

Spiritual Renewal—Back To The Basics And Forward To Maturity

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District convention essays don't get assigned in a vacuum. When the officers of the district meet to set up the convention agenda, they seek to choose an essay topic which addresses a current need and concern in the church.

The choice of the subject of this year's essay certainly fits that criterion. Readers of the *Northwestern Lutheran* will have noticed frequent references over the past year to the subject of spiritual renewal. The current *Report to the Twelve Districts* tells us that the Synod's Board for Parish Services is involved in studying the issues involved in effecting "an evangelical renewal emphasis" in our midst. It has called a full-time Project Director for Spiritual Renewal, who will begin work in this office in August of this year.

Spiritual renewal is without doubt a high visibility item in the synod right now. And it is also a high priority item. The 1987 convention of the synod called it an "urgent need." Hence a paper on spiritual renewal at the district convention of the Pacific-Northwest District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

But why the urgency? Why is such a high priority being given synod-wide to spiritual renewal? Are we perhaps over-reacting to thrust spiritual renewal into such a place of prominence in our midst? To answer questions such as these we need to back up several steps and ask and answer some very basic questions: What is spiritual renewal? Who needs it? Why is it needed? When is it needed? How does it happen? What will be the results of spiritual renewal? Then we will be in a better position to evaluate the urgency of spiritual renewal in our midst.

We will seek to answer questions such as these under this general heading:

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL — BACK TO THE BASICS AND FORWARD TO MATURITY

We will first focus our attention on the individual Christian as we remind ourselves of two basic truths:

- 1) For a Christian spiritual renewal is an accomplished fact; and
- 2) For a Christian spiritual renewal is an ongoing necessity.

This will answer the what, the who, the why, the when and also in part the how and the outcome of spiritual renewal.

Then we will put the spotlight on the home, the congregation and the synod as both the *contributors* to and *beneficiaries* of spiritual renewal. This will provide a further answer to the how and the outcome of spiritual renewal.

FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL RENEWAL IS AN ACCOMPLISHED FACT

We should probably say right at the outset that when we talk about spiritual renewal we are hardly talking about a new concept. Spiritual renewal, both the kind that we already enjoy and the kind we daily need, is intimately bound up with our Baptism. "Unless a man is born again," Jesus told Nicodemus, "he cannot see the kingdom of God ...Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3,5). Nicodemus needed a brand new start. He needed to begin all over again, for, as Jesus told him, "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (Jn 3:6). Born of sinners, Nicodemus of himself could not rise above the level of his parents.

And so it was with all of us. It is about us, too, that Paul is speaking when he tells the Ephesians,

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest we were by nature objects of wrath (Eph 2:1-3).

He is describing a hopeless situation, isn't he, one which we were helpless to change. We were dead. We were under the dominion of the three great enemies of God and our souls. "You followed the ways of this *world*," says Paul, and also "of the *ruler* of the kingdom of the air," an obvious reference to Satan. We were all "gratifying the cravings of our *sinful nature* and following its desires and thoughts."

In his explanation to the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer Luther reminds us that when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we are imploring God to "guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world and our flesh may not deceive us or lead us into false belief, despair and other great and shameful sins." But that is not the prayer of the one "dead in transgressions and sins," which "at one time" included "all of us." Back then, in our lives B.C., before Christ, we rejoiced to follow the deceitful, lying ways of the devil; we took great pleasure in the desires of the flesh; we loved to allow the world to allure us into great and shameful transgressions and sins.

We were "by nature," that is, from day #1, from the moment of conception, in fact (Ps 51:5), "objects of wrath," of the wrath of God against sin that could only result in the terrifying words of rejection on the Last Day: "Depart from me...into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt 25:41).

Such was our dilemma. We were dead. We were enslaved. We were doomed.

Into that situation stepped our gracious God:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:4-6).

Note the tremendous contrasts here. We were objects of God's *wrath*, but God has had *mercy* on us. We were *dead* in transgressions, but God has made us *alive* in Christ, having laid our transgressions on Jesus (2 Cor 5:21). We were *enslaved*, a position of dishonor and disgrace, but God has *set us free*. He has raised us up with Christ and set us at his own right hand, a position of honor and privilege.

All this, all these benefits won at great cost by Christ, God has conveyed to us in our Baptism. Martin Luther puts it in simple fashion in his *Small Catechism*:

What does Baptism do for us?

Baptism works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

With these words Luther is summarizing the key thoughts of the many passages in the Scriptures that speak of the powerful effects of Baptism. Since the starting point of spiritual renewal is one's Baptism, it would be good to review briefly what God has done for us in and through our Baptism.

Baptism works forgiveness of sins. On Pentecost Day, Peter told the crowd assembled in Jerusalem, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Ac 2:38). The purpose of Baptism is cleansing of sin, forgiveness.

Again and again the Scriptures speak of the cleansing power of Baptism. At the close of his Third Missionary Journey Paul defended his ministry before a hostile crowd in Jerusalem. He told them the story of his conversion, how the Lord struck him blind on the way to Damascus and how the Lord sent Ananias to him in Damascus to tell him: “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away” (Ac 22:16). Baptism was the means by which God would cleanse Paul of his sins.

To the Ephesians Paul writes: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water [Baptism] through the Word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27). These are powerful words, aren’t they? One who is baptized lacks nothing as far as God is concerned. God sees no more sins, not even the slightest flaws, in those whom he has cleansed in Baptism.

Paul writes in a similar way in his pastoral letter to Titus:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us...through the *washing* of rebirth and renewal (Tt 3:3-5).

In another obvious reference to Baptism’s power to cleanse, Paul writes:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were.* But you were *washed*, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:9-11).

Note the contrast between past and present and what produced the change. The Corinthians were cleansed of the filth of their past life by the washing of baptism. Notice that these are all passive verbs. The Corinthians did not wash themselves, sanctify themselves, justify themselves. The Doer is God. In Baptism, God washed them clean; in Baptism, God sanctified them, declared them to be his holy people; in Baptism, God justified them, pronounced them righteous, not guilty. For where there is forgiveness of sins, the result is a holy and righteous person in the eyes of God.

In and through Baptism, in fact, God completely covers us with the garment of Christ’s righteousness: “All of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Ga 3:27). Because of my Baptism, I can exclaim in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness” (Is 61:10).

Through Baptism the Lord incorporates us into the Body of Christ, his Church. “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body,” Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:13). He reminds the Ephesians that there is “one Body” and “one Baptism” through which an individual becomes a part of that one Body (Eph 4:4,5).

Through Baptism one is made a disciple of Jesus, a believer. “Go and make disciples of all nations,” says Jesus, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). Baptism is a means by which God turns the unbelieving heart to a faith that calls Jesus “Lord,” the mark of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In Baptism one is given a new birth. To be born again, which is necessary for salvation, means to be born “of water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5). Paul tells Titus in the passage cited above

that Baptism is a “washing of rebirth” (Ti 3:5), a rebirth-washing, a washing that effects a new birth. In Baptism God didn’t merely slap a few Band-Aids on us to patch up the old Man; he gave us a brand new start.

God by means of Baptism calls us his very own. Writing in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul doesn’t mention Baptism specifically, but quite certainly has it in mind when he says: “God...in Christ...anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor 1:21,22). A seal identifies. A seal protects. In Baptism God says, “I have set you free from your former masters. Now you are mine.”

In and through our Baptism God has saved us. He has given us the certainty of eternal life. “Baptism...saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” writes Peter (1 Pe 3:21), as it applies to us all the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death....If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection (Ro 6:3,5).

Again, Paul says, “He *saved* us through the washing of rebirth and renewal...so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Ti 3:5,7). It is worth our while to note that when the Scriptures use the word “hope” they do not use it in the sense that we normally do. To have the “hope of eternal life” is to have the certainty of it. Justified, that is, declared righteous, and saved through Baptism, we can know for sure where we are going.

Through Baptism we are given the Holy Spirit. “Be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins,” says Peter to the Pentecost Day crowd, “*and you will receive the gift of* [we might say, ‘the gift which is’] *the Holy Spirit*” (Ac 2:38). “God...put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit,” Paul tells the Corinthians, “guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor 1:21,22).

Baptism gives us “fullness in Christ,” as Paul puts it when writing to the Colossians:

In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form and you have been given fullness in Christ,...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col 2:9,10,12).

“You have been given fullness in Christ.” The King James Version translates that phrase: “Ye are complete in him”; the translation of the New English Bible is: “In him you have been brought to completion.” The point that Paul is making is that just as Christ lacks nothing—he is fully God and fully man—so, in Christ, through Baptism, we lack nothing. Technically speaking, the Greek verb translated “have been given fullness” is a periphrastic perfect. It emphasizes that something happened in the past and that its effects continue into the present. To produce that thought in English we would say something like this: In Christ, through Baptism, you have been made full, you have been brought to completion, and you are still full and complete in him.

We can add yet one more biblical picture of what God accomplished in us through Baptism. Baptism is God’s means of renewal. Paul calls Baptism “the washing of rebirth *and renewal* by the Holy Spirit” (Ti 3:5). In this passage “rebirth” and “renewal” are best seen, not as two different actions of God, but as two different ways of describing the same action. Just as we described Baptism above as a rebirth-washing, a washing by which God effects a new birth, so Baptism is a renewal-washing, a washing by which God effects a renewal, a restoration of that which mankind once had but lost in the fall.

To be renewed means to have become a new person altogether. “If anyone is in Christ [a blessing that Baptism effects] he is a new creation,” writes Paul; “the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). If you will permit a further technical reference, the Greek word translated “has come” is another perfect tense verb which, as mentioned above, stresses completed action in the past continuing into the present. God has renewed us in Baptism. He has made us brand new creatures in his eyes. He has restored to us his image. And he still looks upon us as his new creation [this is the idea of the perfect tense]—through the renewal-washing of Baptism.

What a marvelous multiplicity of pictures the Lord uses to describe the gracious miracle of renewal that he has accomplished in each of his baptized children!

He has washed away our sins,
clothed us with Christ’s righteousness,
justified us,
sanctified us,
incorporated us into the Body of Christ,
made us his disciples by turning our hearts to faith,
given us a new birth,
set his seal upon us,
anointed us with his Holy Spirit,
given us the certainty of eternal life,
filled us with all the fullness of Christ,
made us complete in Christ.

Small wonder that Luther in his *Large Catechism* exclaims: “In Baptism...every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts” (LC 41, Tappert, pp. 441,442).

To Luther his Baptism was his comfort and strength in life and in death. “There is on earth no greater comfort than Baptism.” he writes (Plass #164). And again: “When our last hour comes, we intend to clothe ourselves in the vestments of baptismal grace and hear the absolution of faith and pass away” (Plass #165).

Do we value our Baptism as highly as Luther did? If it is true, as Luther is quoted as saying, that “most Christians have enough religion to feel guilty about their sin, but not enough to enjoy life in the Spirit,” could not at least a part of the problem be that we don’t return often enough to our Baptism and remember with gratitude and joy what God has done for us in it? God has renewed us through our Baptism. He has forgiven us our sins. He has rescued us from death. He has freed us from the devil’s clutches. He has given us salvation. In Baptism God has already given us absolutely everything that we need for life, for death, for eternity. We have reason to be filled with joy and confidence day by day.

It is against this never-fading background of the blessings of Baptism (for God’s covenant in Baptism never fails) that we move on to our next point:

FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL RENEWAL IS AN ONGOING NECESSITY

One does not have to be a particularly perceptive person to recognize that, though in Baptism God has washed away our sins and declared us to be totally righteous and holy, in actual practice we are far from living a totally righteous and holy life. The “whereases” in the 1987 synod convention spiritual renewal resolution give examples of deficiencies in our spiritual life, especially on a corporate, congregational level.

Within the congregations of our Synod there are numerous evidences of spiritual weakness, such as poor attendance at worship services, infrequent participation in holy communion, low enrollment in Bible classes and a lack of involvement in lay ministry.

The “backdoor” losses are so great that the membership of our Synod basically is not growing.

Increasingly the impact of a pagan society is causing pain for God’s people in the form of many personal, marital, and family problems, so that congregations are struggling to administer God’s grace to those many members in need.

Inadequate staffing, misunderstanding of mission and ministry, impacts of the unbelieving world and other pressures have contributed to many congregations conducting a “maintenance ministry” rather than an aggressive growth-oriented ministry.

In increasing measure, our Synod and other agencies are not receiving what is needed to carry on the work in ways that seem appropriate to God’s will, that take advantage of the opportunities before us, and that properly meet the needs of the congregations they serve.

Insufficient interest in Word and Sacrament, large numbers of “backdoor” losses, difficulties in finding people to serve in the congregation, faulty or non-existent congregational objectives and goals, worldliness impacting the lives of the members of our congregations, multiplying marriage and family problems, grave weaknesses in evangelism and stewardship that negatively affect the mission Christ has given to his Church to “make disciples of all nations”—all these are a vivid reminder to us that the spirituality of our congregations is certainly not at a level that it could be.

This is not a new phenomenon. Already in New Testament times the church in Ephesus is described as a church that had fallen from its former height, a church that had forsaken its first love (Re 2:5). The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were tolerating idolatry and the practice of sexual immorality in their midst (Re 2:14,15,20,21). The church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but was really dead (Re 3:1). The church in Laodicea, which evidently at one time had been on fire for Christ, had become lukewarm (Re 3:16).

We don’t have to range so far afield, however, to find examples of less than perfect spirituality on the part of those who have been spiritually renewed in Baptism. Who of us does not identify with these words of St. Paul?

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing....I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Ro 7:18-24)

There is a major dilemma here. On the one hand, through Baptism the Christian can rightfully say, “I have been renewed. I lack nothing. God has given me all that I need.” On the other hand the same Christian, when he looks at his life, must all too often say, “I seem to bear little resemblance to one who has been renewed through Baptism. My life hardly matches God’s description of me as a holy and righteous person.”

We are talking here about the difference between justification and sanctification, of course. Justification is instantaneous and complete. With most of us this occurred at the time of our Baptism, when God declared us to be personally justified, no longer guilty, but holy and

righteous in his eyes. Sanctification, that which occurs in the days and weeks and months and years after the Lord has applied the finished work of Jesus to an individual in his Baptism, is gradual and incomplete. Justification is a one-time verdict; sanctification, living a renewed life set apart for God, is a life-long process.

The Apostle Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Colossians. He tells them:

You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Col 3:9,10).

In the original Greek language the words translated “you have taken off...and have put on” are aorist (somewhat similar to our past tense) participles. They refer to something that has already happened, a reference to our personal justification in Baptism. The words translated “which is being renewed” is a present participle, which stresses ongoing action. “Being renewed” is a reference to the process of sanctification, of claiming anew day after day in repentance and faith the new life given in Baptism.

It is this difference between justification and sanctification that makes both of these statements valid:

For a Christian spiritual renewal is an accomplished fact. This is my justification.

For a Christian spiritual renewal is an ongoing necessity. This is my life of sanctification.

Daily spiritual renewal, a life of sanctification, of being set apart for God’s purposes, is no less God’s will for his children than his will to justify them. The same Scriptures which declare, “God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Ti 2:4), also say to those whom God has saved, “This is the will of God—your sanctification” (1 Th 4:3). The same Scriptures which describe our Lord as “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pe 3:9) also urge those who have been brought to repentance and faith, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pe 3:18).

St. Paul urges those who have been renewed by Baptism: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the *renewing* of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Ro 12:2). There should be a difference, a notable difference, in the lives of those who have been renewed through Baptism. They should not be letting the world around them shape them into its mold. Nor should they permit their sinful flesh to regain its former mastery over them:

Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires....Be made new in the attitude of your minds....Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24).

There need be no doubt in our minds that the God who has renewed us in Baptism now looks for a renewed life that manifests itself in ways of thinking and speaking and doing and hoping and dreaming and planning that are markedly different from our before-Baptism state. Renewed and transformed lives—such is God’s expectation of those whom he has renewed and transformed from unbelief and death to faith and new life through Baptism.

In fact, if things are working the way they should be over the years, even while we are gradually growing older and weaker physically we will still be maturing and becoming stronger spiritually. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians: “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we *are being renewed* day by day” (2 Cor 4:16).

How do we accomplish this? How can we begin to live ever more fully renewed lives, lives set apart for God’s purposes on an individual, congregational and synodical level? It is not just those within our church body who are asking such questions. For example, in a recent book, *Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal*, Canadian evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock laments over

some of the same problems referred to above. He writes: “We have an energy crisis in the church. There is a low level of spiritual power evident in the lives of so many Christians.” He observes rightly that “we need a fresh impulse of power for ministry and the life of faith” (Pinnock, p 53). But how do we get this “fresh impulse of power”? Pinnock points to a supposed deficiency in Reformation theology in this area. He maintains that

Luther and Calvin concentrated upon the work of the Spirit bringing people to Christ, and did not pay enough attention to life in the Spirit. They did not seem to grasp the dimension of the Spirit’s activity which leads people to praise the Lord and spread the gospel (Pinnock, p 39).

After exonerating the Reformers of blame, at least to a degree, for this supposed deficiency because of the particular situation they were in (e.g., fighting the excesses of the Anabaptists), Pinnock pointblankly states that consequently the Reformers “do not have a lot to teach us about the renewal we now badly need” (Pinnock, p 40). Where, then, should we look? Pinnock points us to the 20th century charismatic movement, which he terms “a new era” in church history. He writes: “An extraordinary spiritual renewal is occurring across Christendom....People are being caught up in a modern expression of Pentecost which promises to revive the entire church” (Pinnock, p 40).

In other words, the secret of renewed personal and congregational lives is to be found in something *new*, a second “baptism,” a charismatic Spirit-baptism. Our response to this is to suggest that the secret of renewed personal and congregational lives is to be found in something old: the Baptism we have already received. Richard Jungkuntz in *The Gospel of Baptism* puts it well when he writes:

The Christian’s baptism...is both point of departure for Christian existence and point of constant return. There is no further, additional grace or gift that can enhance its power or take its place (Jungkuntz, p 86).

Another writer put it this way: “Baptism is the giving of new life, and the new life is laying hold of Baptism” (G. Bornkamm).

The blessings that God has put into our Baptism are so vast, so all-inclusive, so complete, that we need nothing more. We just need to mine the depths, to explore, to trust and to act on the blessings God has already given to us in our Baptism. It reminds me of a rancher I became acquainted with in the early days of my ministry in Montana. He had just recently purchased a huge cattle ranch in the foothills southwest of Great Falls. At the time he had only a vague idea of what that ranch contained. He had heard, for example, that there was a lake on it somewhere. He knew that streams ran through it, but exactly how many and which ones were good trout streams he didn’t really know. Yet all that land was his, and the more time he took to explore its canyons and coulees, to walk its ridges and meadows, the more he would come to appreciate it and benefit from it.

Or, we could illustrate it this way. Four years ago, upon leaving my congregation of twenty years in San Jose, California, and coming to the Seminary, one of my members gave me a computer as a farewell gift. At the time I was 100% computer illiterate. Since then I have come to appreciate more and more what a computer is able to do. I took advantage of many of its word processing features in the preparation of this essay. What never ceases to amaze me, however, is that I keep discovering new things about the computer, new things that I didn’t know I could do with it. It’s not that it couldn’t do all those things before, but that I hadn’t yet discovered what its capabilities were. I have a feeling that even after four years I have just begun to tap the potential of that machine.

So it is with our Baptism. Such a rich treasure it is that, as Luther said, “in Baptism...every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life.”

Daily spiritual renewal means a daily return to one’s Baptism. Luther has much to say about this in his *Large Catechism*:

The ship [i.e., Baptism] does not founder since...it is God’s ordinance and not a work of ours. But it does happen that we slip and fall out of the ship. If anybody does fall out, he should immediately head for the ship and cling to it until he can climb aboard again and sail on it as he had done before (LC 83, Tappert p 446).

Don’t look for something else and don’t try to swim to shore on your own. Simply return to the good ship Baptism. That is Luther’s advice. Again Luther writes:

The slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man...must continue in us our whole life long. Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued. For we must keep at it incessantly, always purging out whatever pertains to the old Adam...When we enter Christ’s kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more free from greed, hatred, envy, and pride...Where this amendment of life does not take place but the old man is given free rein and continually grows stronger, Baptism is not being used but resisted....The old man...follows unchecked the inclinations of this nature if he is not restrained and suppressed by the power of Baptism. On the other hand, when we become Christians, the old man daily decreases until he is finally destroyed. This is what it means to plunge into Baptism and daily come forth again (LC 65-68,71,72; Tappert p 445).

What Luther says in many words in his *Large Catechism* he summarizes briefly in his *Small Catechism*:

What does baptizing with water mean [or signify]?

It means [signifies] that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead. to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever.

Where is this written?

St. Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, “We were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Edmund Schlink elaborates on Paul’s words in Romans 6:

Since in Baptism God embraces the entire life of man in a saving way, the baptized must ever anew lay hold of this saving deed by faith and draw his life from that deed. The baptized no longer only goes to meet the coming death and the coming resurrection, but he already comes from his death and his resurrection. Through his being given into Christ’s death the life with Christ has already been opened up for him. Thus the Christian lives not only in a hurrying forward to ever new hearing of the Gospel and to ever new reception of the Lord’s Supper, but at the same time he hurries back ever again to his Baptism through which he has been given over to the dominion of Christ. The New Testament admonitions are thus based primarily on Baptism; they call it to mind and exhort the baptized to draw his life ever anew from the source of his being a Christian....Baptism is not

only the means by which God once acted on the baptized but it is at the same time the weapon for the fight of faith (*The Doctrine of Baptism*, p 126).

This teaching of the Scriptures that Baptism is a Means of Grace through which God both begins new life and nurtures the new life he has begun is one of the great treasures of the evangelical Lutheran church. The other Protestant churches whether of a fundamentalist moderate or liberal bent see Baptism neither as a means by which God creates new spiritual life nor as a source of power for daily renewal. To them Baptism is simply a one-time act of obedience on the part of someone who has already made a decision to become a believer.

Accordingly when they look back to the beginning of their Christian life they do not find something there that *God* did for them and which they can lay hold of and derive strength from all their lives. Rather they find something that *they* did: They committed their lives to Christ they surrendered themselves to him they decided to follow Jesus etc. Do you see the flaw here? With that kind of thinking my motivation and my power for living a renewed life will be based at least in part on a decision I made to follow Christ and now somehow must live up to; and if I don't live up to my commitment then I begin to wonder how sincere I was when I made the commitment and thus to doubt if I really am a Christian. It is that kind of thinking which makes one quite susceptible to tantalizing invitations to new spiritual experiences, new "Spirit-baptisms," which promise to give one a stronger assurance that he really is a Spirit-filled Christian.

Roman Catholic theology on the other hand does consider Baptism to be a Means of Grace by which God forgives sin but only the sin one is born with or has committed prior to his Baptism. What about sins committed after Baptism? What is needed then is what Jerome calls the second plank penance which requires the sinner himself to make satisfaction for his sin in some way prescribed by the church. The beginning of spiritual life is thus seen to be God's work but the continuation of it man's work. This flies directly in the face of Paul's strong words to the Galatians: "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Ga 3:3)

Luther had this error of Jerome in mind when he wrote in his *Large Catechism*:

Baptism both by its power and by its signification comprehends also the third sacrament formerly called Penance which is really nothing else than Baptism. What is repentance but an earnest attack on the old man and an entering upon a new life? If you live in repentance therefore you are walking in Baptism which not only announces the new life but also produces begins, and promotes it. In Baptism we are given the grace, Spirit, and power to suppress the old man so that the new may come forth and grow strong....Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory (LC 74-76,83; Tappert p 46).

In view of all of the foregoing, it seems quite clear that any talk of "spiritual renewal" in our midst must begin with and continually return to our Baptism. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that in our Baptism God has already given us the fullness of Christ, the fullness of the Spirit, the fullness of his every promise. We don't have to go it alone in the Christian life, nor do we have to look for additional "baptisms" for assurance and strength. We just need to appropriate to ourselves what God has already given us in Baptism.

The power for a renewed life is to be found in the forgiveness and promises of God embodied in Baptism. Daily, therefore, I need to get back to the basics, to return to my Baptism, and then to move on to a new life of grateful service of my God. There is a rhythm here, a “divine” rhythm, if you will, back and forth, back and forth, back to my Baptism, forward to a little closer walk with Jesus with every passing day.

A program of spiritual renewal in a church body must also be premised on the truth that church bodies don’t get renewed. Neither do congregations. Neither, for that matter, do families. Renewal is personal. Just as no one could be baptized for me, so no one can go back to Baptism for me. A church body, a congregation, a family will experience renewal to the degree that the individual believers within the church body, the congregation or the family are daily being renewed.

But this does not mean that a church body, congregation or family cannot be involved in the process of renewal. Let’s look for a few moments at

THE SYNOD, THE CONGREGATION AND THE FAMILY AS CONTRIBUTORS TO AND BENEFICIARIES OF RENEWAL

The best place to start is the *family* since God has designated the home as the primary setting for effecting spiritual nurture, growth and renewal. This is a truth which Luther recognized, as his introductory note to each of the chief parts of his *Small Catechism* clearly brings out: “As the head of the family should teach them in the simplest way to those in his household.” Have we perhaps, in our zeal for congregation-produced Christian education through Lutheran elementary schools, high schools, Sunday schools, etc., relatively neglected the home as the basic institution of Christian education?

We might make two suggestions about the family’s role in promoting spiritual renewal. First, the home, the family circle, appears to be the best place to keep alive the significance of our Baptism. It may take some deliberate planning to do this. Jungkuntz reminds us: “Christians need to practice specific ways and means of making the remembrance of their Baptism a constant and effective rule of life. God needs no reminder of the everlasting covenant of grace with which he has bound himself to us in Baptism. But we do” (*The Gospel of Baptism*, p 136).

Would there not be wisdom in celebrating two birthdays each year, the day of our physical birth and the day of our rebirth and renewal, without which the day of our physical birth would be a terrible calamity? The Northwestern Publishing House catalog lists a “baptismal candle,” a candle decorated with symbols of baptism. This candle could be given to the newly-baptized infant, child or adult and lit each year on the anniversary of the person’s Baptism. We realize, of course, that such a ceremony in and of itself doesn’t guarantee that we will really be remembering our Baptism; but used thoughtfully, reverently and also joyfully as we recall in the family circle all that God has made our own in Baptism (cf. the summary on p 6), it can remind us that God has been very gracious to us and can lead us to rededicate our lives to him.

Secondly there is the daily family altar, the gradual disappearance of which has certainly been a factor that has led to the urgent cry for spiritual renewal in our time. Growing together through the Word is exactly what the Lord wants for his baptized children. “You have been born again,” writes the Lord’s Apostle Peter, “...through the living and enduring Word of God.” Now, he says, “like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk [the milk of the Word], so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (I Pe 1:23; 2:2,3).

The Word and the Spirit are the two elements that make Baptism a washing of rebirth and renewal. As we study the Scriptures, the same powerful, energizing Word of God is conveyed to

us and the same life-giving Holy Spirit. Through daily family devotions the Holy Spirit will lead family members to discover more and more what a gracious God they have and what blessings are already theirs ever since the day of their Baptism. A key, then, it would appear, to ongoing spiritual renewal in our time would be a return to the salutary custom of the family taking daily time together with the Word.

The *congregation* is another excellent setting for effecting spiritual renewal and growth. Here, too, we will offer a few suggestions, without intending this to be an exhaustive list.

For one thing, it would seem wise that we continue to encourage public rather than private baptisms—of infants, children and adults. There seems to be a trend in at least some quarters to remove Baptisms from the public worship service (too time-consuming?). But what a grand opportunity a public Baptism presents to remind the assembled people of God what God does in and through Baptism. This writer is pleased that, according to present plans, the new hymnal will contain a complete order for Baptism in which the congregation will be more than silent spectators.

Secondly, we need to constantly work to overcome the false notion that confirmation is something that supersedes Baptism, the idea that Baptism is something that somebody else did for you and confirmation something that you do on your own and that therefore now at last you have “arrived” spiritually. Quite correctly the Lutheran Church does not consider confirmation to be a sacrament, as does the Roman Catholic Church. The day of confirmation is simply a chance for one to publicly affirm what God has done for him or her in Baptism and to promise, by virtue of the spiritual life God has created in Baptism, to remain true to the God who called the person to himself through Baptism. This is not to downplay the value of confirmation and of the period of intensive study of the Word that leads up to it. It is rather meant to set confirmation in its proper perspective, to remind us that confirmation is intimately tied up with Baptism, which is the study of a lifetime, not a study that terminates with confirmation.

Thirdly, the congregation is the natural place for the second sacrament, Holy Communion, to find a prominent place. Time constraints make it impossible to develop this thought in any detail. Suffice it to say at this point that every time we receive the Sacrament Jesus’ gives us his own body and blood as a personal pledge that our sins are really forgiven and thus brings to our remembrance the pledge and promise God made to us in Baptism, “Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” Should we not be thinking in terms of more frequent opportunities for God’s renewed people to receive this Sacrament of spiritual renewal? Is once a month sufficient?

Fourthly, the congregation is an ideal setting for systematic Bible study that explores the depths of the Word and promises of God. Again, it is all there already in our Baptism—every blessing of God; but it is a matter of discovering these blessings, trusting them, treasuring them and applying them to our lives.

In his synod convention essay in 1987, this writer suggested that a good place to begin would be to encourage each member of the congregation to review the basic teachings of the Scriptures by participating in the pastor’s Bible information class, i.e., his confirmation class for adults. But let us not stop there. We don’t want to be like those people concerning whom the writer of Hebrews had to say:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk [is] still an infant....But solid food is for the

mature....Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity (He 5:12-6:1).

With these words the writer is not saying that we should forget about the basics, the elementary truths; but he is saying that there is so much more, like the Montana rancher's ranch, like my computer. The rancher could have decided never to travel out of eyesight of his house. The whole ranch would still have been his; but so much of it would not have benefited him personally. I could have decided to learn how to do just one thing with my computer and let it go at that. Everything else the computer could do would still have been mine also; but it would have done me no good if I had not discovered its potential and put it to use.

So it is with the Word and promises of God. Why sell ourselves short with a little when God has already given us a lot and wants us to have it? The Peter passage we quoted before urges us, "Grow in grace and knowledge" (2 Pe 3:18). "Grow" is a present imperative, which implies continuation: "Keep on growing."

Keep on growing in "grace," in appreciation of what it means to live in the grace of God bestowed in Baptism—forgiveness, freedom, life, salvation.

Keep on growing in "knowledge." This is the Greek word for the kind of knowledge that touches more than the brain cells. This is heart knowledge, knowing, really knowing my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Planned, systematic study of the Word will give the Spirit ample opportunity to produce such growth in grace and knowledge and also to produce every fruit of the Spirit, the first-fruit being love, love for God that will manifest itself in a desire to praise God and do his will and love for others that will manifest itself in a desire to serve them.

Which leads to a fifth way that the congregation can help its members in an ongoing life of spiritual renewal: It can help channel those in whom this fruit of the Spirit is blossoming into a life of Christian service. We realize, of course, that it is not pleasing to God if we try to put every Christian into the same "good work mold." This is sometimes called "programmed sanctification." Rightly do God's people object to such programming of good works, since God's Word says that as Christians "we are *God's* workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which *God* prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). God has his own plans for each of us.

But there are certain general principles that apply equally to all renewed people of God. One, they want to worship God. The congregation, especially its worship leader, can work at making the Sunday morning worship hour a grand opportunity to really worship God. The hymns he chooses, the prayers, the order of service, the sermon, even his appearance and mannerisms will have a considerable effect on the people's ability to rejoice and praise their Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Two, all of God's renewed people have received special gifts of the Spirit that are uniquely theirs and are meant to be used for the glory of God, for building up God's people and for reaching out to the lost. The congregation, through its spiritual leaders, can help its members to understand what spiritual gifts are and what their value is and then help them to identify their gifts and give them opportunity to put them into practice.

Three, all of God's renewed people have certain discipleship functions in common. One example: giving. The congregation, through its spiritual leaders, will want to provide training in biblical principles of stewardship. Another: witnessing. The congregation, through its spiritual leaders, will want to provide training in biblical principles of sharing one's faith with others. Still

another example: teaching one's children. The congregation, through its spiritual leaders, will want to provide training in biblical principles of Christian parenting.

A program of extensive as well as intensive Bible study, coupled with training programs of various kinds—all intended to help God's people to grow in grace and knowledge and love—will probably tax the strength of a pastor. Are we training and then using qualified lay leaders to the degree that we could be? Do we perhaps need to augment the full-time staff in some of our congregations?

Finally, the *synod* also can help in the effort. It needs to be remembered, though, that because the synod stands the farthest distance away from the only ones who can be renewed day by day, the individual Christians, it cannot do the real work. That must be done in the home and the congregation. Through its Board for Parish Services and now also the Spiritual Renewal Project Director it does, though, serve a good, one might even say invaluable, purpose. Through this board and the Project Director congregations and homes will be provided with program ideas they can adapt for their own use and with materials, e.g., Bible study guides and training courses, that can be used to help carry out some of the above. But everything still must start and end in the heart of the individual Christian.

Ongoing spiritual renewal, growing in grace and knowledge and love, will have a beneficial effect upon the *home*. It is really true that "the family that prays together stays together." As we are renewed day by day through the Word and Spirit, we will be empowered to walk closer with Jesus and thus also with husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister. And tomorrow's families also will be strengthened as today's young people discover the bonding the Spirit produces through the Word and promises of God.

Another beneficiary of ongoing spiritual renewal will be the *congregation*. A congregation will tend to have more of a unified sense of direction as its members are daily being renewed in grace and knowledge and love. It won't be business as usual if by that is meant simply trying to keep the organization afloat. Rather there will be a renewed desire to be about the *Lord's* business, to make the Great Commission the congregation's commission.

Families alive in Christ and congregations alive in Christ mean a *synod* alive in Christ. A synod that consists of God's people walking together in the power of their Baptism, renewed and being renewed day by day, will be a synod that will be asking, "Lord, what do you want us to do?" It will be a synod eager to pursue the vision the Lord of the church sets before it. It will be a synod whose plaguing money and manpower shortages will be a thing of the past. It will be a synod on fire for Christ.

At the beginning of this essay we asked whether we as a synod might be over-reacting by thrusting spiritual renewal into such a place of prominence in our midst. It all depends upon how one looks at it. If spiritual renewal is seen simply as a means to an end, if it is looked upon merely as a quick, one-time fix to overcome current congregational or synodical budgetary and manpower problems, then it is hardly worthy of our time and effort.

If, on the other hand, spiritual renewal is seen as an ongoing process, a daily return to our Baptism and a moving forward to growing maturity in Christ, then it is an urgent matter. It is what the Christian life is all about. Nothing should have a higher priority on our agenda.

This essayist is confident that such was the intent of the 1987 synod convention. Back to the basics and forward to maturity. God's blessings upon our homes, our congregations and our synod *will* follow.

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