The Doctrine Of "Faith Only" And' What Martin Luther Believed About Water Baptism

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It is reported that when Martin Luther wrote the Latin word ***solus*** (alone or only) on the margin of Romans 1:17, thus interpreting that passage to mean we are justified by "faith alone," He, was in an awful struggle with the Roman Catholic church of which he was a priest at the time.

Doubtless, his putting ***solus*** in that margin was a reaction to the emphasis in the Catholic Church on the works of Catholicism. At that time he may have taught the doctrine of faith only in the sense which some say he did. However, if he did, it is apparent that he later changed his views on this considerably.

The distinguished church historian, Philip Schaff wrote an eight volume set entitled, The History of the Christian Church. In Chapter Three of Volume VII, Schaff covers the German Reformation and the work and beliefs of Dr. Luther from 1517‑1521. (See page 213.) On pages 218, 219 Schaff says that in 1520 Luther held the following views.

1. "Baptism is that dipping into the water whence it takes its name. For in Greek to baptize signifies to dip, and baptism is dipping."

2. Infants could be immersed on what he called "the vicarious faith" of their parents. Luther became involved in controversy with Thomas Munser and others over this. His opponents correctly argued that those who were baptized when they were infants should be immersed again. This gave birth to the word Anabaptist which was formed from the Greek word ***ana*** (again) and ***baptizein*** in the Greek infinitive that means to baptize.

At the end of this treatise I present documented evidence that Luther changed his mind on this matter and said infants should not be immersed.

3. Schaff also says that in 1520 Dr. Luther said, "it is not baptism which justifies any man, or is it of any advantage; but faith in that word of promise to which baptism is added, for this justifies and fulfills the meaning of baptism."

Ten years and more later, Dr. Luther had come to a better understanding of baptism and faith, as the following shows.

In searching through several of the relatively large volumes of Luther's sermons and lectures on New Testament books, I found much that he said against the multitude of works imposed by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church, most of which were without Bible authority. Of these works be wrote, "Therefore we teach that all the works of man are nothing and in vain apart from the new birth. And for this reason we call this the most important element in the instruction of the people, namely, that first of all they must be reborn. They must be told that they are all dead and that everything else, whatever there may be of conduct, orders, fasting, etc., avails nothing toward the attainment of the forgiveness of sin. First they must be born anew and become new persons." (Luther's Works, Volume 22: Sermons of the Gospel of St. John, page 279.)

Luther followed this with a presentation on the new birth. On page 283 he clearly affirmed that Jesus meant water baptism in John 3:5. Luther made it quite clear several times that in his opposition to works he did not include water baptism, but that he was referring to works of man which were performed, as he stated it, "by papists, priests, and monks."

Martin Luther was mixed up and confused on some matters pertaining to religion, but he taught that baptism (immersion) in water was essential to being born again and being saved. l am not saying that he understood what we understand about restoring the New Testament church. He wanted to reform the Catholic Church of which he was a priest. Perhaps, if he had lived longer, his desire to reform the Catholic Church might have caused him to engage in a strong effort to restore the New Testament church.

The great falling away of the New Testament church was predicted in the New Testament by the Holy Spirit guided apostle Paul in Acts 20:28‑31; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 Timothy 4:1‑6; and 2 Timothy 4:1‑6. This apostasy resulted in the formation, over a long span of years, of the Roman and Greek Catholic churches. Dr. Luther desired to reform the Roman Catholic Church by going by the Bible.

Volume 26 of Martin Luther's books contains his lectures on Galatians chapters 1‑4. According to page IX of that volume, he began these lectures on July 3, 1531, which was more than ten years after what he said about "faith only" as cited above.

Paul wrote to the churches of Christ in Galatia (Galatians 1:2), "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Galatians 3:27.) Martin Luther commenting on this verse and the change that takes place in a lost person when he becomes a child of God, said, "This does not happen by a change of clothing, or by any laws or works; it happens by the rebirth and renewal that takes place in Baptism, as Paul says, 'As many of you as were baptized have put on Christ."' Then he quoted the following from Titus 3:5: "He saved us, in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration." By quoting this, Dr. Luther showed that he believed "the washing of regeneration" refers to what occurs in baptism. He added, "For in those who have been baptized a new light and flame arise; new and devout emotions come into being, such as fear and trust in God and hope; and a new will emerges. This is what it means to put on Christ properly, truly, according to the Gospel."

In the following, Martin Luther's references to "the Law" must be references to the Law of Moses about which Paul wrote in Galatians, or any other meritorious system of works such as that of the Catholic Church, which he had abandoned. He said: "To put on Christ according to the Gospel, therefore, is to put on, not the Law or works but an inestimable gift, namely, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, peace, comfort, joy in the Holy Spirit, salvation, life, and Christ Himself.

"This passage must be studied carefully, in opposition to the fanatical spirits who minimize the majesty of Baptism and speak wickedly about it. Paul, by contrast, adorns Baptism with magnificent titles when he calls it 'the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5). And here he says that all who have been baptized have put on Christ. Now, as I have said, Paul is speaking about a 'putting on,' not by imitation but by birth. He does not say: 'Through Baptisrn you have received a token by which you have been enlisted in the number of the Christians'; that is what the sectarians imagine when they make of Baptism merely a token, that is, a small and empty sign. But he says: 'As many of you as have been baptized have put on Christ.' That is: 'You have been snatched beyond the Law into a new birth that took place in Baptism. Therefore you are no longer under the Law, but you have been dressed in a new garment, that is, in the righteousness of Christ."'

On Galatians 3:28, Martin Luther wrote, "With the words 'there is neither Jew,' then, Paul vigorously abolished the Law. For here, where a new man comes into existence in Baptism and where Christ is put on, there is neither Jew nor Greek." (The foregoing comments by Dr. Luther are from Volume 26 of his lectures and sermons and comments, pages 352‑354.)

**DR. LUTHER'S LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF JOHN**

Volume 22 of Dr. Luther's works contains Sermons On The Gospel Of St. John, Chapters 1 ‑4. According to page IX of Volume 22 he presented these sermons in 1537, seventeen years after what he said on baptism and faith in 1520 as already cited. The following are comments by him on John 3:5,6.

"It is true that the word 'water' does often symbolize temptation in Holy Writ, especially in tile Psalms (18: 16; 69:1‑3.) But here it cannot be interpreted that way; for here Christ is speaking of Baptism, of real and natural water such as a cow may drink, the baptism about which you hear in the sermons on this subject. Therefore, the word 'water' does not designate affliction here; it means real, natural water, which is connected with God's word and becomes a very spiritual bath through the Holy Spirit or through the entire Trinity. Here Christ also speaks of the Holy Spirit as present and active, in fact, the entire Holy Trinity is there. And thus the person who has been baptized is said to be born anew. In Titus 3:5 Paul terms baptism 'a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit’ In the last chapter of Mark we read that 'he who believes and is baptized will be saved.' (Mark 16:16.) And in this passage Christ declares that whoever is not born anew of the water and the Holy Spirit cannot come into the Kingdom of God. Therefore, God's words dare not be tampered with. Of course we are well aware that baptism is natural water. But after the Holy Spirit is added to it, we have more than mere water. It becomes a veritable bath of regeneration, a living bath which washes and purges man of sin and death, which 'cleanses him of all sin." (Pages 283, 284.)

"Thus the spiritual birth is brought about by the word of God, baptism and faith." (Page 290.)

Dr. Luther wrote concerning what Jesus said in John 3:8 that just as we cannot explain the wind, its origin and destiny, no more can one born again explain how the word of God, faith, and the Holy Spirit, can do such for him, but he can believe it. He wrote the following on John 3:8.

"But the Lord Christ declares here what one cannot say about the wind, which constantly surrounds us, whither it goes and whence it comes. It does not blow as we desire or from the direction we wish. It also rushes and roars without our knowledge, strength, will, might, or power, wherever it chooses, everywhere in the world, at one time from morning till evening or sunset, at another from midday until midnight. We only feel its rushing and blowing, and we must simply believe it and acknowledge its existence.

"The fact that everyone feels and hears the wind is, of course, only a physical matter subject to our five senses; and yet we do not know just what the wind is, whence it comes, or where it goes. Then why do we not readily give honor to our God and believe His words when He tells us that we are born anew through Baptism and that, although we are still sinners, we enter into eternal life by way of the grave and are saved? Why do we not believe this even though we cannot perceive and comprehend it with our reason and do not feel anything but the water and the sound of the Holy Spirit, that is, His Word? Therefore the Lord later says to Nicodemus: 'If you cannot understand earthy things – for example, the origin and the goat of the wind – how, then, can you hope to understand when I talk to you of heavenly things? You must do God the honor of admitting His power to do things that transcend your comprehension. As if the Lord were to say: 'I want you to know that I am going to talk to you about many things which you will not and cannot understand. In particular you will not understand how those who are born anew from water and the Holy Spirit will come into eternal life; this you must simply believe. It is not necessary for you to know the origin of the wind. Even though you do not know what the wind is, whence it comes and where it goes, you are content to hear its sound and feel its breath. And it may be very surprising that such a smart and wise man (indeed, all of us even today!) cannot know the wind, its source, its beginning, and its end, though we inhale it and derive our breath and life from it."' (Page 294.)

"I do not know either whence the wind comes; and still I know that it exists, for I can hear and feet it. Thus I will also believe God when He says that baptism initiates. a new birth, even

though I cannot understand how it can renew me, keep and preserve me for eternal life. I will simply hear the Word, accept the water of baptism, and believe. After all, I have to accept far lesser things without understanding them." (Page 295.)

Notice that in the foregoing, Dr. Luther says that after being born again through baptism, "we are still sinners." I perceive that he meant that we are still sinners in the sense that after we are baptized we can and do sin and need God's forgiveness, and this is what the New Testament repeatedly teaches. I perceive that Luther meant this because he plainly and repeatedly states in the quotations from him in this treatise that one is born again in baptism, and receives forgiveness or remission of sins.

**QUOTES FROM VOLUME 24 OF LUTHER'S WORKS**

"Even if a monk has tortured himself to death with works, fasting, vigils, and self‑castigation, fie still cannot know whether he has merited heaven or hell, For what else is this than declaring: 'I do not know whether Christ is speaking the truth when He says that he who believes in Him and is baptized in His name shall be saved (Mark 16:16)." (Page 326)

"For if it is true that common Christians, the so called laity, who have holy Baptism and faith in Christ, cannot be saved by their Baptism and the blood of Christ but, in addition, must purchase the merits and share in the works of the monks, then what purpose does Christ serve with His blood and His Baptism?" (Page 222)

"A Christian is a person who begins to tread the way from this life to heaven the moment he is baptized, in the faith that Christ is henceforth the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And he holds to this way until his end. He is always found on this way and' is led in the truth to obtain life, as one who already sees the shore where he is to land." (Page 51)

**QUOTES FROM VOLUME 30 OF LUTHER'S WORKS**

After quoting 2 Peter 2:20, Luther wrote: "To have love of the brethren means to regard the other person as one's brother. This is easy to understand, for nature itself teaches it. Here you see what true brothers are. They cling together much more closely than any friends do. We Christians should also do this, for we are all brothers through Baptism. After Baptism even my father and my mother are my brother and my sister, for through faith I have the very same blessing and inheritance from Christ that they have." (Page 96)

"Here St. Peter shows why they are servants of perdition. 'The knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ' means knowing what he is namely, our Savior, who forgives us our sin out of pure grace. Through this knowledge we escape wickedness and the defilement of the world. But when they have escaped (his in Baptism, they are later thrown back into it again. Then they give up their faith and return to their own deeds." (Page 190)

"A physician reveals an illness, not because he takes delight in the illness, but rather that the person who is sick may sigh and ask to be delivered front the illness. Indeed, the patient gets hope of health from his faith in the physician who gives him a promise. Thus in Baptism we, too, are translated from darkness into light and into the place, where there is remission of sins." (Page 245)

**MARTIN LUTHER CHANGED HIS MIND ABOUT INFANTS BEING IMMERSED**

Harry W. Dahlstrom was a member of the church of Christ. I understand he is deceased. Before he became a member of the church of Christ he had been a Lutheran. He wrote a booklet after he left that church entitled "A Letter To Lutherans" in which he explained the Scripture reasons why he left the Lutheran Church. The following is the first paragraph of that booklet.

"I have written this letter out of a deep concern for the souls of human beings and especially for those who have learned about God and his Son Jesus thru the reaching of the Lutheran church. I was a Lutheran in the Augustana Synod from 1920 through 1959, having absorbed all the Lutheran teaching made available by the local church in Hartford, Connecticut as I grew up. I served as a junior deacon and deacon, choir member, Sunday school teacher and department superintendent. I am no longer a Lutheran but have become simply a Christian, worshipping God and continuing to mold my life by loving obedience to the teaching of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament." (Page 10) Harry Dahlstrom said, "Luther knew that faith had to precede baptism and at various times had different ways of trying to reconcile infant baptism. At one time he said the infant had faith but the faith was 'asleep.' Another time he felt the faith of the infant's sponsors was sufficient. However, he saw the truth." (Page 7)

The following is part of a statement by Dr. Luther which shows why brother Dahlstrom said Luther "saw the truth" about why infants should not be immersed.

"In addition to these there are some others, as those called Waldensian Brethren, who hold that each must believe for himself and must by his own faith receive baptism or the sacrament, otherwise to him baptism or the sacrament profits nothing, So far they speak and hold aright. But that they go further, and baptize nevertheless young children, whom they also hold to be such as have no faith of their own; this is a mockery of holy baptism; and they sin against that other commandment in that they take needlessly and in vain God's name and 'word, with knowledge and wantonly. It avails them also nothing to use the subterfuge that they baptize children on their future faith when they come to intelligence, for faith must be present before or at baptism, else the child is not delivered from the devil or from sin.

"Therefore, if their opinion were right, all that is done with the child in baptism must be empty lies. For at it the baptizer asks if the child believes and someone answers in its stead 'Yes'. Yet no one is baptized in its stead, but the child itself is baptized; therefore must itself also believe, or the godparents lie when they say in its stead, I believe. Where we are not able to prove that the young children themselves believe and have personal faith, it is my sincere counsel and judgment that one straightway desist, and the sooner the better, and never more baptize any child, as that we no longer mock and blaspheme the most blessed majesty of God with such baseless tomfoolery and jugglery."

Brother Dahlstrom then says, "This excerpt is taken from Luther's Collection of Sermons On The Church, in the sermon for the third Sunday following Epiphany, Matthew 8:1; it may be found in Martin Luther, AusgewahItc Werke, Dritte Auflage (3rd printing), which is Put Out by the Chr. Kaiser Verlag Munchen, 1957; Vier ter Band (4th Volume), pages 275‑278.

I sent this reference to someone at the Lutheran Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, MO and asked them to send a copy of what Luther wrote presented above. I received a copy written in German. Rene' Voser a native of Switzerland, was graduated from International Bible College (now Heritage Christian University) and is a former beloved student of mine. He is doing a great work of preaching the gospel in St. Gallen, Switzerland. He recently visited me in my office. He is fluent in the German language. I asked him to check the German text of Luther's statement and when he did he said Luther's statement about infants should not be baptized is properly translated in Harry Dahlstrom's booklet!

Brother Dahlstrom also put in his booklet that famous statement, Martin Luther made to those who claimed allegiance to him, which follows. "I pray you leave my name alone and call not yourselves' Lutherans but Christians. Who is Luther? My teaching is not mine. I have not been crucified for anyone ... how then does it befit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes, to give my name to the children of Christ? Cease, my dear friends, to cling to these party names and distinctions; away with them all; let us call ourselves only Christians after him from whom our teaching comes."

In their book, entitled, Encountering The New Testament (Baker Books 1997), Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough "say that as early as, 1522, Martin Luther stated the New Testament Book of James was "a rather strawy letter" in comparison to Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and I Peter. He said this about when he said what he said about being saved by "faith alone." Luther must have changed his mind about the Book of James also, because Elwell and Yarbrough go on to say that Dr. Luther did not exclude James from the New Testament Canon, and that be quoted it often and approvingly. (Page 353)

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