

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Baptism and



LIFELINES

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Isn't it sad that we do not do spontaneously and eagerly what we should — things like loving one another, studying the Word of God or witnessing to His grace? There would be no need for an *Ablaze!* movement, if we did not remain sinners even after our conversion!

As I see it, *Ablaze!* has as its goal awakening us Missouri Lutherans to our witnessing responsibilities and privileges, so that personally and corporately we tell the good news of Jesus to everyone who will listen.

June 9-11, the Florida-Georgia District will be meeting in convention at the Marriott Hotel in Lake Mary, FL. A major thrust of the convention will be to recommit to being a "missionary" District, challenging each of our congregations to share the love of the Savior in word and deed, and they in turn challenging their members personally to do the same.

It's my conviction that we are not going to achieve long-term success in these goals unless we are hooked up to the power of the Gospel. Programs may redirect us for a while, but without the renewing power of the Gospel, we will slip back into the old ruts again. Because of our ongoing sinfulness, we will keep

on failing unless Christ's forgiveness releases us from our fear and self-centeredness, redirects our lives and empowers us to begin anew.



This month I would like to suggest how we might connect our baptisms to witnessing, confident that its gracious reality will not only provide direction for our witnessing efforts but also power to carry them out effectively. Recalling how Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism* that in

baptism "every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life," (LC, IV, 41) I want to identify some of the ways that baptism can assist us in speaking up for Jesus.

Let me begin by saying that baptism can foster the attitude which will be conducive to witnessing. To be an effective witness, one needs to be humble, if one's witness is to be welcomed. Baptism, I believe can promote that attitude.

A common picture for baptism is that of "being reborn." Jesus uses it with Nicodemus in John 3, talking about the necessity of "being born from above," "being born of water and the Spirit," if he would see or enter the kingdom of God. Mothers give birth to babies; God must give new life to us, if we would experience His gracious rule. He does so in baptism.

In his first letter Peter also speaks about "being born anew, not of perishable but imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God," (1:23) and in 1:3, "By His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," references which undoubtedly refer to baptism. Paul too is most likely

thinking of baptism when writing to Titus, that God our Savior "saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." (3:5)



Another image that reinforces that we are receivers is that of enlightenment. In the theme verse for our upcoming convention, Ephesians 5:8, Paul writes, "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light."

Darkness cannot make itself light. Light comes to darkness and drives it out. Christ is the light we receive in Holy Baptism. The ceremony of the lighted baptismal candle implies that Christ shares His light with the one who has been baptized. Ephesians 5:14 is generally thought to be a fragment of a baptismal hymn, suggesting further that enlightenment is an appropriate picture for baptism.

is the One who died for all, the One in whom God was at work reconciling the world to Himself. (II Cor. 5:15, 19)



Now, if you have been united with the Savior of the world, and are personally experiencing the fruit of His life-giving work, does it not follow that you have an unlimited mission field? Everyone you come into contact with is someone for whom Christ died: the hairdresser, the policeman, the clerk in the supermarket, the person changing your car's oil at the service station, the students and teachers at school, the folks you worship with — in short everyone you encounter, whether he or she is like you or not. Through your baptism you are linked with the Individual the townspeople from Samaria identified as "the Savior of the world." (John 4:42)

By listing these various people, I trust that you sense an important truth about our witnessing. It is relational. Our goal is not to try to communicate with everyone at once. By birth

Through baptism we are born into the family of God, and our goal is to help other people enter the family of Our Father, through knowing His only Son, Jesus Christ. By approaching it relationally and personally, we can welcome others into the family.

Both images suggest to me the same reality. In baptism, we are receivers. God is the Actor. We get baptized. We get united with Christ. We are reborn. We are made light. Because God is the Doer and we are recipients of His mercy, new life and light, our attitude can and should be humility.

Humble people will likely witness more effectively than the arrogant or aggressive. Their humility makes them acceptable to other people. Because they know that what they have has come by grace, they can quietly listen to other people to learn their needs, their situation, their personalities. Their humility will communicate their interest and concern, key ingredients for gaining a hearing. People who don't take the time to listen before they start speaking will likely not be very good missionaries!

In baptism we are also given the goal for our witnessing. We seek to proclaim Jesus Christ. He is the One we are united with in baptism. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Gal. 3:27) Romans 6:3-11 emphasizes powerfully that in baptism we are united with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, a truth that Colossians 2:11-12 expresses as well. And who is this One with whom we are united? He

we are born into a family and we relate to family members individually. Through baptism we are born into the family of God, and our goal is to help other people enter the family of Our Father, through knowing His only Son, Jesus Christ. By approaching it relationally and personally, we can welcome others into the family. Baptism helps us do that by reminding us that we have personally been united with Jesus, the world's Savior.



In addition to helping us sense the right attitude and the goal for our witnessing, baptism helps us realize that there is content to our witnessing. By listening to our neighbors, friends, family members and co-workers, we learn where their hurts and struggles are, and how we might connect with them.

Our purpose in connecting is not just to identify with them, but to point them to Jesus, the One who is sufficient to meet every form in which sin expresses itself. To someone struggling with broken relationships, we may present Christ as "our peace," (Ephesians 2:14); to someone burdened with guilt, we may share we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3-5). To someone who is confronted

with death, we may share Him as the "resurrection and the life." (John 11:25). To one who is confused, we may proclaim Jesus as the Leader (Acts 5:31), the one who calls us to follow him (Mark 1:16-20).

My point is this: in baptism we are joined to this all-sufficient Savior, and even though we ourselves need to be taught anew how all-sufficient he truly is, doesn't it make sense for us to let others in on the secret, the mystery hidden for ages but now disclosed in Jesus Christ? (Romans 16:25-27) Since He is all-sufficient, shouldn't He be a blessing for everyone?



Finally I wish to connect baptism to our witnessing because in it we have power to undertake this privilege. In baptism we are united with Jesus Christ who has risen from the dead. All the forces of darkness have bowed before Him. If the last enemy, death itself, cannot conquer Him, then we have a light no darkness can overcome (John 1:5). We have a life which cannot be snuffed out; it is everlasting, beginning now but continuing forever.

The content of our witnessing packs power, for it's all about the One who has "all authority in heaven and on earth." Nothing is excepted. And He gives us a powerful promise as we pursue witnessing and disciple-making for Him: "Lo, I am with you all the days to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

If that were not enough, listen how He encourages His awe-struck disciples as He prepared to leave them to return to heaven, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) As the rest of that book bears out, the Spirit is active in baptism. Those who are baptized have that precious yet powerful gift. Peter told the people on Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (2:38)

In our baptisms, my readers, we have direction and power for witnessing to Jesus! Daily let's remember what Jesus has given us in our baptisms that we may not only die to sin and live to righteousness, but also listen humbly to those around us and confidently witness to them of Jesus the Christ whose saving work has been sealed to us in Holy Baptism and made our own through faith. Baptism can keep us *Ablaze!* for Jesus Christ!

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