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The study of any aspect of Martin Luther’s theology must be seen in its historical context. While it may confidently be maintained that Luther presented fresh ideas and new approaches to doing theology, it must also be said that much of his work was in reaction to what went on around him. This, at times, is a weakness. One can better understand Luther’s system if one sees it in juxtaposition to others who were writing at the time. This explains to some extent the polemical emphasis that is present in much of his writing. Luther was often writing in response to what he saw as improper doctrine being taught by others.

**Sacrament**

The starting point in discussing Luther’s doctrines of baptism and communion is to understand his theology of the sacraments. He numbered the sacraments at two: baptism and the Lord’s supper. At times he spoke of three, but the third—repentance—he effectively included as a part of baptism. Thus he could say, “Hence it follows that there are, strictly speaking, only two Sacraments in the Church of God: Baptism and the Bread. . . . For the sacrament of penance . . . is . . . nothing but a way and a return to Baptism.”

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2. Luther said, “All I have written I have written only because I have been forced to do so by the insinuations, the pressure, and the deceptive designs of others. Erbieten, Weimar Edition, 6:480. See also What Luther Says, Ewald M. Plass, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 1:113.

3. Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *Three Treatises*, second revised edition, trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), p. 258. This is a good example of Luther’s polemical writing. Luther’s title refers to the authoritarianism of the Roman Church over the laity. The document goes through the seven traditional sacraments and refutes them, arguing against the Roman Church at other points as he proceeds.
He concluded that these should be considered the only sacraments because it "seemed proper to restrict the name of sacrament to those promises which have signs attached to them."\(^4\)

This last statement is a capsulized form of Luther's sacramental theology. "A sacrament consists in the combination of the Word of promise with a sign."\(^5\) That is, the promise is sealed with a sign, and the sign is accompanied by a promise. He called the sacrament "a divine covenant of grace and blessing transmitted in the visible form."\(^6\) And again: "A Sacrament is a human act to which a divine promise has been appended or a visible sign with an accompanying promise."\(^7\)

**Sacrament and Sign**

It is not enough for the symbol or sign merely to be analogous to a divine truth. There must be a divine promise connected, and the rite must be instituted by God as such.\(^8\) Thus, although such things as prayer are connected with promises, they are not sacraments because there is no visible sign. Likewise, marriage is not a sacrament because there is neither a sign nor a word of promise.\(^9\) Luther says, "To be sure, whatever takes place in a visible manner can be understood as a figure or allegory of something invisible. But figures or allegories are not sacraments."\(^10\)

The purpose of the visible sign is for an objective assurance of the promise. It helps to keep the Christian's faith from being overly spiritual. The eminent Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper says, "Consistent 'enthusiasts,' such as Quakers, reject . . . Baptism as a permanent divine ordinance. In this matter they are abolishing . . . 'useless external things.'"\(^11\) Of course Pieper, with Luther, rejects this abolition as contrary to true faith. Luther called the sacraments a visible sign so that we may not "pretend that we do not know

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\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 345.

\(^6\) Luther, *Tischreden*, Weimar Edition, 1:1168. (The Tabletalk of Luther is included in the Weimar Edition of his collected works as six volumes numbered separately from the other volumes. The designations are to the volume and entry number. This is volume 1, entry 1168.)

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 345. "The symbolic act must be instituted by God and combined with a promise."

\(^9\) See "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *Three Treatises*, p. 220. "Nowhere do we read that the man who marries a wife receives any grace of God. There is not even a divinely instituted sign in marriage."

\(^10\) Ibid.

how or where we may find [God], or . . . err and roam about here and there according to our own ideas." There is an objective point to which "we are to fix our eyes and ears"\textsuperscript{12} so that we can be sure both of God's plan for salvation and the proper doctrines concerning it.

Luther referred to God's repeated use of visible signs to support his conclusions. The system of sacrifices in the Old Testament is such an example. "A Sacrament . . . is a 'sign of the Divine will' which betokens His real presence among men, and can be called an 'epiphany' of God."\textsuperscript{13} The paschal lamb was given as a sign to Israel so that they would recall that God brought them out of Egypt and that he was present with them. "This is what Christ did in the case of the Sacrament: He placed a sign before the eyes of the Christians. Accordingly, they were strengthened through the Word and the sign."\textsuperscript{14} This visible sign, appropriated by the senses, is a help for faith in God's work. "Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped and thus brought into the heart."\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to a visible sign, the actual physical nature of the sacraments is important. Since they are physical, we participate in them through our physical bodies. Thus not only are they visible signs of God's work, but they are testimony to the doctrine that our physical bodies also share in God's grace. Althaus says, "Through its physical character the sacrament assures us that our bodies are intended for eternal life and blessedness."\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Sacrament and Word}

The sign, though, is nothing if not for the Word of promise which it communicates. The Augsburg Confession\textsuperscript{17} says, "There are two parts to a sacrament, the sign and the Word. In the New Testament, the Word is the

\textsuperscript{12}Predigt am Freitag nach Ostern, Weimar Edition, 49:133. See also What Luther Says, 3:1237.


\textsuperscript{14}Luther, \textit{Predigt am Gründonnerstag}, Weimar Edition, 49:74f. See also What Luther Says, III:1236.


\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}The Augsburg Confession, though written by Philip Melanchthon and others, had Luther's full approval. See A. Skevington Wood, "Augsburg Confession," \textit{Baker's Dictionary of Theology}, Everett Harrison, et al., eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 79.
The Word makes the element the sacrament and the sacrament brings the Word to the individual.

**Sacrament and Faith**

"Therefore, it is a truism that nobody gets grace because he has been through the motions of . . . baptism. A man receives grace because he believes that in this act of . . . baptism he receives grace." Just as the Word makes the symbol a sacrament—and without the Word there is no sacrament—so the sacrament is meaningless apart from the faith of the participant. Luther, seeing a need to counter the Roman teaching that the sacrament itself dispenses grace (ex opere operato), greatly emphasized the need for personal faith.

The sacramental form of the Word, just as the spoken form, is only received in faith. The sacrament "depends on faith and contributes nothing to a man's salvation without faith." Luther was condemned by the Roman Church for the sentence "It is heresy to hold that the sacraments . . . give grace to those who place no obstacle in the way" even though they have no faith (the obstacle being mortal sin). Luther used the example of the Ethiopian in Acts 8:36-37 to illustrate. After asking what prevented him from being baptized, the eunuch was told, "If you believe with all your heart you may."

This strong emphasis on the necessity of faith for the recipient of the sacrament presents difficulty for Luther on the "subjects" of baptism, which will be considered in the second part of this study. It is important at this point that we keep in mind the absolute necessity of faith to receive the benefits of the sacraments. Just as the water without the Word is the same as bathwater, so the sacrament without faith has no meaning for the person taking part. "Since we are indeed justified by faith, it follows that the Sacraments are not efficacious except through faith." Without faith the sacrament has no

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28Ibid.
29Luther, *Vorlegungen über 1. Mose Kapitel 48:21*, Weimar Edition, 44:719. See also *What Luther Says*, 3:1240. Luther uses this in order to refute the Roman teaching that "Baptism will benefit you and justify you whether you believe or not." (Scripture quotation from the New American Standard Bible)
30Ibid.
meaning. “Hence to seek the efficacy of the sacrament apart from the promise and without faith is to labor in vain and to find condemnation.”

Baptism

As mentioned above, baptism was a major area of controversy in the Reformation period. On the “right” was the Roman Catholic Church, which taught that baptism was salvific apart from personal faith in the recipient. On the “left” were Zwingli and the Anabaptists, who separated the physical sign from the spiritual blessing. Martin Luther fought against both positions.

The Meaning

Baptism, being done by men as a sign, may at first appear to be a human work. Of course, Luther vehemently rejected this. Baptism is first a divine ordinance, as spelled out clearly by Christ himself. Luther began his study of baptism in the Large Catechism by quoting Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16. Not only is it a divine institution, but, Luther was careful to note, it is also commanded. “It is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved.”

Both of these points were important for Luther, because he was writing against the sacramentalism of the Roman Church and the reduced significance of the sacraments for the Reformed and, especially, the Anabaptists. He wanted to maintain the efficacy of baptism while renouncing that it is a human work, as taught by the Roman Church. He also wanted to emphasize that, while not a human work, it is still a visible external sign, and it is legitimate since it is instituted by God. Included in the opening remarks in the section on baptism in the Large Catechism is a reference to “sects who proclaim that Baptism is an external thing and that external things are of no use.” This is refuted because “What God institutes and commands cannot be useless.”

Since baptism is done as a response to God’s command and in God’s name, it “works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this.” This is possible because the

31Luther, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther’s Works, 36:67.
33Ibid. The editors of the Book of Concord add a footnote to this remark: “This was an argument used by some left-wing radicals in the sixteenth century.”
34Ibid.
35Luther, Small Catechism (St. Louis: Concordia, 1943), p. 174.
baptism is not done by man, but by God himself. It is a work, yes, but the work of forgiveness in baptism is God’s work. Salvation certainly is not effected by the water, but it certainly is effected by God at the water. “The significance of baptism is a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God so that the old man, conceived and born in sin, is there drowned and a new man, born in grace, comes forth and rises” (emphasis added).36 Again Luther said, “Ordinary water . . . could not have such an effect [of salvation]. But the Word has.”37

Of course the Word is again central in this work. As pointed out above, the water without the Word is meaningless. This is why, while the work takes place in the water, it is effected by God. Without the Word from God the water is like any other. “Baptism is a very different thing from all other water, not by virtue of the natural substance but because here something nobler is added.”38 God has chosen baptism as the agent whereby faith is expressed and salvation is given. Baptism “from the Word . . . derives its nature as a sacrament.”39

Faith must be emphasized again as being crucial to a proper understanding of baptism. Since it is faith that brings one to salvation, Luther could say that salvation can come without baptism. Althaus says, “In opposition to Roman sacramental doctrine and piety, Luther can even declare that faith can do without the sacraments, especially baptism.”40 In a sermon on Mark 16:14-20, he seemed to say the opposite of what we have just seen. Perhaps it is best to regard these comments as a corrective or balance of his very strong words concerning the salvation that comes in the water. He said, “A person can believe although he is not baptized; for Baptism is no more

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36Luther, Holy Sacrament of Baptism, Luther’s Works, 35:30.
38Ibid., p. 438. Also p. 439: “When the “Word is present according to God’s ordinance, Baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ’s Baptism.”
39Ibid. See also Zweite Predigt uber die Taufe, gehalten am 3. Sonntag nach Epiphaniä, Weimar Edition, 46:155: “Baptism . . . is merely water before the Word of God is added to it; it is ordinary water, of which a cow may otherwise drink or which a cook may use for boiling and washing. However, when the Word of God is pronounced over it so that Baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, it possesses the power and might to wash away sin and to save from death.” See also What Luther Says, 1:45-46.
40Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, p. 349. Cf. “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Three Treatises, p. 189: “It cannot be true, therefore, that there is contained in the sacraments a power efficacious for justification, or that they are ‘effective signs’ of grace. All such things are said to the detriment of faith, and out of ignorance of the divine promise. Unless you call them ‘effective’ in the sense that they certainly and effectively impart grace where faith is unmistakably present.”
than an external sign to remind us of the divine promise."  

Karl Barth, commenting on this passage, points out that Luther did not want to make baptism optional, though he "incautiously" came close.  

Though he came close, he did not make baptism optional. These statements, in light of his comprehensive doctrine, must be seen as referring to extreme cases.  

Faith does not conflict with baptism, because, as mentioned above, baptism is not a work of man, but of God. "God’s works are beneficial and necessary for salvation. They do not exclude but require faith; for without faith they would not be apprehended."  

The implication here is that if baptism were a work of man, faith would not really matter. Luther saw this in the Roman teaching about baptism. Since the Roman Church taught that baptism was efficacious apart from faith, it, to Luther, was a work of man.  

Baptism is a work of God attained in faith. "Thus you clearly see that there is no work here which we perform but a treasure which he gives us and which faith apprehends."  

Luther insisted on the need for baptism, but he wanted to make it clear that it was not the same "need" the Roman Church taught. For Luther, faith was the saving condition through the sacramental water which God used in justification. He also had the Anabaptists in mind when he said, "Therefore they are unfair when they cry out against us as though we preach against faith. Actually, we insist on faith alone as so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed."  

Another argument against the Anabaptists was Luther’s emphasis on the discontinuity between the believer’s faith and God’s grace in the sacrament of baptism. While the Anabaptists said that baptism came after faith and had no meaning apart from faith, Luther insisted that baptism was the same whether one believed it or not. The absence of conscious faith by

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41Luther, *Am Auffartag das Evangelium Marci’ am letzen*, Weimar Edition, 10.3:142. See also *What Luther Says*, 1:54. If one reads this in isolation, he may not see any difference between this and the traditional Reformed view. As mentioned above, it must be seen as a corrective of any misconception, as well an emphasis on the importance of faith. Althaus points out that this teaching was condemned by the Council of Trent (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 350). See discussion below on Galatians 3:27.  
44Ibid.  
45"Large Catechism," *Book of Concord*, p. 441. Again we see that Luther was fighting a battle on two fronts. When he refuted Roman Catholic doctrine, the Zwinglians and Anabaptists rejoiced. When he refuted them, the Catholics took notice.
man does not nullify the grace of God, nor does faith create a sacrament. The Anabaptists tried to change baptism from a “sign and assurance of God’s promise to a sign of man’s faith.”46 Contrary to this, Luther affirmed that God’s activity in baptism comes before man’s faith. Luther declared,

No matter what my relation to faith may be, whether faith comes to me or endures, my faith or lack of faith neither contributes anything to Baptism nor detracts anything from it. For it does not depend on my belief but on the ordinance and institution of Christ.47

This is not to say that baptism works on a person apart from faith, but that faith does not make baptism a sacrament as though “God’s Word and work thus had to derive their power and effectiveness from us.”48

The meaning of baptism as the death to sin of the believer was important to Luther. The meaning of baptism is to be present throughout the life of the believer.49 The life of the Christian is a life of death to sin, which continues throughout his life and is consummated in physical death. “Therefore this whole life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and he who is baptized is condemned to die.”50 The Christian enters into a “life of death” in which he dies to sin.51 He has been

46Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, p. 351.
47Luther, Predigten des Jahres 1534: Nr. 73: Von der heiligen Taufe Predigten, Weimar Edition, 37:640f. See also What Luther Says, 1:54. This also came up in Luther’s discussion of infant baptism. See below.
48Ibid.
49Luther seemed to make an existential distinction between the actual baptism worked by God which is once for all and the baptism that the believer remains in and reenacts in faith. He said, “Thus, you have been once baptized in this sacrament, but you need continually to be baptized by faith, continually to die and continually to live” (The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther’s Works, 36:69). See also note 51 below.
50Luther, The Holy Sacrament of Baptism, Luther’s Works, 35:30.
51See Martin Luther, Luther: Lectures on Romans, Wilhelm Pauck, trans. and ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 185. “He has Christ who dies no more, and so he, too, dies no more but lives with Christ forever. For this reason, we are baptized only once, affirming the life of Christ thereby, though we may fall quite often and get up again.” Althaus says that Luther departs somewhat from Paul’s doctrine of baptism in this point. He says, “The apostle thinks in terms of the missionary situation; Luther is concerned with the situation within the Christian church. This means: Paul speaks of baptism as baptism of conversion and as the great point of distinction which clearly divides what a man once was from what he now is. . . . Luther must deal with the problem of that sin which remains in the life of the baptized. For this reason, Paul places the emphasis on what has taken place in baptism while Luther places it on the fact that baptism must be realized throughout our lives” (The Theology of Martin
“absolved from sin and come to grace . . . in order to live a different life now and to abstain from sins. To be baptized and yet to remain in sin makes no sense.”

This does not mean that one emerges from the water never to sin again. Luther said that people are baptized “into death,” or “toward death.” The new Christian does not yet have the fullness of eternal life, but has begun his journey towards it. He has “taken only the first steps toward the attainment of this death as [his] goal.” Since the baptism will not be consummated until physical death, the believer will still struggle with sin as his old nature tries to fight through the new. This brings up a question that Luther anticipated: “How does baptism help me, if it does not altogether blot out and remove sin?”

This question is answered by Luther’s well known exposition of the biblical doctrine of forensic justification. As related to the doctrine of baptism it means that Christians have died to the effects of sin. That is, the believer is forgiven of his sin and therefore he has died to sin. “It follows, to be sure, that when someone comes forth out of baptism, he is truly pure, without sin, and wholly guiltless.” The person who has died to sin in baptism is altogether pure and guiltless. He is “without sin and guilt.” This is true because of the “gracious imputation of God,” rather than by the nature of the person baptized.

This “gracious imputation” is effected by our “putting on Christ.” Commenting on Galatians 3:27, Luther said, “But to put on Christ according

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Luther, p. 358). While acknowledging that there may be more emphasis in Luther on the ongoing death, we cannot agree with Althaus that they have “two theologies.”

52Luther, Predigten des Jahres 1534: Nr. 73: Von der heiligen Taufe Predigten, Weimar Edition, 37:670. Also Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe, Weimar Edition, 2:737: “To be sure, Baptism is so great that if you turn from sins and appeal to the covenant of Baptism, your sins are forgiven. Only see to it—if you sin in this wicked and wanton manner by presuming on God’s grace—that the judgment does not lay hold of you and forestall your turning back.”

53Luther, Luther: Lectures on Romans, p. 181.

54Luther, The Holy Sacrament of Baptism, Luther’s Works, 35:33.

55Ibid., p. 32. He pointed out in the same paragraph that they are remiss who think that “sin is no longer present, and so they become remiss and negligent in the killing of their sinful nature.”

56Ibid., p. 33. See also page 35: “So you understand how in baptism a person becomes guiltless, pure, and sinless, while at the same time continuing full of evil inclinations.”

57Ibid., p. 36.
to the Gospel is a matter ... of ... a new birth and a new creation, namely, that I put on Christ Himself, that is, His innocence, [and] righteousness."58 To put on Christ, according to this verse, is to put on forgiveness of sins. The way this is done, through baptism, is extremely important. Luther wrote in opposition to the "fanatical spirits who minimize the majesty of Baptism and speak wickedly about it."59

This "putting on" actually takes place during baptism. Althaus comments that Luther's "understanding of baptism exactly expresses his doctrine of justification." “Paul teaches that Baptism is ... the garment of Christ, in fact, that Christ Himself is our garment. Hence Baptism is a very powerful and effective thing.”60 Luther used Titus 3:5 in several places, emphasizing the "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."61 This washing comes in baptism. Baptism is not "an empty token; but the power of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” It, therefore, "makes a different person of me before God.”62 Thus, even though sin may still be a part of the Christian’s life, his sin is forgiven by God’s decision.63 This is one important reason for the external institution of baptism. Baptism is something we can look back to and cling to for assurance.64

The modern evangelical churches would do well to heed Luther’s summary in his “Large Catechism”:

58Luther, Lectures on Galatians, Luther’s Works, 26:352.
59Ibid., p. 353.
60Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, p. 356.
62Luther, Predigt am Freitag Dionysii der Schloßkirche, Weimar Edition 45:174. See also What Luther Says, 1:46.
63See Luther’s Works, 35:37. Also page 38: "For so long as I believe that God will not count my sins against me, my baptism is in force and my sins are forgiven, even though they may still ... be present.” See above discussion of the death to sin. Luther is not here espousing the right of the believer to continue in sin. See also Luther’s Works, 35:41: “For in baptism we all make one and the same vow: to slay sin and to become holy through the work and grace of God, to whom we yield and offer ourselves, as clay to the potter.” See also Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, p. 356: “God now wills to take us, who remain sinners throughout our lives, and actually make us what we are in his gracious judgment.”
64 See “Large Catechism,” Book of Concord, p. 440. “But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe—something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand. Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through water . . . but through its incorporation with God’s Word.”
We are not to regard it as an indifferent matter, then, like putting on a new red coat. It is of the greatest importance that we regard Baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted. It is the chief cause of our contentions and battles because the world now is full of sects who proclaim that Baptism is an external thing and that external things are of no use. But no matter how external it may be, here stand God’s Word and command which have instituted, established, and confirmed Baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. It is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it may not be worth a straw.

Although Luther broke with his contemporary Catholic environment on the meaning of baptism, he followed the Catholic tradition on the mode and subject of baptism.

**The Mode**

Luther clearly understood that the meaning of the Greek word for baptism and the corresponding German word (*Taufe*) to be “to plunge something entirely into water so that the water closes over it.”65 Not only did he come to this conclusion from the meaning of the words, but also from the imagery that is present in immersion. The believer is baptized so that “the old man and the sinful birth of the flesh and blood are to be wholly drowned by the grace of God.”66

In “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” Luther explained his preference for immersion. Since the symbolic aspect of baptism is the death and resurrection of the believer, immersion is obviously the best choice. The physical activity of being immersed into the water symbolizes the spiritual immersion into sin’s grave and the rising from it. “When the minister immerses the child in the water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth again it signifies life.”67

Luther even acknowledged that immersion was “doubtless the way it was instituted by Christ.”68 For these reasons he saw that immersion is, indeed, the preferred method. “It is far more forceful to say that baptism signifies that we die in every way and rise to eternal life, than to say that it signifies merely that we are washed clean of sins.”69 But he also said that it

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66Ibid.
68Ibid., p. 191.
69Ibid. Also page 192: “Although the ceremony itself is soon over, the thing it signifies continues until we die, yes, even until we rise on the last day. For as long as
was not "necessary." It is good to immerse as it is a "perfect and complete sign" of a perfect and complete event, but it is not "necessary."  

The Subject

The treatment of the "subject" of baptism is the most unsatisfactory aspect of Luther's total doctrine and possibly the one most influenced by his reaction against Anabaptists. It may be that Luther would not budge from his strong stand about infant baptism because it would have allied him with all the other things which he considered to be the worst of heresy in Anabaptist theology. He began his discussion of infant baptism with a direct reference to this very problem: "Here we come to a question by which the devil confuses the world through his sects, the question of infant Baptism."  

Luther admitted that there are no Bible passages that explicitly state that infants are to be baptized. But he cited the accounts of Jesus with the children to support his firm conviction that infant baptism was the correct doctrine. He also used the command to baptize. The command did not mention children specifically, but neither did it mention any other specific group. And he referred to the passages in Acts where "households" were baptized. The universal command to baptize was the mainstay of Luther's biblical argument for infant baptism. Luther was not attempting to prove infant baptism was taught in scripture, but to prove that it was not excluded. He felt he did this, whether his arguments were correct or not. But he had other arguments.

After Luther's scriptural arguments for infant baptism, his primary appeal was to tradition. If infant baptism was not legitimate Christian baptism, then "all this time down to the present day no man on earth could have been a Christian." There follows a list of church fathers and prominent

we live we are continually doing that which baptism signifies; that is, we die and rise again."

70 Ibid.

71 "Large Catechism," Book of Concord, p. 442.


73 Ibid., pp. 243-245.

74 Ibid., p. 252. See Article 252 of the Small Catechism: Q: "How do you prove that infants, too, are to be baptized?" A: "Because they are included in the words "all nations."" Following are quotes of Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38.

75 See Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, pp. 362f.

76 Ibid., p. 443.
Christian men of previous eras who received baptism only as infants. Not only does he present this obviously pragmatic approach as a good reason, he says that it is surely sufficient without any other proof! “This,” he stated, “is the best and strongest proof for the simple and unlearned.”

One objection to Luther’s insistence on infant baptism is that the infant cannot have faith. As seen above, Luther insisted on the absolute necessity of faith in baptism for it to be effective. He even went so far as to say that one could be saved by faith, in extreme cases, without baptism. How then can an infant be baptized without faith? For this Luther had at least two answers. The first has to do with the efficacy of baptism apart from any faith, and the second tries to explain that the infant does indeed have faith. The latter is connected with the faith of the sponsor.

The former answer has been alluded to already. Luther insisted, against the Anabaptists and Zwingli, that baptism is a sacrament because of God’s Word and the water, and nothing else. Applied to infants, this means that even if the infant did not have faith, the baptism is still a sacrament because of God’s Word and the water. “When the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For . . . faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it.” The lack of faith of the participant does not nullify God’s grace. Therefore baptism of infants is valid, even if infants have no faith. The infant can later say, “Now I believe, and since I was baptized, everything is fine.” The baptism was effective, not because of faith, but because of God’s Word. For Luther, though, this was an argument for the sake of argument only, because he was fully convinced that the infant has some kind of faith.

Luther did not back down from his contention that faith was absolutely necessary, even for infants. Therefore, according to Luther, infants have faith. “Children below the age of reason believe when they are baptized.” He came to this conclusion a posteriori, in a sense. Since he concluded that infant baptism is God’s will and that faith is essential, the only conclusion is that the infant has faith. “He is certain that children believe because infant baptism is right and valid—and for no other reason.” G. R. Beasley-Murray charges that Luther “postulated the presence of faith in an infant, in order to

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., p. 365.
80 Ibid.
bring his doctrine of infant baptism into line with justification by faith” (emphasis his).  

One way that Luther did try to show the presence of faith in the infant was by the vicarious faith of the sponsor during baptism. The responses of the sponsor to the baptismal questions express faith for the child. But, according to Althaus, Luther had abandoned this as early as 1522. In his Lenten sermon of 1525, Luther rejected both the Roman doctrine that the child was baptized on the faith of the church and the justification of baptism on the basis that the child would later believe. Since Jesus welcomed the children, he obviously knew that the children had faith. Surely Jesus would not welcome into the kingdom of heaven those who do not believe. The sponsor is still important when the child is baptized, since the child may receive faith through the sponsor. Nonetheless, it is still the child’s faith that saves. “Children are not baptized because of the faith of sponsors or of the church; rather the faith of sponsors and of the church gains their own faith for them and it is in this faith that they are baptized and believe for themselves.”

Luther objected to the charge that infants cannot believe because they do not have reason. This was an especially sensitive area for Luther, as he did not have high regard for reason at all, especially in matters of Christian faith. To the charge that an infant cannot believe because he does not have reason, Luther responded, “What if you have already fallen from faith through this reason and the children had come to faith through their unreason?” Again he says, “An old person may deceive, may come to Christ as Judas and permit himself to be baptized. But a child cannot deceive.”

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83 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 364.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., p. 366, quoting from Weimar Edition, 17.2:82. Excerpts of this sermon are reproduced in *What Luther Says*, 1:52-53: “No one is saved through another’s faith . . . but through his own.” See also the “Large Catechism,” article 234: “We bring the child with the conviction and trust that it believes and pray God to grant it faith.”
87 Ibid.
no one comes to Christ on the basis of reason, but only on the basis of faith. “A man must die to reason and become a fool, so to speak.” “The older people grasp it with their ears and their reason but often without faith; children, however, hear it through their ears without reason and with faith. And the less reason one has, the closer faith is.”88 Luther further objects that we cannot be sure that an adult has faith. What if he is lying? Adults are baptized even though no one is sure that they truly have faith. Why then should infants be withheld when they fall under the same category of ignorance?

Luther’s explanation of infantile faith has all the marks of special pleading. One may hold to Luther’s doctrine of the meaning of baptism or to infant baptism, but it is difficult to overcome the inconsistency between them, and Luther’s attempt shows how desperate his case is.

The Real Presence in the Lord’s Supper

Martin Luther’s theology of the Lord’s supper is thorough enough to take a volume by itself. It is necessary, therefore, to limit this study just to the doctrine of the real presence in his work. This doctrine was of high importance to Luther. It was one of those doctrines that he clung to tenaciously.89

What the Real Presence Is Not

Hoc est corpus meum.90 These words were inescapable for Martin Luther.91 When the Lord spoke the words of institution in the upper room he meant exactly what he said: “This is my body.” Luther said that anyone who claims that the term “is” means anything like “represents” is fabricating

88Ibid.
89Witness the title of a tract from 1526: “That These Words of Christ, ‘This Is My Body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics,” Luther’s Works, 37:3.
90These words were a major point of contention in the conciliatory efforts between the Lutherans and the “Reformed” theologians. At Marburg, Luther met with an impressive group of Swiss reformers, including Zwingli and Oecolampadius. While Zwingli declared at the outset that he was thrilled to see both Luther and Melanchthon there, the mood changed. Luther took a piece of chalk and wrote on the table “Hoc est corpus meum” to underscore his literal interpretation. Zwingli and the others of his persuasion gave a figurative interpretation. See Roland Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), pp. 249-250.
91See Hermann Sasse, This Is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), p. 81: “I am captured by the Word of God and cannot find a way out. The words are there, and they are too strong for me.” (The quote is from Luther, Weimar Edition, 15:394.)
This stems from Luther’s basic hermeneutical principles. Since the words of Christ in the upper room gave no indication that this was a symbolic institution, Luther had to conclude that the words are to be taken literally. The problem, of course, is just how the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Luther spent some time saying how it did not occur.

The doctrine of transubstantiation is one way that the bread and wine do not become body and blood. The first direct formulation of a rejection of this doctrine is found in “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.” The problem of transubstantiation is the “second captivity” of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Luther sought to retain as simple a doctrine as he could and yet retain the real presence. The words spoken by Christ and the apostles should

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92Luther, Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis 1528, Weimar Edition, 26:271f. See also What Luther Says, 2:801.

93Luther insisted on a literal interpretation of scripture unless scripture itself warrants otherwise. Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, says, “One may depart from this principle [of literal interpretation] only when the text itself compels a metaphorical interpretation... ‘Luther opposes...‘those fanatics who subject the Scriptures to the interpretation of their own spirit.’” For a fuller treatment see Ad librum eximii Magistri Nostri Magistri Ambrosii Catharini, Weimar Edition, 7:711; De servo arbitrio, Weimar Edition, 18:700f.; Predigten über das erste Buch Mose, Weimar Edition, 14:305.

94It should be pointed out that Luther saved his sharpest criticism for Zwingli and those who held to his theology of the Lord’s supper. He once said, “Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood” (Luther’s Works, 37:317). Our purpose here, though, is to examine the details of the doctrine of the Real Presence, not to see Luther’s refutation of other doctrines. See below for his strivings with the Radical Reformers.

95In Luther’s very early years he did maintain the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation. See “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods,” Luther’s Works, 35:47ff. This article was written in 1519. See especially page 59: “Christ did not institute these two forms solitary and alone,” but he gave his true natural flesh in the bread, and his natural true blood in the wine, that he might give a really perfect sacrament or sign. The bread is changed into his true natural body and the wine into his natural true blood.” Luther says this without elaboration, so it seems that he had not yet given much consideration to alternate explanations. But it is important to note that in the very same section of the same article he refers to the flesh as being “under” the bread and the blood being “under” the wine (p. 60). Within a year he rejected completely the doctrine of transubstantiation.

96See Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Three Treatises, pp. 113-260. Although it is clear that he rejects transubstantiation in this treatise, he does not yet condemn those who hold to it. Instead he says, “Therefore I permit every man to hold either of these opinions, as he chooses... One may... believe either one view or the other without endangering his salvation” (p. 145).
be understood in the simplest way possible. Therefore, when the Gospels
plainly say that Christ took bread and broke it, we should take it to mean that
he had actual bread. When Luke and Paul referred to bread and wine, we
assume that they were real bread and wine. Transubstantiation is an invention
of the human mind, since it has neither scriptural nor rational support.97

The Bible never speaks of a changing of the bread and wine into flesh
and blood. Since this is the case, it is a forced interpretation to say that a
change takes place.98 According to Luther, it is an error to say that no bread
remains, but only the accidents of bread. The bread remains real bread and
the wine remains real wine. He emphasized this by talking about the grain of
the bread and the grapes of the wine.99 Luther had no regard for the “subtle
sophistry” of those who teach that the bread and wine lose their substance.
The bread and wine do not surrender or lose their natural essence.100

Luther blames the teaching of transubstantiation on adherence to
ancient philosophy. He cites Thomas Aquinas as being more influenced by
ancient philosophy than by scripture. He says that the church of Thomas is
“the Aristotelian church.”101 Even at that, the church survived for 1200 years
without the doctrine of transubstantiation. He refers to the official
establishment of the dogma as set out by the Fourth Lateran Council of
1215.102 Luther challenged the assumption that “heat, color, cold, light,
weight, [and] shape are accidents.”103 The result was a complex doctrine
which became more elaborate and confused as it developed. Luther preferred
a simpler explanation for the real presence.

Luther’s Explanation of the Real Presence

This explanation we will refer to as “consubstantiation.”104 While
Luther was surely correct in maintaining that he interpreted Christ’s words


98See Luther, Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis 1528, Weimar Edition,
26:287.

99Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, p. 377.

100See “Smalcald Articles,” The Book of Concord, p. 311.

101“Babylonian Captivity,” Three Treatises, p. 144. See also Althaus, The
Theology of Martin Luther, p. 376, n. 2. “The metaphysical theory in the dogma of
transubstantiation was completely dependent on the philosophy of Aristotle.”


103“Babylonian Captivity,” p. 148. Here and in the following pages Luther
condemns those who put more faith in Aristotle than in the simple words of Christ.

104We must understand that most Lutherans reject this label for their doctrine of
the Lord’s supper. It is used here for two reasons; first, it is the common description,
more simply than the Roman Catholics, his explanation of just why he held this interpretation is far from simple. He went to great pains to make clear just what he thought was meant by the doctrine of the real presence. In spite of his elaborate explanations, he still left much to faith in respect to how the body and blood of Christ are present.

The real presence exists in that the body and blood of Christ are “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. This is not to say that the bread and wine are “mere” bread and wine, any more than the water of baptism is “mere” water. The essence changes in no way, but in the presence of the word of faith and the community of the faithful, the true body and blood of Christ are present. Because of the Word, the sacrament of the Lord’s supper is “rightly called” the body and blood of Christ.

Just as the unbelief of the recipient cannot nullify the sacramental character of baptism, neither can the unbeliever nullify the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s supper. The body and blood are present, not because of the faith of the communicant, but because of the work of God. No one’s lack of faith could undo Jesus’ specific words and God’s work in the supper. This is not to say that the unbeliever will receive a blessing in the Lord’s supper. On the contrary, he may drink damnation upon himself. The eating outside of faith is “actually pernicious and damning.”

The difference between Luther’s doctrine and the Roman Catholic doctrine has been alluded to previously. Luther taught that the bread and wine never change in either accidents or essence. The bread and the wine which

and second, as we shall see, it may not be inaccurate. See Althaus, p. 376, who says that Luther replaced the doctrine of transubstantiation with consubstantiation.

105See “Luther’s Large Catechism,” The Book of Concord, p. 447.

106See Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 3:370. See also “The Formula of Concord,” The Book of Concord, pp. 571ff. See also Luther, Tischreden, Weimar Edition, 6:6770: “For the Sacrament is not based on the holiness of men but on the Word of God. And just as no saint on earth, yea, nor any angel in heaven, can make Christ’s body and blood out of the bread and wine, just so no one can alter or change the essence of the Sacrament, even though it is misused. For the Word by which it was instituted and made a Sacrament does not become false because of a person’s unbelief.” See also What Luther Says, 2:796.

107See Pieper, 3:110; 370; 376. See also “Formula of Concord,” The Book of Concord, p. 580: The one who partakes in an unworthy manner “becomes guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

are initially presented at the time of the Lord’s supper are the same bread and wine taken by the communicant. There is no conversion to the body and blood from bread and wine. Luther taught that Christ said, “This bread is my body; this wine is my blood.” The bread is still bread and the wine is still wine.

But the presence of Christ is no less real. Luther went to a great deal of trouble to maintain that the actual body and blood of Christ are eaten and drunk in the celebration of the Lord’s supper. Whoever sees the bread of communion sees Christ’s body. The body of Christ is actually put into the mouth and chewed at the same time that the bread is put into the mouth and chewed. Luther’s language is specific and graphic. But if the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation is not correct, and yet the bread and wine actually are the body and blood, what is the explanation? How can Luther maintain both his denial of the Roman Catholic doctrine and his affirmation of the real presence?

To begin with, he rejected the need to formulate any doctrine defending what was so clearly taught in scripture. He thought that those who denied the real presence should be the ones to work out a system to prove their case against scripture. Luther did not desire to present a complete and satisfactory explanation. Indeed he said (tongue in cheek?) that if he was wrong about this doctrine, he was deceived by God. Since it was much better to be deceived by God than man, he was willing to be deceived by the former.

Nevertheless, Luther did present a systematic and thorough explanation about why he believed as he did: not to defend his view but to

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109See Pieper, p. 299: “The changing of the bread into the body of Christ is a dream of the monks and sophists.”


111Luther, Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis 1528, Weimar Edition, 26:442: “Whoever eats this bread eats Christ’s body, and whoever presses this bread with teeth or tongue presses the body of Christ with teeth or tongue. . . . For what we do to the bread is correctly and well attributed to the body of Christ because of their sacramental union.” See also What Luther Says, 2:796.

112See “This Is My Body,” Luther’s Works, 37:55. “I shall do this even though I do not owe it to the fanatics; rather they are under obligation to prove that it is contrary to Scripture.”

113Luther, Sermon von dem Sacrament des Leibs und Bluts Christi, widder die Schwärmeister, Weimar Edition, 19:498: “See to it that you fasten your intention on God’s Word and stay in it, like an infant in the cradle. If you let it go for one moment, you have fallen away from the truth. The one intention of the devil is to get people away from the Word and to induce them to measure God’s will and works with their reason.” See also What Luther Says, 2:797.
show its possibility and rationale. The doctrine of the Lord’s supper is anchored in the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. Since the human nature of Christ on earth could not be separated from the divine, neither can there be a separation in the Lord’s supper.

The doctrine of communicatio idiomatum was developed to show the communion of the two natures in Christ; that is, the divine nature is communicated to the human nature in such a way that the two natures share the attributes of each other. Luther maintained that, just as there is real communication in the man Christ who walked in Palestine, so there is real communication of the glorified Christ at the right hand of God. This is especially important from the standpoint of the omnipresence of Christ. The divine attribute of omnipresence is communicated to the human attribute of flesh and blood. Since the body of Christ at the right hand of God maintains the attribute of omnipresence, it can indeed be present in the bread and wine of the sacrament.

That Christ may be in all places according to the communicatio idiomatum is coupled with the doctrine that the “right hand of God” is in all places. The “right hand of God” is not a specific physical place where Christ sits on a golden throne, but the power of God, which can be “nowhere and yet must be everywhere.” If it were not present in all places, it would have to be present in a specific place, which, of course, requires a denial of omnipresence. So the body of Christ may be in bread and wine by virtue of its sharing the divine nature and by virtue of being at the right hand of God, which is in all places.

In conclusion, we see that Luther could refute the radical reformers, who thought the Lord’s supper was only a reminder and nothing more, and that he could also refute the Roman Catholic doctrine that says the bread and wine are transformed. He maintained the simplicity of the scripture references which refer to the bread and wine—against the Catholics; and he maintained the real presence through a literal interpretation—against the Reformed theologians.

114 For a full treatment see Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 2:166ff.
115 Luther’s Works, 37:55.
116 Ibid., p. 140. A major criticism of this is that there is not substantial scriptural support that the glorified and ascended body of Christ is one of “flesh and blood.” Indeed the opposite would seem to be the case.
117 Ibid., p. 57.
118 Again, this teaching is not to prove the proper doctrine of the real presence of Christ. That need not be proved since scripture plainly teaches it. This only shows the possibility of the real presence and the coherence of the doctrine.