

Lutheran Reliance upon Sacraments

I recently attended a public memorial service for a colleague. He was in a profession that placed him in contact with the public so people of many different church backgrounds attended the service. Modern Evangelicals conducted most of the service, so I was expecting to find (and did find) the usual emphasis upon the person's action in believing or accepting as the basis for salvation.

But, I was taken aback somewhat by a statement that was made by one speaker, which I don't remember word for word, but was something like this: "Even though he grew up in a Lutheran church, he later learned that he couldn't just rely upon his baptism and came to realize that he needed a relationship with Jesus".

While my first reaction was annoyance that someone could be crude enough to disparage another religion at a public service that included people of all types of religious backgrounds, later I reflected about what was incorrect in his statement.

By his direct connection comparing baptism to the relationship with Jesus, he points out that he would base his assurance of salvation upon his relationship with Jesus. Lutherans do believe that we are forgiven and that the perfect life of Jesus becomes ours through baptism; therefore, we are made partakers of salvation through baptism. This is made plain in Acts 2:38 – 39: Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children."

When we look to baptism as means through which God provides salvation to us, that is correct and backed by scripture. If we were looking to find a way that we can satisfy God through our own actions, and use baptism as that action, that would be an incorrect use of baptism. That is what modern Evangelicals often accuse Lutherans of doing. Even if a Lutheran were to incorrectly base his salvation upon his own actions or life (instead of upon the cross), it would be unlikely that baptism alone would be used. One semi-retired Lutheran pastor, who has visited with countless Lutherans, said that he had never visited with anyone who held the view that if you just were baptized and received communion you would go to heaven no matter what the rest of your life was like. So, even Lutherans who make the mistake of basing their salvation upon their own actions generally don't make the mistake that is widely attributed to Lutherans by Evangelicals.

Surely, if a person relied solely upon the outward physical act of the reception of these two sacraments, it would be wrong because God hasn't lowered his standards for salvation to just routine mechanical acts without even faith in what they bestow. However, the mistake made by the modern Evangelical speaker is that God hasn't lowered his standards to just having a relationship with Jesus, either. The standard that God requires is perfection. Nothing less! But, that is the jump that the modern Evangelicals are not willing to make. They are continually trying to define some lower standard than perfection that God will accept as a condition of salvation. But, there is no lower standard. The acceptance of a standard that demands perfection or sinlessness will

not fit with their view of salvation. Its acceptance would require that only the cross and the message of the cross received through the sacraments could be used for assurance of salvation. It would require that they look at the word in the light of the doctrine of law and gospel, realizing that we will never achieve an act or a level of living acceptable to God as a basis of salvation. It would require that they accept that the law's purpose now is not for laying out a life that will give us assurance of salvation, but to just humble us and make us receptive to the message of the cross.

As the Lutheran pastor indicated, there are not many people would be so foolish as to believe that God had lowered His demands so low that only a couple of mechanical acts would suffice. But there are many who are fooled by the modern Evangelicals, who set a higher, but cloudier picture of what God demands. They try to convince many that God is satisfied by the living out of an experience or relationship with Him and so will consider them as partakers of His salvation based upon it. They are trying to use a set of standards or actions as a basis of salvation, and they think Lutherans are doing that also, but only using baptism, and they say it is too little. Their mistake is using their own lives or actions at all. With that attitude they will never see the free salvation that God entirely and solely provides for us, including through the means of baptism.

Even though I should be somewhat hardened to Modern Evangelicals' continual criticisms of the Lutherans, I can't help but wonder if modern Evangelicals would have reacted very gracefully if a speaker got up at a memorial service and said, "Even though he grew up in a Baptist church, he wasn't as spiritually successful as most Baptists and he later found that his conversion experience or personal relationship with Christ did not provide him with assurance of salvation. He came to realize that his only hope of heaven was that God would have mercy upon him, of which mercy he found assurance of in the cross and in the forgiveness offered through the Lutheran sacraments."

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