

The Ecumenical Sacrament: Baptism and the Holy Christian Church

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“One Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Eph 4:5

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Baptism is the ecumenical sacrament. It unites Christians into one holy Christian and apostolic Church. One is not baptized Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or otherwise. One is baptized by water and word into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This theme of the New Testament, gets overshadowed by the greater theme of justification that runs right through Holy Baptism. Ecumenism takes a back seat to the gospel proclaimed in “the washing of regeneration” (Tit 3:5). Anything touching on the means of grace, naturally speaks about grace!

For example, Peter uses the imagery of Noah’s Ark that rescued him and his family, and says, “baptism now saves you”(I Pt 3:21). Fantastic! Paul asks Christians in Rome, “Don’t you know?” as if they do (indeed) know! “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Amazing! Ananis comes to Saul, calling him to the great benefit of baptism: “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” (Ac 22:16) Terrific!

We can spend a lifetime unpacking the meaning of these verses. Pastors are constantly teaching about the benefits of holy baptism. Lay people are constantly being reminded of the merits of this objective promise when their subjective faith so often wavers. We are not as confident of God’s grace as we should be. But we can always say, “But I am baptized!”

Add to this the controversy that stirs the church about infant baptism. Since the time of the Middle Ages, there has been a debate about the inclusion of children in the benefits of Holy Baptism. The simple words of Jesus, “you must be born again of water and the spirit” become “you must be born again of water and *then* the spirit” (Jn 3:5), so that one is left watching and waiting for a truly spiritual encounter with Jesus that sticks and stays all the way to the grave.

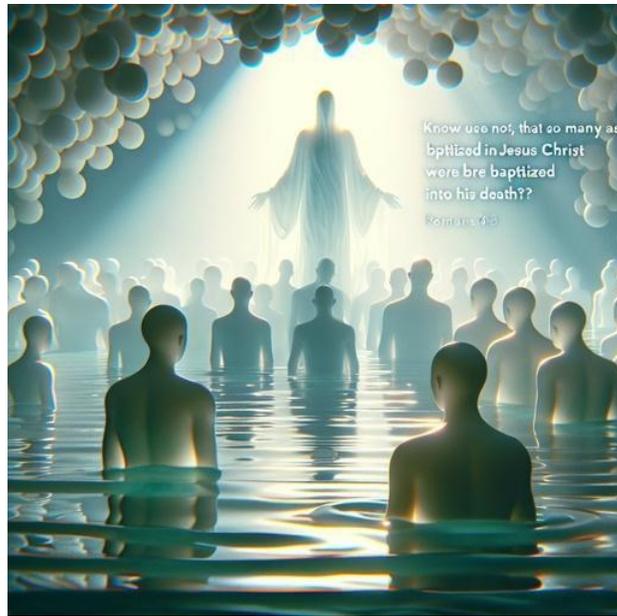
But lost in all this celebration of what God gives in and through baptism, and the ongoing discussion about infant baptism, is the simple emphasis of the New Testament on the ecumenical nature of the sacrament. There is true unity in Christ that is grounded in our baptism and faith. Call it a fringe benefit!



It is like a boat moving through the water from point A to point B, kicking up a wake in its going. So too Christian unity is a peripheral matter compared to the gift of salvation delivered by the “water with the word” of holy baptism (Eph 5:26). It is not a primary benefit. Perhaps not even secondary, but tertiary. In holy baptism, we are washed clean! We are joined to Christ. But we are also joined to one another in the holy Christian church. Though we are baptized into Christ as individuals so that we are buried with Christ and raised with Christ (Rom 6:4), nevertheless, ours is a mass grave. And a mass resurrection! We are not baptized alone into Christ. We are baptized as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The same thing can be said of the sacrament of the altar. Fellowship is not its principal aim. Unity is not its ultimate outcome. “The chief thing in the Sacrament is... the forgiveness of sins.” (Luther, Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar III) It is the chief thing! But it isn’t the only thing.¹

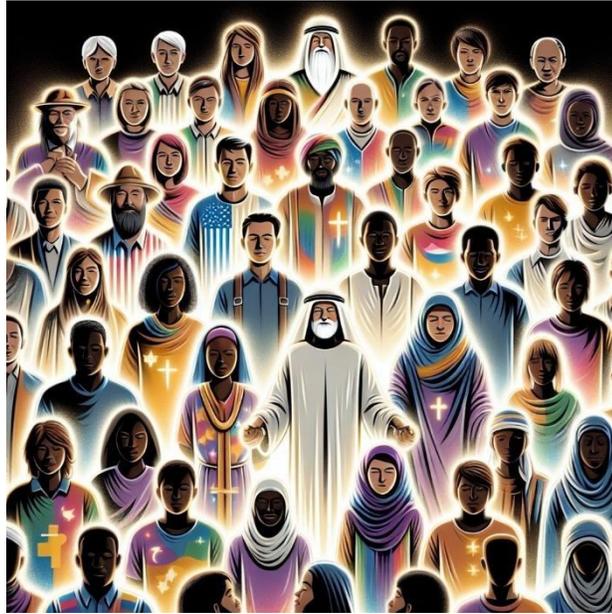
¹ Trent would agree: “If any one saith, either that the principal fruit of the most holy Eucharist is the remission of sins, or, that other effects do not result therefrom; let him be anathema.” (Council of Trent, Eucharist, 5)



This paper will begin first with the principal texts of the New Testament that stress the ecumenical nature of baptism, primarily Galatians 3:26-20 and Ephesians 4:4-6; also I Corinthians 10:2 and 12:13. Second, we will explore the 4th century church father Cyprian of Carthage who dealt with baptisms by heretics in connection with the doctrine of the church. He is the one who gives us the elegant phrase, "He who has not the church as his mother, has not God as his father." And "Outside the church there is no salvation." Third, we will deal with the issues of fellowship in the two sacraments. We have baptized membership rolls and communicant membership rolls in our congregations. What is the distinction? Is this a way of understanding fellowship issues in the church today?

I. THE PRINCIPAL TEXTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Gal 3:26-29)



Paul's letter to the Galatians is considered one of his earliest works. There, Paul marshals forth the chief article of the Christian faith, namely, justification by faith in Christ. This is the gospel that he preached and, "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). So intent is Paul on this topic of justification that he covers it from beginning to end in his letter. Only in the last chapter and a half does he let go of justification to move onto moral and practical matters and close with his farewell (Gal 5:13-6:18). Even so, he returns to justification in his farewell saying, "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14).

Part and parcel to this topic of justification is the sacrament of holy baptism. "You are all sons of God through faith. For as many as you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:26). Putting on Christ, being clothed with Christ, means to have and wear on our bodies, like a shield, the benefits of his death and resurrection. Paul ends this reference to baptism with the comfort that we are "heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). And what is that promise? Eternal life! The Promised Land of Abraham!

Paul is speaking here of baptism within the great theme of his epistle: justification through the merits of Christ's death and resurrection. We are delivered from sin, death, and the power of the devil, not by our own works of the law, but by the work of Christ. However,

tucked away in this same passage is the theme of Christian unity. There, in the wake of this ship moving through the water toward the shores of eternal life, is the benefit of being one in Christ. “For there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ” (Gal 3:28).

When you track through Paul’s letters, there is an overriding concern for Christian unity. This is even more evident in his letter to the Ephesians. But even here, in his letter to the Galatians, the divide between Jew and Gentile seems apparent. There is much attention paid to the subject of circumcision as a key work of the law, which may have been not only a theological question, but one that divided Jew and Gentile sharply in this congregation.

Paul’s theme verse to the Romans brings this also to the fore: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom 1:16-17).

The divide is also between male and female as well as slave and free. The Roman world was not a classless society. Lines were rigidly laid between Roman and non-Roman as they were in Judaism between Jew and Gentile. As with all ancient societies, there were those in power and those who were not. In the tradition of the early church, we have the story of Onesimus who went on to become the pastor and bishop of his parish in Ephesus, over and with his master Philemon.

This is not to say that the social order is upset by holy baptism. When a parent baptizes their child, that child becomes their brother or sister in Christ; not their son or daughter in Christ. Nevertheless, that child is still their son or daughter! Children still obey their parents. So too the distinction between male and female and slave and free. Paul calls slaves to obey their masters too; nevertheless, we are family in Christ, while our obligations in daily life can differ.

The other principal text from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

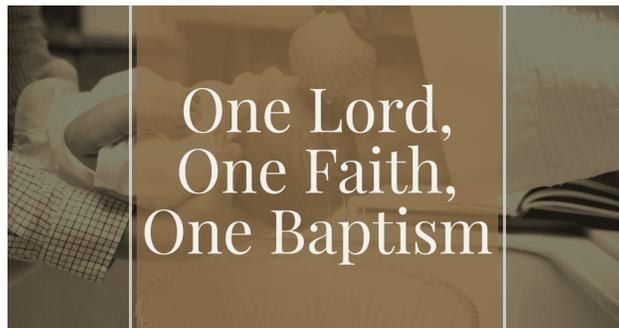
“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph 4:1-6, ESV)

Unity is a great theme in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. 46 times in 6 chapters Paul speaks of our being “in” Christ, and because we are “in” Christ we are one. Like spokes in a wheel that are drawn together in the hub, so we are one in Christ. “For he himself is our

peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14).

The great dividing wall in the early Christian church was between Jew and Gentile. There are other divisions of male and female, slave and free, and even rich and poor (I Cor 11:22), but much ink is spilled on the topic of Jew and Gentile in Paul’s letters.

Christianity in the first century was walking across the bridge from the Old Testament into the New, and there were some bumps along the way. We don’t appreciate these bumps much in our day because they are behind us. Who debates the importance of circumcision? Who argues for worshiping on Saturday instead of Sunday? Who concerns themselves with meat offered to idols? That isn’t the world we live in today. The seeds of the new covenant are there in the old, and they were flowering as Paul brought the gospel out to the gentile world. We look back on flowers that have already grown.



In the text above, you’ll notice the word “one” is used seven times. “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” One body is the church. One spirit is the Holy Spirit. One hope is the one offered to us in the gospel. One Lord is Jesus Christ. One faith is the one we confess. One baptism is the one we experienced. One God and Father of all is the first person of the Trinity. And the fact that the trinity is mentioned in its parts and final unity, “over all, through all, and in all” brings us right back to the sacrament of baptism again.

Obviously, our unity isn’t solely in baptism. It is in Christ! It is also in our common faith and hope in Christ. But Paul centers our unity in an objective reality. It is there in the “washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:26) that we are bound together as one and made into the bride of Christ, “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Eph 5:27). This bride isn’t one person. It is the whole Christian church washed clean in Christ.

It is fascinating to study the history of Church bodies from separate theological traditions accepting or not accepting the baptisms of other faith traditions. Two exceptions should be

considered. Those who reject infant baptism, and the question of baptisms administered by the water and word of baptism by heretical church leaders.

Those who reject infant baptism are those, we would say, who rebaptize their converts. Hence, the term anabaptist means to baptize again. But that moniker is one aimed at this tradition, not used by them. They would see their convert's second baptism as their first. The Schleithem Confession of 1527 states: "Baptism is administered only to those who have consciously repented, turned away from sin, amended their lives, and believe that Christ has died for their sins and who request it for themselves. Infant baptism is specifically denounced."

Conversely, those who come to Lutheranism from an Anabaptist tradition are not rebaptized. Because holy scripture dictates no exact mode of baptism, Lutherans receive those who were immersed or sprinkled, in their youth or old age. Infant baptism (paedobaptism) and believer's baptism (credobaptism) are one and the same. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism."

The Roman Catholic tradition also does not rebaptize converts to Roman Catholicism. Those who are converting will often seek documentation from their former congregations that they indeed were baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and of the Holy Spirit, but that this individual was baptized by a Lutheran Pastor, is of no consequence.

The Orthodox tradition is unique. Historically, converts to Eastern Orthodox from other traditions, such as Roman Catholicism, were rebaptized. This happened after the great schism of 1054 until the 18th century. Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions still do not recognize baptism done outside their own traditions. However, this official condition is not universally practiced in these Orthodox traditions. This is because there is no clear answer to the question of whether Lutherans and other Protestants are indeed heretical in the same way the term is used in the early church.

"The recognition or non-recognition of baptism performed in other churches is closely related with the question about the boundaries of the church. In paedobaptism churches baptism is, among other meanings, also understood as reception into the body of Christ, which is the church." ²

Two other texts to consider are both from First Corinthians. These are unique because they also contain references to the sacrament of the altar. First, consider I Corinthians 10:2

² Heller Dagmar. Baptized into Christ: A Guide to the Ecumenical Discussion on Baptism, p 175



“And all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (I Cor 10:2).

Paul begins this section of I Corinthians by taking his readers back to ancient Israel. They all were called into being as a nation by the rescue of the Lord God of Israel. This corporate unity, this gathered identity, is marked by the presence of God. “Our fathers were all under the cloud,” by the passing “through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” as well as the eating of the manna in the wilderness and drinking “from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (I Cor 10:1-4).

Universal participation in these sacramental actions did not mean Israel then in turn could abandon faith and still remain in God’s favor. The baptized will be in heaven. The baptized will be in hell. So too the faithful communicate at the altar who nevertheless possesses “a wicked unbelieving heart” (Heb 3:12). The sacraments do not create their effect by mere operation. One doesn’t just go through the motions of a sacrament and find themselves secure. Faith receives the gifts offered in the means of grace. Five times Paul uses the word “all” in I Cor 10:1-4, and it is counterposed by the word “most” in the end. “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased” (I Cor 10:5).

Luther underscores the importance of faith in holy baptism too. He has us ask, “How can water do such great things?” Answer: “It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water.”

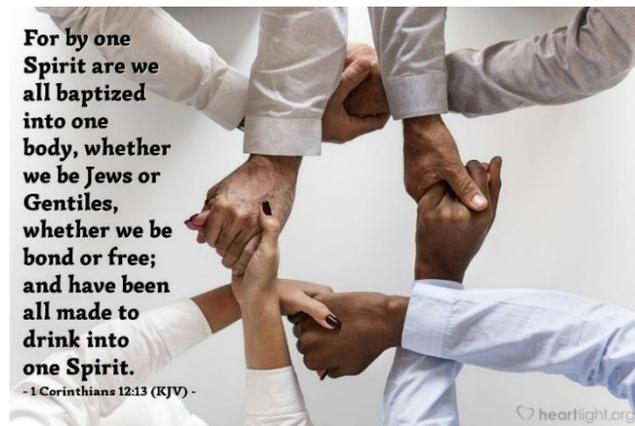
Paul places this sacramental narrative before us along with the chronology of Israel. They first came under the cloud (Ex 13), then through the sea (Ex 14), then subsequently ate the manna (Ex 16), and drank from the rock (Ex 17). We should not be surprised to see this same chronological sequence in our own lives. Baptism first, initiating us into the body of Christ. The sacrament of the altar sustains us in this fellowship. You’ll notice also that the baptism is into Moses, but the Rock is Christ. It was Moses who said, “The Lord your God will

raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen” (Deut. 18:15).

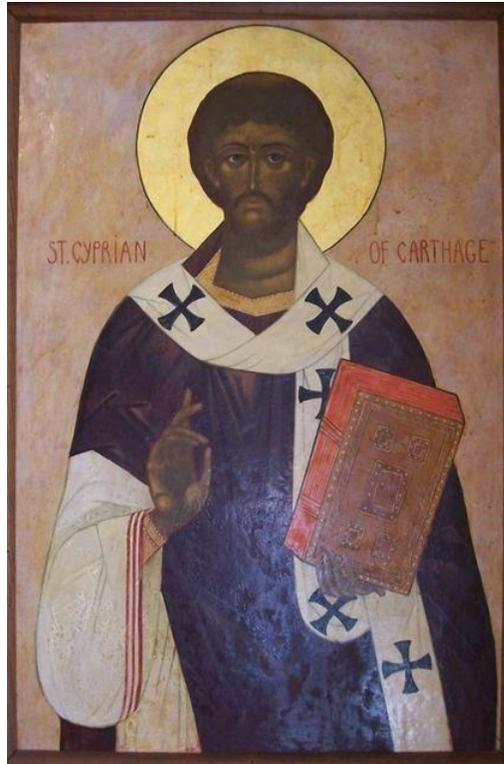
Paul returns to this same sacramental theme in chapter 12:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (I Cor 12:12-13)

Again, the sequencing is the same. The lack of distinction between Jews or Greeks, slaves or free is connected to baptism. He leans into the first sacrament—Holy Baptism—for this ecumenical, or churchly fellowship. Though it is certainly expressed also in the drinking of God’s people; nevertheless, the barriers between Jew or Greek, slaves or free, are taken down immediately with holy baptism.



In summary, these four texts all bring out the ecumenical nature of the sacrament of holy baptism. The first two speak of this unity in baptism alone. The second two speak of this unity in baptism and also Holy Communion. Nevertheless, the emphasis is put forward upon baptism as that which brings about one body without distinctions made between “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” (I Cor 12:13). There are no solo New Testament references to Holy Communion having this same ecumenical impact. The themes of unity are there in Holy Communion but of a different kind. Holy Baptism is the initiating sacrament, and hence also the ecumenical one.



II. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

The second point of this paper is to see how this idea of unity expressed in the sacrament of holy baptism gets expressed in the church in real time and under duress. Much of the early church is spent on the doctrines of Christology and the Trinity, which culminate in the creeds of the early church. But this particular epoch in time brought before the church great questions of ecclesiology, that is, what is the church? What are the boundaries of the church? How does the church seek and establish unity?

Augsburg Confession Articles VII and VIII speak to this same time period and take the church one step further. The difference will be that the Lutheran Confession finds its timeless center in Christ and the Gospel “rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered,” and not

in the visible church hierarchy, such as the bishop of Rome, the purity of its leaders, or in the beauty of its liturgy.^{3 4}

Cyprian was a North African leader in the early church. He was born at the turn of the third century and was martyred in 258. A Black man of Berber descent, Cyprian lived and worked in Carthage, one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire. He was well educated in pagan philosophy and worked in the prestigious role of public orator and teacher of rhetoric until he was converted to Christ in 246. It was the humble witness of an elderly priest named Caecilianus through which Cyprian came to know and love Christ. Cyprian later recounts how everything changed after his conversion to Jesus Christ as Lord. In a world that confessed “Caesar is Lord,” Cyprian proclaimed “Christ is Lord.”

Cyprian was ordained shortly after his conversion. He rose to become bishop of Carthage in 249 AD. Because of his talents in debate, he was catapulted into public controversies early on in the church. One of these debates, centered on the question of how the Church should respond to lapsed Christians who had faced persecution and recanted their confession of Christ.

After nearly 40 years of peace and tremendous numerical growth in the church, the church was hit by a wave of persecution ordered by Emperor Decius in AD 250. His reign was short-lived 249-251, and this persecution died with him in battle.⁵ Clergy and bishops were intentionally targeted and tortured until fealty was sworn to Rome and the Roman pantheon. Many Christians, when threatened with death and or the loss of property, recanted their faith in

³ Also, they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4:5-6. (AC VII)

Although the Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use Sacraments administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ: The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, etc. Matt. 23:2. Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men. They condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect. (AC VIII)

⁴ “While the emphases differ and to some extent also the structure of thought, the Augustana shares interest with Cyprian every bit as much as it does with Augustine. This point is hardly ever appreciated because of the emphasis on the inherent power of the word in Lutheran thinking. Nevertheless, other interests, closer to Cyprian than to Augustine are also at work in Augustana 8.” (Weinrich, William. Cyprian, Donatism, Augustine, and Augustan VIII: Remarks on the Church and the Validity of Sacraments, p 286)

⁵ Origin in 248 AD predicted this: “And it is probable that the secure existence, so far as regards the world, enjoyed by believers at present, will come to an end, since those who calumniate Christianity in every way are again attributing the present frequency of rebellion to the multitude of believers, and to their not being persecuted by the authorities as in old times.”

Christ and performed ritual sacrifice, *sacrificati*, to the gods, burned incense, *thurificati*, to the emperor, or obtained letters, *libelli*, stating they had made such a sacrifice. They succumbed to this persecution and became apostates. These Christians came to be known as *lapsi*, or the lapsed.

After this year-long wave of persecution subsided, many lapsed desired to return to the Christian faith. Some made their appeal to the Christians, called confessors, who did not compromise their faith in the time of persecution and somehow survived. They sought their advocacy in the form of letters. What to do? Should the Church permit them back into fellowship with the body of Christ? Should they be permitted to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion? Or should it be withheld?



There were three reactions to the controversy. The harshest reaction comes from Novatian, a priest in Rome. No penance and no Holy Communion for the lapsed! God may forgive them in the end, but the church cannot. Also, and more importantly for the emphasis of this paper, no baptisms performed by lapsed priests were accepted. So too, from the sects, despite being done in the orthodox manner. Those desiring to return to the church were rebaptized.⁶ Novation's position is labeled "rigoristic" and rejected. His followers endured to the 7th century calling themselves "kataroi" instead, meaning pure.

The kindest reaction comes from Cornelius and then later Stephan, both to become, in quick succession, the bishop of Rome. They both advise a path back to the church for the lapsed. First, a simple act of penance, and then the reception of the sacrament of the altar. An example of penance in this time period was the lapsed kneeling in worship while the congregation went forward to receive Holy Communion. Also, no rebaptisms were necessary. All baptisms done

⁶ Technically merely baptized, as their first baptism was invalid. Today converts to Rome are not rebaptized, but there is a laying on of the hands so that the Holy Spirit is given by the church. The orthodox do the same, even for when converts came from Rome before the 19th century.

outside the church with the water and word (Matt 28:19) were considered valid. They were readmitted to the catholic church with the anointing of oil and the laying on of hands.

Cyprian of Carthage stands between Novatian and the successive bishops of Rome. He insists on a set time of testing, penance commiserate with their lapse, and then reception of the sacrament of the altar. In agreement with Novation, but on differing terms, baptisms were to be repeated upon their return. This becomes a flashpoint between Cyprian and Stephan that will only end with the bishop of Rome's martyrdom in Rome in 257.⁷

Of the three responses to the lapsed, it is Stephan's response that is enacted by Rome and is still practiced.⁸ Yet, echoes of Cyprian's theology long survive this time. The catholic catechism will quote his elegant phrase: "He who has not the church as his mother has not God as his father," but not in the spirit of Cyprian. The churches of the reformation also speak affirmatively of Cyprian's phrase, but here too, departing from his context of rebaptism.⁹

Novatian is a fascinating church father, though condemned by the church as a heretic for his ecclesiology and backdated and blacklisted as an antipope. Yet his Christology and trinitarian theology are thoroughly orthodox, and his clear writing advances the church to the council of Nicaea in 235 AD. But he is excommunicated for his rigor and ultimately his doctrine of the church.¹⁰

⁷ Cyprian will directly challenge the primacy of the bishop of Rome on this matter. "Neither does any one of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another. — 7th Synod of Carthage under Cyprian

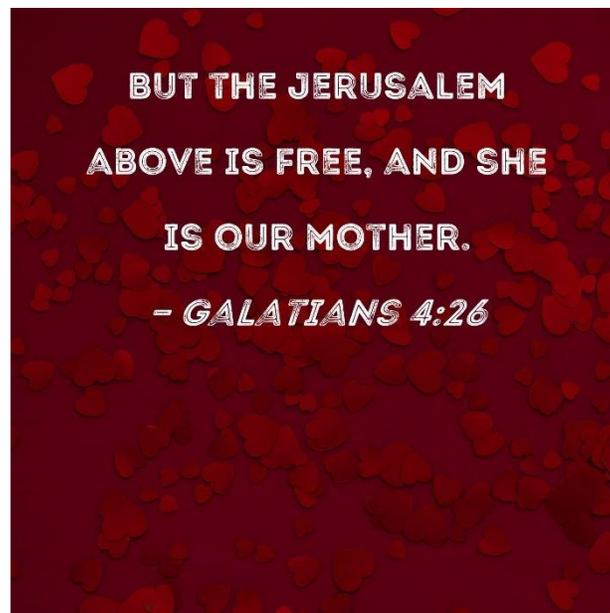
⁸ The Catechism of the Catholic Church introduces the phrase "Outside the Church there is no salvation" with a question, "How are we to understand this affirmation, often repeated by the Church Fathers? Re-formulated positively, it means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his body." But disarms the statement immediately saying, "This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church."

⁹ The principle: "Outside the church there is no salvation" or "Who does not have the church for a mother, does not have God for his Father," therefore, is true only in the sense that outside the invisible church there is no salvation and no divine sonship of grace. The principle means no more than that outside of Christ there is no salvation. Whoever has no spiritual fellowship with the believers and saints also has no fellowship with Christ. On the other hand, whoever by faith has fellowship with Christ, has fellowship also with all those in whom Christ dwells, that is, with the invisible church." C F W Walther, Church and Ministry, p 149

¹⁰ Roman Church historians put Novatian forward as the first example of the church dealing with schism instead of heresy. The Lutherans speak of the reformed also not as heretics but as heterodox which is finer point. Heterodox means hold a confession of the faith "once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3) mixed with error.

The council of Carthage in 251 AD responded also by excommunicating five rigorist bishops, including Novatian.¹¹ The Council affirms the election of Cornelius, bishop of Rome. But the matter of rebaptism is left to another council, and another bishop of Rome. Cornelius is martyred in 253, and two years later, Stephan takes his place, 254 until 257, and continues his same more lenient approach, one that wins out over Cyprian's compromise.

Leaving aside Cyprian's insistence upon a more intense time of testing and penance than either Cornelius or Stephan, Cyprian does push back against claiming baptisms outside the catholic church are valid. He agrees with Novatian that priests who had renounced Christ and had performed baptism were performing invalid baptisms. Those same individuals should be rebaptized as well as baptisms done by schismatics, or heretics, such as followers of Marcion, despite those baptisms being done according to the institution of Christ. (Matt 28:19-20).



During the Decian persecution, Cyprian wrote a treatise in exile titled "On the Unity of the Church." Here he articulates a theology of the Church in the context of these harsh on-the-ground experiences. And it is in the context of holy baptism as "the sacrament of unity" that he writes. The English translator of this work writes in his forward: "[Cyprian's] attitude on the baptism of heretics was closely bound up with his convictions about the unity of Church. He says (Letter 70.3) "Baptism is one, just as the Holy Spirit is one, just as the Church is one."¹²

¹¹ Cyprian compared the rigorists to the priest and the Levite who walked by the wounded man in the ditch, in the parable of the Good Samaritan. They had no compassion on those who had fallen into sin. A good bishop should be like the good shepherd leaving the ninety-nine in order to get the lost sheep back.

¹² Cyprian of Carthage 250. The Unity of the Church. Translated by Roy J. Deferrari 1972, p 91.

For Cyprian, the church is a visible, external association of the saints. The office of bishop is central. The bishop is in the church, and the church is in the bishop. That Cyprian is speaking of the institutional church seems obvious to him. Since baptism is the church's unique property, Cyprian suggested that the lapsed and or heretical bishops had illegal possession of the Sacrament. Therefore, baptisms that happened outside this visible church were, in fact, no baptisms at all.

What is the takeaway from all this?

Cyprian's elegant phrase is perhaps too elegant. It is too memorable! The holy scriptures most certainly speak in this same way. The church is always in the feminine in the New Testament. She is the bride of Christ, and she is our mother (Gal 4:26; Is 66:10-11). But a distinction still needs to be made between the institutional church and the spiritual church. What the New Testament describes as the church "at" such and such city and the church throughout the world (I Cor 1:2). In classical Lutheran theology, we would distinguish the visible and invisible church.

III. FELLOWSHIP IN THE TWO SACRAMENTS

The church not only exists, she gathers. And she gathers to hear the word of God taught and proclaimed (Acts 13:34) and to receive the sacraments (I Cor 11:26) rightly administered. The sacraments, in particular, call us out of our individual lives into the body of Christ. They have us put skin in the game. One can sit and hear and learn and no one would know anything about our faith. But when I seek baptism for my children, or for myself as an adult, I stand before the community of faith where everyone can see me, and hear me speak on behalf of my child, or myself. "I'm in it to win it," as they say. So too Holy Communion. I go up and stand in line. I bow and receive the body and the blood of Christ. I'm actively engaging in my faith before others. I make a public spectacle of myself, binding myself together with these other sinners. As Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (I Cor 11:26)

The two sacraments are a way for the church to "live move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) in our fellowship, so that the Holy Spirit is busy and active within Christ's church creating and sustaining her fellowship. This then brings us to the third part of this paper. We have two sacraments, and we have two membership rolls within the church: baptized membership and communicant membership.

The apostle Paul spoke of "letters of commendation" in his letter to the Corinthians (II Cor 3:1), and actually gives such a commendation for Phoebe in his letter to the Romans (Rom 16:1). Such letters continued in the early church commending "admission to the koinonia." Sometimes called "Letters of Peace" or "Letters of Fellowship" they came not from a village priest

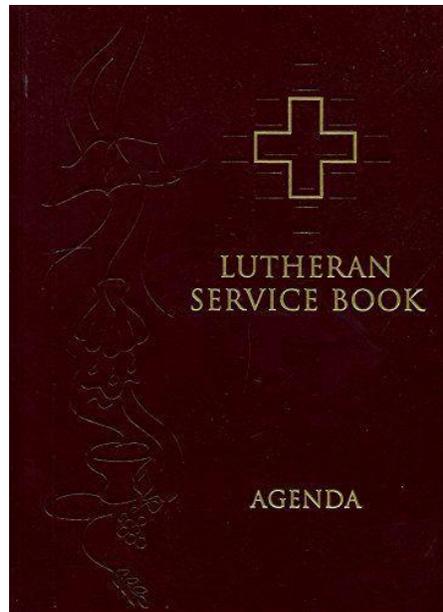
but from the bishop. “By his enjoyment of church fellowship in the local congregation, a Christian had a part in the universal church fellowship of the whole church. The inclusion of the small circle in the great one found concrete expression in this that a Christian who transferred from one congregation to another might join in the Holy Communion there. Thus, the altar fellowship of the local congregation was also embraced and upheld by the altar fellowship of the whole church.”¹³

This tradition continues today, but not in all denominations in the same manner. The higher the view of the sacrament, the more attention to this matter will take place. Traditions with ordinances in place of sacraments, or see only a symbolic meaning to baptism and Holy Communion, may seem confused if a “letter of release of membership” is requested by your congregation. So too, you may receive “letters of transfer” from a Presbyterian church when no altar and pulpit fellowship is there between that communion and your own.

Your own constitution and bylaws will outline this for you. We receive letters of transfer from sister congregations in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and from congregations that are in altar and pulpit fellowship with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. A list can be found here: lcms.org/partner-church-bodies. Such letters show us that incoming new members have been baptized and or also instructed in the teachings of the small catechism with explanation. The rite of membership in your public worship services underscores this same expectation.¹⁴

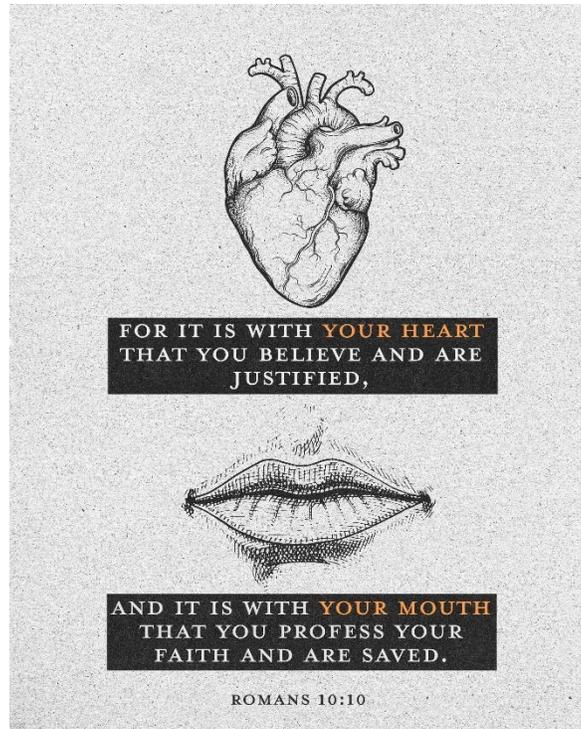
¹³ Werner Elert. *Eucharist and Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, p 130-131, 134

¹⁴ The questions are as follows: Do you confess the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Scriptures, as you have learned to know it from the Small Catechism, to be faithful and true? Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully? Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?



In the Lutheran Service Book, the public rite of new membership is the same as that of confirmation. The promises made follow the contours of the two sacraments of the church. The first question is: “Do you this day in the presence of God acknowledge the gifts given to you in your baptism?” The rite ends with reference to the sacrament of the altar: “As you continue to hear the Lord's Word and receive His blessed Sacrament...” Older rites follow this same outline.

So too, there is movement from the invisible Church of all believers, an ecumenical church, to the visible church, the evangelical Lutheran Church. One is not baptized Lutheran, but one is confirmed Lutheran. And the vows make that apparent. “Do you confess the doctrine of the evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Scriptures, as you have learned to know if from the Small Catechism, to be faithful and true” (Lutheran Service Book Agenda, page 29).



In this parish pastor's teaching, I've used the heart and the lips to illustrate this movement from baptism to the Lord's supper, and from the invisible toward the visible church. Paul says "For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:10). The rite of confirmation references the words of Jesus, "So everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 10:23-33).

The distance between your heart and your mouth may be only twelve inches. But for many, it is the longest road the Christian faith will travel. Yet approaching the sacrament of the altar means traveling down this road. It is a road that brings us out of the pews to the altar to stand before the congregation as one who joins in this confession of Jesus who is there in his body and blood, for me, for the forgiveness of my sins. Who can see faith in the heart? Who knows we have been baptized? Yet baptism and faith make a Christian. They include us in the church of all the saints. Baptism is the ecumenical sacrament. And the movement to the Lord's Supper is a deepening of that same faith. It takes one further down the same road into the teachings of Christ. And it takes us into a deeper fellowship with the body of Christ that we are willing to confess before the world, what Paul calls "increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:10).

Why does the apostle Paul stress baptism "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:6) as the sacrament that establishes the church and not also Holy Communion? Why do the creeds bring us to the sacrament of the water and the word, but not also the sacrament of the bread

and wine and the very words of Christ? Because baptism is the ecumenical sacrament. It unites all believers in Christ. The Lord's supper will ask for more of its fellowship—more teaching and more understanding.

When there is an adult baptism instruction beforehand is focused on the Trinity. They will speak the baptismal creed which broadens their understanding of the three persons of the Trinity. How much instruction is necessary? How much took place in the chariot until the Eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36b). But certainly more instruction takes place for one coming to the sacrament of the altar. Infant communion is rejected because Paul says, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 10:28-29).

We all have children and adults who come to our altar not to receive Holy Communion. Children do so because they have not yet been instructed and have not yet given assent to the teaching with their vows. Thumbs up! Amen to the catechism! So too adults who have been instructed in other faith traditions, perhaps were taught "without discerning the body" as Paul suggests in his letter to the Corinthians. But just because we pass by or offer the blessing on their baptism, it does not suggest that they are second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. They have been baptized. They also believe. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ! We would invite them, even draw them, to the Lord's Supper, not to bring them into the church, but to bring them further into that same fellowship.

C. F. W. Walther makes this finer point in his lectures on law and gospel. "Making a person's salvation depend on this membership in, and communion with, the visible orthodox Church means to overthrow the doctrine of justification by faith. True faith has been obtained by people before they join the Lutheran Church. It is a fatal mistake to think that Luther before becoming a Lutheran did not have the true faith."¹⁵

¹⁵ C F W Walther. The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. Translated by W H T Dau 1986 p 337.

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