of which he himself has added thereto may be drowned in him and engulfed, and that he may be sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom, serve Your name at all times, fervent in spirit and joyful in hope, so that

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 53:102.

with all believers he may be made worthy to attain eternal life according to Your promise; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

The various regions that adopted the Reformation more or less followed Luther's rite with certain changes of their own, reflecting Luther's own hands-off attitude, preferring that each area sort out the rite that best fit its circumstances – as long, of course, as it adhered to the tenets of Reformation theology. Saxony's rite, developed by such persons as Johannes Bugenhagen and the Crucigers, was closest to Luther's, adding a stronger admonition to the godparents and forbidding any blessing of the water. Osiander's rite for Nuremberg also kept fairly close to Luther, for instance adopting the flood prayer, though he retained separate exorcisms for males and females and also added an admonition to godparents. The 1540 Brandenburg rite kept most of the medieval ceremonies; Luther and friends approved it though expressed their disappointment at how much had been retained. Much the same was the case with the Swedish rite developed by Olavus Petri. South German rites were more influenced by the Swiss Reformed, putting less emphasis on external features of the ritual and more emphasis on the faith of the community rather than on the nascent faith of the infant. Here again, admonitions to godparents were important, as were discourses on the benefits of baptism. Johannes Brenz's 1543 rite for Schwäbisch Hall allowed for either the medieval prayer over the blessing of the font, or Luther's flood prayer, or this prayer which was probably Brenz's own:

Almighty eternal God, you have given all authority in heaven and on earth to your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and he has commanded that his gospel be preached to all people, and that they be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and has also promised that whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved. We entreat you with all confidence that you would graciously permit to flourish in this child, N., through baptism, the saving bath and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he desires, not for the sake of the work of righteousness which he does, but on account of your grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

South Germans were also much more likely to omit the exorcisms, in keeping with Reformed tendencies, despite the fact that Luther considered them an essential aspect of the rite.

Interestingly, this already signals the single most contested issue in the history of Lutheran baptism, namely whether or not the baptized is to be ritually exorcised. The first eruption took place in 1549 between two pastors in Thuringia; ultimately the one who omitted the exorcism was dismissed from his post. In Prussia the use of exorcisms in the late sixteenth century depended entirely on who was the elector. It continued to be a political issue in places where Lutherans and Reformed overlapped. Lutheran Orthodoxy judged exorcisms to be a matter of adiaphora; they also turned toward sprinkling rather than immersing in water. Enlightenment-era Lutheranism not only rejected exorcism; it rejected nearly everything that Luther had considered to be the very heart of the sacrament. An 1834 rite in Germany for the child "of well-to-do, cultured and highly respected parents" included this prayer:

Water, an element required by the whole nature, has thus been the emblem of your Christian consecration, dear child. May the religion of Jesus become the element of your entire moral life! Water is the common property of the rich and the poor, the high and the

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<sup>2</sup> LW 53:107–8. I have altered the verb endings to contemporary English and changed all uses of "thou, thee, thy" to "you, you, your."

<sup>3</sup> Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 19.

low. Thus also the religion of Jesus is intended for all: and to you, dear child, as we hope to God, it will come of purer quality and in larger measure than to countless others. Water, the best means for cleansing the body, is the most fitting emblem of soul-purity. May your heart remain pure and your life unspotted, you still-innocent angel!...<sup>4</sup>

This was certainly a low point, and atypical at that; most other nineteenth-century Lutheran liturgies kept much closer to Luther's. But the same controversies over exorcism were found in Scandinavia. The first pastor to omit it, in 1567 in Denmark, was fired; there was an attempt to omit it from the 1607 Norwegian liturgy but the pressure of Lutheran Orthodox professors got it reinstated; bishops generally urged their pastors to include the exorcism, but the royal family's children were always baptized without it! Nicolai Gruntvig, the highly influential nineteenth-century Danish theologian, made the strongest contemporary argument in favor of its retention.

By the twentieth century, the renunciation of the devil – also a part of Luther's liturgies – was taken to be sufficient and supplanted any need for exorcism. Liturgical renewal in this period also led to the reintroduction of elements previously dispensed with as adiaphora, such as anointing with oil and lighted candles, and renewed interest in the catechuminate, reflecting a new situation where adult converts to Christianity were becoming more common.

*Some observations:*

– The most essential elements of Lutheran baptismal liturgies were and continue to be: a prayer modeled on Luther's flood prayer, a reading from the Gospels (usually Mark 10 and/or Matthew 28), the Lord's Prayer, the renunciation of the devil and/or evil, an emphasis on the forgiveness of sin, the Creed (often in question-and-answer form), the vows of parents and/or godparents, the use of water, and the triune name.

– Despite Luther's strong preference for immersion, it did not become normal practice in Lutheran churches, probably because of the dangers involved in immersing newborn children in very cold water and because it was only preferred, not required.

– The retention of exorcism as a baptismal practice reflected Luther's theology: no human being stands in a neutral position but is either for or against God. A child born in a state of original sin needs to be reclaimed from the lordship of the devil through baptism. The gradual elimination of exorcisms in the West reflects the modern discomfort with biblical and early Lutheran apocalypticism, an optimistic view of human progress, and a sensationalized view of the devil.

– Exorcism fully vanished from Lutheran baptismal rites about the same time that Lutheranism was finally becoming global, and in the newer Lutheran churches the practice of exorcism as its own distinct spiritual act, separate from baptism, has become rather common.

– The intuitive liturgical response of the developing Lutheran churches to Luther's doctrine of baptism and his defense of baptizing infants was to stress the role of the godparents in the cultivation of faith. Infant baptism practiced apart from active and well-trained godparents, ultimately leading to confirmation, is incomplete and does not do justice to the full scope of Luther's thought. Thus a consideration of the evangelical rite of confirmation should be included in the discussion of the Lutheran theology of baptism. It should be noted that "the father of evangelical confirmation," the partly-Lutheran partly-Reformed Martin Bucer, developed the practice in response to Anabaptist challenges<sup>5</sup>; it was taken up by Wittenberg Lutherans as well, such as Johannes Bugenhagen, and approved by Luther as long as it was not understood to be a sacrament.

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<sup>4</sup> Spinks, 25. Here also I have updated the English grammar.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Nelson Burnett, "Martin Bucer and the Anabaptist Context of Evangelical Confirmation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68/1 (1994): 95–122.