

THE SACRAMENTS

Depart, Unclean Spirit

What the Lutherans Lost at the Font

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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There is a sentence that Lutheran pastors said over infants for two hundred years and have not said in most of the last two. It is short. There is nothing lurid about it. Before the water, before the creed, before anything else, the minister addressed the devil directly and told him to leave:

Depart, thou unclean spirit, and give room to the Holy Spirit.

Ask most lifelong Lutherans about this and you will get a blank look, and then a slightly worried one. Exorcism sounds like something that happens in a farmhouse in Iowa with a Jesuit and a strobe light. It does not sound like something that happened at your grandmother's baptism, in a country church, on a Sunday morning, in about four seconds.

But it did. And the story of how it stopped happening is not a story about the church growing up. It is a story about what a church quietly gives away when it decides a word has become embarrassing.

What Luther actually did

Luther produced two baptismal orders. The first, the *Order of Baptism* of 1523, was essentially the medieval Latin rite rendered into German, lightly trimmed, with one enormous addition of his own: the Flood Prayer.¹ It is a crowded service. The priest blows three times under the child's eyes — the *exsufflation* — and speaks the command above. Salt is placed in the child's mouth. There is spittle, and the Ephphatha. There are anointings before and after the water. There is a longer adjuration of the unclean spirit after the Flood Prayer. There is a candle.

Three years later Luther revised it, and the revision is the one that matters, because the *Taufbüchlein* of 1526 was bound into edition after edition of the Small Catechism and became the template for German church orders for generations.²

What is striking is what he cut. Gone: the salt. Gone: the spittle and the Ephphatha. Gone: both anointings. Gone: the candle. Gone: several prayers. He had left much of this in place in 1523 out of deference to weak consciences, and by 1526 he was done deferring. His stated concern was that the ceremonies were crowding out the thing itself — the water and the Word, which is what makes a baptism and the only part you would keep in an emergency.

And yet.

He kept the opening command. He kept a shortened adjuration of the spirit after the Flood Prayer. The man who had just swept the font clean of everything he considered decorative looked at the exorcism and left it standing.

That is the datum. Everything else in this essay is an attempt to explain it.

Why he kept it

Luther's preface to the rite gives the reason, and the tone is not what a modern reader expects. He does not defend the exorcism as venerable, or as pedagogically useful, or as a nice link to the ancient church. He warns the sponsors that taking sides against the devil is no joke, and that in bringing this child to the font they are handing him an enemy for life.³

That is a diagnosis. Everything hangs on it. If the infant in your arms is neutral — a blank, an innocent, a small unwritten thing — then the exorcism is at best theater and at worst a slander against a baby. But if the infant is what Luther and the Confessions say he is, born in sin, by nature a child of wrath, already inside a kingdom he did not choose and cannot leave, then the exorcism is simply the truth said out loud at the only moment when it can be answered.

The Scriptures Luther is working from are not obscure. Every man walks according to the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2). The whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Paul is sent to turn men from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). And most precisely: the Father *has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son* (Col. 1:13). Transferred. Out of one jurisdiction and into another. That verb is the entire baptismal rite in miniature, and the exorcism is what it sounds like when a jurisdiction changes hands.

How a ceremony became a flag

For fifty years this was uncontroversial, in the way that plumbing is uncontroversial. Then it became the most contested four seconds in German Christendom.

The reason was that the Reformed hated it, and they hated it for reasons that Lutherans immediately recognized as doctrinal rather than aesthetic. To the Reformed it was a leftover of papal magic, a bit of sub-Christian sorcery that had survived the Reformation by inattention. To the Lutherans, the demand to remove it was a demand to concede that the child of believing parents comes to the font already inside the covenant, already holy,

needing not rescue but recognition. The rite, in other words, had become a public test of what baptism is *for*.

The controversy ran through Thuringia, Saxony, Anhalt, and Brandenburg, and it was fierce out of all proportion to its liturgical footprint.⁴ Lutherans read the Reformed objection as Pelagianism wearing a Reformed hat. The Reformed read Lutheran insistence as superstition wearing a Wittenberg hat. Neither was entirely wrong about what the other was defending.

Electoral Saxony is the case everyone remembers. Under Elector Christian I and his chancellor Nikolaus Krell, the Saxon court moved to pull the electorate toward the Reformed, and one of the moves was to forbid the baptismal exorcism. Pastors lost their positions over it; Caspar Starke was put out of office for refusing to give it up.⁵ Then Christian I died suddenly in 1591, the Lutherans came back in force, and the Four Visitation Articles of 1592 slammed the door.⁶ Krell was arrested, tried for six years, and beheaded in Dresden in 1601. He was not executed *for* the exorcism, of course — the politics were tangled and the man had enemies enough — but Schaff, no Lutheran partisan, notes drily that abolishing the rite was counted among the chief crimes of the crypto-Calvinists.⁷

You may find the whole episode appalling. You are welcome to. But notice what it proves: these people did not think of the exorcism as an accessory. They thought a church that dropped it had said something, and they were right.

What it claimed, and what it did not

Here is the objection that comes up every time, and it is a fair one: the devil is not omnipresent. Addressing him seems out of order. And there is no solid biblical basis for assuming that every child brought to the font is actually possessed.

The second half of that is true, and the Lutherans knew it. The rite never claimed the child was *possessed* in the sense of the Gerasene demoniac — no secret knowledge, no unlearned tongues, no supernatural strength, the actual criteria the old pastoral handbooks used before anyone would touch a case of possession. The claim was dominion, not occupancy: the child is under Satan's spiritual control, whatever his body is or is not doing.⁸ That is not an exotic doctrine bolted onto baptism. It is the doctrine that makes infant baptism intelligible in the first place. Strike it and you are left explaining why you are washing someone who has nothing to wash off.

The first half of the objection is the more interesting one, because it proves far too much. Liturgy addresses the absent constantly, and so does Scripture. Paul taunts death in the

second person. Luther's own hymn speaks to the prince of darkness grim. Apostrophe is a normal mode of confession, and its force has never depended on the addressee standing there listening.

But the decisive evidence is closer to home than that. Cyril of Jerusalem, walking the newly baptized through what had happened to them on Easter night, describes the candidate standing in the outer chamber, facing west toward the region of darkness, stretching out his hand — and here is Cyril's own gloss — *as though he were present*, and saying: I renounce thee, Satan.⁹

As though he were present. The fourth century knew perfectly well that the devil was not standing in the vestibule. It addressed him anyway. The renunciation, which almost every Lutheran alive has heard and which nobody finds objectionable, is itself a second-person address to an absent devil. The objection, pressed consistently, does not merely take out the exorcism. It takes out the renunciation too, and Tertullian, and Hippolytus, and the entire baptismal tradition of the church east and west.¹⁰

The trade that was not a trade

It is tempting — I have been tempted — to describe what happened as a trade: the church swapped a hard word addressed to the devil for a gentler one addressed to the candidate. That is not quite what happened, and the truth is worse.

The interrogatory renunciation is old. By the eighth century Rome was already using the triple question and answer: Dost thou renounce Satan? I renounce him.¹¹ Luther inherited that form and kept it, unchanged, in both 1523 and 1526 — alongside the exorcism. The two lived together in the same rite for centuries. Nothing was swapped, because nothing was added.

Something was subtracted. And the renunciation, which had always been one voice in a duet, was left onstage alone.

Look at the grammar of what remained. The exorcism is God's Word doing something to the child through the minister's mouth: a declaration, in Christ's authority, that a claim is being broken. The renunciation is the candidate doing something: a promise, an answer, a word from below. In a rite for adult converts those two hold each other in balance. In a rite for an eight-day-old, the second one is made by proxy — a sponsor promising on behalf of someone who cannot promise, in a service whose entire burden is that God is the one who acts.

Remove the declaring word and the asking word is all that is left. And an asking word, standing alone at the font, starts to look like the point.

How it died

Not by argument. The exorcism was never refuted. It was outlived.

Rationalism found the devil embarrassing, and the eighteenth century revised him out of the service books along with a good deal else.¹² Once he had become a metaphor, a command addressed to him was not false so much as unintelligible, and unintelligible words fall out of liturgies the way unused tools fall out of toolboxes.

The American chapter is the one Lutherans in this country should sit with. The Saxons who founded the Missouri Synod produced a *Kirchen-Agenda* in 1856 that followed Luther's 1526 order closely — but the exorcism was demoted to an optional rite, printed in a footnote. In 1916 the footnote went away, and with it the exorcism.¹³ *The Lutheran Hymnal* inherited the deletion. So the sequence was not deletion but demotion, and then deletion; not a decision but two decisions, sixty years apart, neither of which required anyone to say out loud that Luther had been wrong.

That is how these things actually go. Nobody votes to stop believing something. It gets moved to a footnote, and then the footnote gets tidied.

What was lost

The diagnosis was lost. That is the whole answer.

The exorcism named the condition out loud, in public, in the hearing of the congregation, immediately before the cure was applied. Take the naming away and the water is still there, the Word is still there, the promise is still there — everything essential survives, which is exactly why the removal was so easy and why so few noticed. But the rite no longer tells you what it is *for*. It becomes a lovely thing done to a lovely child for reasons increasingly hard to state.

And a cure whose disease has gone unmentioned starts, within a generation or two, to look optional. Then to look like a gesture. Then to look like something you might reasonably schedule later, when the child can speak for himself and mean it — which is to say, when the promise from below has entirely replaced the declaration from above.

I do not think the removal of the baptismal exorcism caused the anxious bench. Causation in these things is never that tidy, and the American revival had a hundred parents. But I would say this: the grammar of the anxious bench — the moment where the sacrament pauses and turns to ask you to commit — had already put a foot in the door of the Lutheran font a century before Finney was born. It got in through a subtraction that nobody thought was doctrinal.

The ember

It is not entirely gone. The Lutheran Church of Australia retains the exorcism as an option. The Eastern rites never lost it. And in the *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* there is an Alternate Form of Holy Baptism which restores Luther's opening command, with the sign of the cross and the triune name, right where he put it.¹⁴ It is printed. It is authorized. A pastor may use it tomorrow.

Almost nobody does, and I understand why. It would require explaining, and the explanation is uncomfortable, and Lutherans are not currently in the habit of making people uncomfortable at baptisms.

But that is the question the old rite puts to us, and it is not really a question about ceremonies. If the words are false, we should be glad they are gone. If they are true, then we have spent two hundred years declining to say the truest thing we know about the child in our arms, at the one moment when saying it would have cost us nothing but our composure.

Sources

1. *Order of Baptism* (1523), LW 53:95–103. The Flood Prayer is Luther's own composition and is the one substantial addition to the inherited rite.
2. *Taufbüchlein / Order of Baptism Newly Revised* (1526), LW 53:106–109. On its circulation with the Small Catechism and its influence on the German church orders, see Mark Birkholz, "Luther's Baptismal Rites," LutheranReformation.org (2017), which includes a useful side-by-side of the 1523 rite, the 1526 rite, and *Lutheran Service Book* p. 268.
3. LW 53:102. Luther's remarks on the "external things" being less important occur in the same preface.

4. Bodo Nischan, “The Exorcism Controversy and Baptism in the Late Reformation,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 1 (1987): 31–51. This is the standard treatment and the place to start.
5. Gaylin R. Schmeling, “Paul Gerhardt: Pastor and Theologian,” Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. Schmeling notes that baptismal exorcism “had taken on the significance of being a confessional stand against the Reformed” and recounts Starke’s removal.
6. The Four Visitation Articles of Electoral Saxony were written in 1592 and published in German in 1593. Philip Schaff treats them as an anti-Calvinist appendix to the Formula of Concord; they remained in force in Saxony into the nineteenth century.
7. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1. Schaff’s note is explicit that the abolition of baptismal exorcism was counted among the chief crimes charged to the crypto-Calvinists.
8. The distinction between bodily possession and spiritual dominion is standard in the Lutheran pastoral handbooks of the period, which set a high evidentiary bar (knowledge of secret things, unlearned languages, preternatural strength) before any case of possession would be entertained, and which direct that a physician be consulted first. Cf. the Evangelical Lutheran Synod’s summary: the old liturgies used exorcism for those “under Satan’s control spiritually (if not physically).”
9. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* I (Lecture XIX), §§ 2–9; NPNF 2/7:144–146.
10. Tertullian, *De corona* 3 and *De spectaculis* 4; *Apostolic Tradition* 21; *Apostolic Constitutions* VII.41.
11. The Roman triple-question form is attested by the eighth century and passes into the Gallican and Sarum books, and thence into English usage. See the survey in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Renunciation of the Devil.”
12. On the eighteenth-century removals and their rationalist rationale, see Nischan (for the earlier controversy) and, for the arc through the twentieth century, Thomas Pietsch, “Baptismal Exorcism: An Exercise in Liturgical Theology,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 45, no. 3 (2011).
13. Ryan C. MacPherson, “A History of the Baptismal Order.” The Missouri Synod’s *Kirchen-Agenda* (1856) followed the 1526 order closely but relegated the exorcism to an optional footnote; the *Liturgy and Agenda* of 1916 omitted the footnote.
14. “Alternate Form of Holy Baptism,” *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*, p. 13.