



Baptism as Transformation and Promise: The Seal of the Spirit in 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Lutheran Liturgy

AMY LINDEMAN ALLEN

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the rite of water baptism is immediately followed up by marking the brow of the newly baptized with the sign of the cross. Accompanying this marking, the minister declares, “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”¹ While the specific language of sealing is reserved for the baptismal rite, related rites employ similar imagery. Catechumens beginning the process of baptismal preparation may be marked with the sign of the cross together with the accompanying words, “Receive the sign of the cross, a sign of God’s endless love and mercy for you.”² And after a person has been baptized, they may choose

¹ Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, “Holy Baptism,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1978), 124; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Holy Baptism,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 231.

² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Welcome to Baptism,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 233.

Lutherans and many other Christians make much of baptism as a core for their theology and religious life. Yet the question of how baptism is transformative of the human person is less clear. Here, the imagery of being “sealed by the Holy Spirit” is investigated as a means of clarifying and strengthening the understanding of the transformative power of baptism.

to affirm their baptism (a rite that can be repeated at significant points in the life of the baptized) while a minister lays hands upon them and prays for God to “Stir up in [that person] the gift of your Holy Spirit.”³ These latter two rites have received increasing use and attention with the reemergence of the adult catechumenate in the Lutheran Church; however, the significance of the sealing is rarely defined.

To add to the confusion, scriptural language about the seal of the Spirit in 2 Cor 1:22 and Eph 1:13–14 and 4:30 remains highly debated. While early church tradition drew a clear connection between these rites and baptism, within the canonical texts such a connection is circumspect at best. Several commentaries around the midpoint of the twentieth century made a case for a connection between the Ephesians text in particular and baptism, largely based upon ritualistic parallels in the Qumran communities.⁴ Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague connect the “sealing” in Eph 1:13 with the ritual laying on of hands following baptism, and G. W. H. Lampe even equates the “seal” directly with the mark of the cross on the forehead of the baptized.⁵ However, historical study of the liturgy suggests that both these practices came much later, and connections between early Christian communities and those at Qumran are highly speculative. Moreover, other possible baptismal parallels seem more likely to align with the theological concerns of the respective scholars than with any actual or reconstructed textual audience. The majority of scholarship today thus reads the seal of the Spirit as distinct from the rite of water baptism, either connected with conversion, concurrent with but separate from water baptism, or as a part of the altogether different experience of spirit baptism as defined in Pentecostal traditions. This plurality of plausible interpretive possibilities itself points to the ambiguity in the texts.

The majority of scholarship today thus reads the seal of the Spirit as distinct from the rite of water baptism, either connected with conversion, concurrent with but separate from water baptism, or as a part of the altogether different experience.

Acknowledging that the connection between baptism and the seal of the Spirit may not have been original to the first-century audiences at Corinth and Ephesus, this paper investigates the value of applying a scriptural understanding of the seal of the Spirit to the baptismal (and related) practices of contemporary

³ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Affirmation of Baptism,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236.

⁴ Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 135–44; J. C. Kirby, *Ephesians Baptism and Pentecost* (London: SPCK, 1968), 150–54; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretations of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 383.

⁵ Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 2nd rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 33; G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1951), 16.

liturgical communities such as the ELCA adult catechumenate. Such a reading has the potential to empower both catechumens and the baptized to receive the seal of the Spirit and engage in the related rites as a transformative moment and encounter with the divine. To do this, I explore the significance of the seal of the Spirit in the first-century Mediterranean context more generally and in relation to the specific passages in which it occurs in 2 Corinthians and Ephesians and suggest possible implications for the present-day experience of the Spirit's seal among the Lutheran catechumenate.

The root σφραγίς (seal) occurs in the New Testament in relation to πνεῦμα (spirit) three times: 2 Cor 1:22 and Eph 1:13–14 and 4:30. The action of sealing expresses a number of related concepts in the ancient world, varying from simply shutting something up, to attesting to its validity, to claiming ownership and extending protection. Although each of these meanings have been applied fruitfully to the seal of the Spirit, in the context of baptismal identity, the seal as a mark of ownership and protection provides the strongest parallels with the experience of being named and claimed as children of God in baptism.

As an identifying mark used for legal protection of property rights and as a guarantee of ownership, seals are well attested in the first-century world.⁶ Nor were they limited to the branding of animals, as we may think of today. In the first-century world, seals denoting ownership could take a variety of forms, ranging from the branding of animals and occasionally slaves, representative of abusive hierarchical orders of the day, to more frequent sealing of humans signified by the wearing of a ring or an amulet.⁷ The prevalence of seals among human beings had to do not only with a sense of belonging but even more so with a desire for the protection that affiliation with the seal provided. Such protection extended far beyond the legal realm. Archaeologists have speculated that “more important than these utilitarian functions was the seal’s use as an amulet . . . to provide protection and bring good fortune to the wearer.”⁸ Drawing upon the alternate meaning of “to seal” as to “shut or close,” a seal was thought to close off a person from invasion of evil forces or spirits. Such a protection draws direct parallels to the rejection of the forces of evil presently used in the Lutheran baptismal rite prior to sealing.⁹

Within this context, the Epistle writer’s use of the term *seal* carries a dual sense of Christian identity and divine protection.¹⁰ The seal of the Holy Spirit thus becomes much more than a mere mark of membership, as though Christianity

⁶ G. Fitzer, σφραγίς, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 6.940–41.

⁷ Rodney Thomas, “The Seal of the Spirit and the Religious Climate of Ephesus,” *Restoration Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2001): 156.

⁸ Thomas, “Seal of the Spirit,” 158, citing Edith Porada, ed., *Ancient Art in Seals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3.

⁹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Holy Baptism,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 229.

¹⁰ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); hereafter cited BDAG.

were a sort of club with a members-only badge. It rather functions in an apotropaic sense to shield the one who is sealed from harm. Through the seal of the Spirit, baptism thus not only serves a ritualistic or initiatory function related to God's eschatological reign but promises an apotropaic relationship with God's Holy Spirit in the present life with particular regard to protection against evil. This can be seen in the texts that follow.

But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting [God's] seal on us and giving us [God's] Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. (1 Cor 1:21–22)

In 2 Cor 1:22 Paul, describes God's seal as an ἀρραβών (first installment), language that also occurs in Eph 1:14 connected with sealing. This is a technical term for a down payment in the first-century Mediterranean world, signifying paying for part of a purchase in advance.¹¹ Similar to a down payment in contemporary society, an ἀρραβών served to secure "a legal claim to the item in question" on the part of the purchaser as well as to protect the seller by obligating the buyer to future payments.¹² With σφραγίς used in relation to claims of ownership and ἀρραβών serving as a part of the process by which one secures ownership, these words are connected not only by proximity within the biblical text but as a part of a shared semantic group around law and commerce, specifically denoting ownership in the first-century Mediterranean world. Connected with this sort of official language, the seal of the Spirit does not denote accidental connection but serves as an official mark of God's ownership placed upon members of the community.

The seal of the Holy Spirit thus becomes much more than a mere mark of membership, as though Christianity were a sort of club with a members-only badge. It rather functions in an apotropaic sense to shield the one who is sealed from harm.

In this passage, God is the agent who establishes the community together both by sealing as an official mark of belonging and by bestowing the Holy Spirit as a first fruit of the transformed life in the presence of God. In the Lutheran ritual of baptism, this new life is signified by baptism and connected with anointing and sealing as the reception of this ἀρραβών of the new life with God experienced by the baptized. Baptism does not complete one's journey with God; however, it is a realized beginning. This beginning is a significant one because it is marked by the reception of the gift of God's Spirit in the present—a first fruits of the encounter with God through God's Spirit that the community of the baptized can anticipate in their life ahead, both in this life and the next one.

¹¹ BDAG.

¹² BDAG.

This relational aspect of sealing is highlighted by the first- and second-person plurals in 2 Cor 1:21–22. It is not a single catechumen or believer who receives God’s Spirit but the whole community at Corinth to whom Paul’s letter is addressed. Furthermore, they receive this gift not by the work of one minister but by the ministry of Paul and his colleagues among them. To be sealed is to be a part of a community, connected with one another. Protecting and shielding one another from the evils of the world, Paul describes God’s sealing as the means by which a believer is brought into relationship with God and other believers in Christ. The seal is not reserved for an individual person; it is a marker of community. The seal does not simply mark the believer as belonging to God but also puts them in relationship with other believers who have also been sealed by God’s Spirit for the purpose of protection. As such, the experience of God’s Spirit and the promise for the future communion with God in God’s fullness occurs within the context of a protective community.

In [Christ] you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of [God’s] glory. (Eph 1:13–14)

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. (Eph 4:30)

While 2 Corinthians is concerned about the identity of the community at Corinth and their relationship with Paul and his associates as ministers, Ephesians is less concerned about an individual community than it is about the broader theme of eternal salvation and how one navigates their salvation in the present while awaiting the future eschaton. The theme of eternal salvation permeates Ephesians.¹³ The Epistle emphasizes believers’ connections with God through Christ in this life, calling for right living so that believers might continue to experience the transformation won by the Holy Spirit move toward their ultimate moment of salvation.

The Epistle emphasizes believers’ connections with God through Christ in this life, calling for right living so that believers might continue to experience the transformation won by the Holy Spirit move toward their ultimate moment of salvation.

The connection between the seal of the Spirit that has already been given (as an ἀρραβών, Eph 1:14) and the anticipated “day of redemption” in Eph 4:30

¹³ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul: A Study in Pauline Theology*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 87.

highlights the eschatological character of the letter. Sealing is bound up with the eschatological promise of salvation, which imparts the reality of salvation while promising its fullness as a future inheritance. This is seen also in the exhortation toward present and future action in light of the action God has already taken (Eph 4:31–32). In order to live into the fullness of God’s vision for them, believers are called to recognize first the way in which God has already come into their lives through the sealing of the Spirit.

As it is presented in Ephesians, the seal of the Spirit is both a now and not-yet reality, representing both the bestowal of transforming activity of the Holy Spirit in the here and now and the promise of the future inheritance at the end of time. As such, Lampe describes the “conception of the Spirit, and hence of Baptism” in Ephesians as “always eschatological.”¹⁴ The Holy Spirit is understood in Ephesians as a gift out of God’s fullness already beginning to be fulfilled and present in a transformative way for all believers. Such transformation in Ephesians’ cultural context would have included protective, apotropaic effects. It is this present working of the Spirit that is often missed in contemporary practices of baptism that treat the sacrament merely as ritual or as a guarantee for eternal life at the eschaton.

By uplifting the seal of the Spirit as a first installment of the Spirit’s present activity and not merely a guarantee of God’s future activity, catechumens can benefit from a more active theology of God’s presence. Schnackenburg uplifts this theology with reference to the seal as an ἀρραβών such that “the Spirit is bestowed on us in plentiful abundance out of God’s uncompelled loving-kindness, but not yet in the fullness which this divine gift contains.”¹⁵ In this theology, the seal imparted to believers in their baptism is understood as both a promise and a push. In the action of sealing, the Holy Spirit promises the protection brought about by membership within a baptismal community, alongside a future inheritance. Together, these are experienced as a fullness with God, which pushes toward transformation through a life lived with and through the Spirit in the present, itself reflecting confidence in the Spirit’s presence and the promised future. In this way, the Spirit serves to enact the promise for the larger baptismal community as well.

As is typical in the Epistles, such theology occurs within the context of practical advice for living in the present. Eph 4:30 identifies the seal of the Spirit as a mark for the day of redemption in the midst of a list of practical advice for believers (4:17ff.), including an admonishment not to grieve the Holy Spirit with which those in the audience are assumed already to have been sealed. The baptismal language of clothing oneself “with the new self” is employed in this section (Eph 4:24) in order to encourage the audience to “live in love” (Eph 5:2). This new way of living that is different from “the Gentiles” (Eph 4:17) is grounded in the transformative experience of renewal marked by the seal of the Spirit and expected to guard the community, even if at present such protection is experienced in the incomplete

¹⁴ Lampe, *Seal of the Spirit*, 57.

¹⁵ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 66.

sense of an ἀρραβών. Because God's Spirit is present and active among the Ephesians community, failing to live according to the Spirit could grieve God's Spirit for the loss of potential. At the same time, as a guarantee of the promise to come, God's Spirit continues to live and work through even these lapsed believers, even through the harsh words of reproach that come through the Epistle.

The Spirit works most effectively through the community of believers that have been sealed and joined together. The author of Ephesians makes this case with the use of body imagery in 4:12–16, reminding the baptized that together they are “the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love” (Eph 4:16). The transformation begun by the Spirit at baptism is thus continued through the work of the community together, guarding them from the forces of evil renounced at baptism.

By connecting baptism with the seal of the Holy Spirit, I seek to understand baptism not as a once-and-finished initiation act but as an ἀρραβών (first installment) of new life in God. This life is characterized by God, given community among a body of people marked with the same Spirit by which they care for and uplift one another. Through this body, the believer both encounters the presence of God in their midst through the protection of their baptismal community and hopes for the fulfillment of this encounter at the eschaton among all of the saints.

Although baptism may sometimes be treated as a sort of spiritual life insurance, when recognized as a distinct encounter with God and so connected with the Holy Spirit, the rite of baptism marked by the seal of the Holy Spirit uplifts the Holy Spirit's ongoing protective and transformative activity in a believer's life before and after the actual rite of baptism. The moment of sealing is important as a fixed moment at which a believer experiences the ἀρραβών of the Holy Spirit, which serves as a guarantee of the Spirit's continued and transformative work and a promise of a future inheritance at the eschaton or, in Ephesians, “the day of redemption” (4:30).

This transforming activity of the Holy Spirit is at the core of the Lutheran practice of baptism and its related rites. While understanding that the seal on the baptized is necessarily only a fraction of the future fullness of the Spirit, it is equally important to remember that the Spirit *is* present. The sealing represents the *present* transforming work of the Spirit within believers. To this end, Schnackenburg concludes, “The metaphor of a seal does not imply that the Holy Spirit has stamped us with a seal (in 2 Cor 1:22 God has sealed us) but that [the Spirit itself] is this seal.”¹⁶ Indeed, the seal is in actuality “the activity and the presence of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ The seal of the Holy Spirit is not a simple luggage tag to remind God to whom we belong on the day of redemption, but it is the real presence of the Holy Spirit, a piece of the fullness of God's salvation already working inside of every believer, transforming them in order to live a life according to the Spirit.

¹⁶ Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 65.

¹⁷ Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 65.

Understanding the baptismal elements of the seal of the Holy Spirit as expressed in 2 Cor 1:22 and Eph 1:13–14 and 4:30, the eschatological nature of the baptismal rite expands to include the promise of fullness in the Spirit. This fullness reflects a transformative reality, not only at the eschaton but in the present-day life of sealed believers who benefit from the requisite protections that possession by the Spirit entails. Thus, the experience of sealing at baptism both guarantees the future hope of redemption to the newly baptized and transforms them to live in the reality of the Spirit here and now.

Once the Holy Spirit takes ownership of and responsibility for an individual, there is nothing a person can do to nullify this relationship. Rather, the transformative power of the Holy Spirit claims both ownership of and responsibility for the believer at baptism through the imparting of the Spirit as seal. Through this seal, the baptized are claimed for the purposes of God at the day of redemption and protected under the care of the Holy Spirit, made alive by the community of believers, in the meantime.

The transformative power of the Holy Spirit claims both ownership of and responsibility for the believer at baptism through the imparting of the Spirit as seal.

A scriptural reading of 2 Cor 1:22 and Eph 1:13, and 4:30 suggests that the seal of the Spirit is the beginning and the ending of a way of life marked by the transformative power of God's Holy Spirit, empowering believers to live lives accented by the Spirit in the present. This process begins with an overturning of secular values and an affirmation of one's possession by and service to the Holy Spirit, and ends at the last with the final installment on the day of redemption. ☩

AMY LINDEMAN ALLEN is assistant professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana. She is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.