

LUTHER AND THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM

Since the first International Anglican Liturgical Consultation in Boston (1985), baptism has been accepted as the sacramental sign of full incorporation into the church; and the only prerequisite for receiving communion. The Consultation's recommendations were endorsed by the 1988 Lambeth Conference.¹ Since baptism alone was confirmed as the basis for communion, children of all ages have been receiving the Eucharist. Now, however, the case for 'believers' baptism' – the Anabaptist argument – is once again being made in the Church.

With the elevation of baptism from a life-stage pastoral office to the sacrament uniting Christ with his people, a movement has begun to return to an intentional process of catechumenical formation leading to baptism and discipleship. In this model, the presumption is that inquirers would be adults.² Children could be baptized provided that their parents or guardians could provide for them a Christian household; which the Rev. Canon John Hill, a leading proponent of The Catechumenate, has defined as one "whose daily life is so shaped by the Christian story, Christian prayer, and Christian assumptions that a young child growing up there cannot even imagine not being a Christian".³ This presumes that the children's sponsors are themselves baptized, having undergone appropriate catechumenical formation.⁴ The Christian household is not merely one in which the parents happen to be churchgoers.⁵

One of the intentions of the proposed changes is that the baptism of children would be the exception, not the norm⁶. Children, after all, are unable to substantiate, and give a valid account for, their belief. Since the Anglican

¹ Colin Buchanan, Confirmation, in David R. Holeton, ed., "Growing in Newness of Life", (Toronto: The Anglican Book Centre, 1993), 114-116.

² For information on the catechumenate see The Catechumenate: Forming the Body of Christ in the 21st Century, (Toronto: The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission) available from <http://www.associatedparishes.org>.

³ The Rev. Canon John W.B. Hill, What Meaning has Infant Baptism in a post-Christendom World?, unpublished essay.

⁴ The Catechumenate, 13.

⁵ Hill, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid.

Church subscribes to the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, the proposals of the Catechumenate Network appear to make sense. Coming to faith is described as a process of discernment, formation, and conversion, culminating in a desire to be baptized and join the Christian community.⁷ Clearly such a process is beyond the capability of a child.

While I understand the need and desire for a program of discipleship, I question whether baptism is the appropriate vehicle. My contention is that infant baptism is, and was always intended to be, normative. Furthermore, demonstrable faith is not a prerequisite; it is sufficient if it develops over time – perhaps a lifetime. My contentions are based on the work of the architect of Justification by Faith himself, Martin Luther.

Much of Luther's argument can be found in the document, *Concerning Rebaptism (1528): A Letter of Martin Luther to Two Pastors*.⁸ In fact, it is summarized in the following statement:

*Our baptism, thus, is a strong and sure foundation, affirming that God has made a covenant with all the world to be a God of the heathen in all the world, as the gospel says. Also, that Christ has commanded the gospel to be preached in all the world, as also the prophets have declared in many ways. As a sign of this covenant he has instituted baptism, commanded and enjoined upon all heathen, as Matt.[28:19] declares: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father," etc. In the same manner he had made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants to be their God, and made circumcision a sign of this covenant. Here, namely, that we are baptized; not because we are certain of our faith but because it is the command and will of God. For even if I were never certain any more of faith, I still am certain of the command of God, that God has bidden to baptize, for this he has made known throughout the world. In this I cannot err, for God's command cannot deceive. But of my faith he has never said anything to anyone, nor issued an order or command concerning it. True, one should add faith to baptism. But we are not to base baptism on faith.*⁹

Luther draws a direct analogy between circumcision and baptism as the sign of a covenant relationship with God. Just as circumcision was the sign of

⁷ The Catechumenate, 5-8.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism (1528): A Letter of Martin Luther to Two Pastors*, In Editor, Timothy F. Lull, and William R. Russell Second Edition Editor. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 239-258.

⁹ Ibid, 253

the Old Covenant, baptism is the sign of the New Covenant that replaced it, for the gentiles and those Jews that believed through Jesus Christ. The Old Covenant has been superseded, but it remains normative for the Jews. Indeed, Jonathan Trigg, in commentary on Luther's Lectures on Genesis, notes that Luther speaks of the two covenants as one, even though the signs have changed.¹⁰ As such, Luther believes we are entitled to interpret God's instruction to Abraham and his descendents to circumcise male infants (Gen 17:12) to also hold for the baptism of infants.¹¹ To those who say that there is no specific scriptural reference to a command to baptise children, Luther replies:

*I answer, neither has he specifically commanded the baptism of adults, nor of men or of women, so we had better not baptize anybody. But he has commanded us to baptize all Gentiles, none excepted, when he said, "Go and baptize all heathen in my name," etc. (Matt. 28[:19]). Now children constitute a great part of the heathen.*¹²

Concerning faith as a prerequisite for baptism, Luther notes that baptism is a work of God – a divine work. It is not invented by man but commanded by God and witnessed to by the gospel.¹³ As Trigg notes, Luther holds it to be permanently valid without human factors.¹⁴ He holds baptism to be the first sign of grace, followed by the word and the eucharist. Primacy, however is not centrality. The major part of Luther's argument centres on right understanding of the relationship between faith and what that faith has to grasp. For Luther *fides infantium* can be advanced because the major place is not given to faith but to the means of grace.¹⁵ He believes that the sacrament of baptism, rests on foundations other than faith. It is the words of promise and command on which

¹⁰Jonathan D. Trigg, Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994)

¹¹ *ibid*, 41.

¹² Luther, Concerning Rebaptism, in Lull, 248.

¹³ *ibid*, 245.

¹⁴ Trigg, 2.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 106.

all rests – the dominical words, grounded in the divine warrant for baptism in MT 28:19¹⁶ and Mk 16:16¹⁷.

Thus Luther can say: “...whoever bases baptism on faith and baptizes on chance and not on certainty that faith is present does nothing better than he who baptized him who has no faith.”¹⁸ And further:

I maintain as I have written in the Postil that the most certain form of baptism is child baptism. For an adult might deceive and come to Christ as a Judas and have himself baptized. But a child cannot deceive. He comes to Christ in baptism, as John came to him, and as the children were brought to him, that his word and work might be effective in them, move them, and make them holy, because his Word and work cannot be without fruit. Yet it has this effect alone in the child.”¹⁹

It is enough for Luther that the parents, godparents, or broader congregation have faith - his defence of *fides aliena* - because faith itself is not the guarantor of the sacrament. In fact, it does not matter whether the child has faith as long as the words were spoken and all that pertains to baptism was done as fully as if faith were present.²⁰ As he says, “faith does not exist for the sake of baptism, but baptism for the sake of faith. When faith comes baptism is complete.”²¹

Perhaps Luther was most cogent, and at his most pastoral, when he said:

... child baptism derives from the apostles and has been practised since the days of the apostles. We cannot oppose it, but must let it continue, since no one has yet been able to prove that in baptism children do not believe or that such baptism is wrong. For even if I were not sure that they believed, yet for my conscience’s sake I would have to let them be baptized. I would much rather allow them baptism than to keep them from it. For if, as we believe, baptism is right and useful and brings the children to salvation, and I then did away with it, then I would be responsible for all the children who were lost because they were unbaptized – a cruel and terrible thing. If baptism is not right, that is, without value or help to the children, then I would be guilty of no greater sin than the Word of God had been spoken and his sign given in vain. I

¹⁶ Mt. 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, NRSV

¹⁷ Mk. 16:16 The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. NRSV.

¹⁸ Luther, Concerning Rebaptism, in Lull, 248.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Luther, Concerning Rebaptism, in Lull, 249.

²¹ *ibid.*

*would not be responsible for the loss of any soul, but only of an ineffectual use of the Word and sign of God.*²²

Luther's theology of baptism was succinctly expressed in the Marburg Colloquy (1529), where he says in part: "(We believe) that Holy Baptism is a sacrament established by God to create this faith...it is not merely an empty symbol or sign among Christians, but a sign and act of God by which our faith is fostered.²³...(We believe) it is proper to baptize children. Through baptism they are brought to God's grace and into Christendom."²⁴ This position was confirmed in the Smalcald Articles (1537) where he said, "We maintain that we should baptize children because they also belong to the promised redemption that was brought about by Christ. The Church ought to extend it to them."²⁵

As noted in Mark Edwards and George Tavard's *Luther, A Reformer for the Churches*, Luther finds that only the Eucharist and baptism clearly express justification. They remark, "Because baptism is described by St. Paul as participation in the dying and rising of Christ, it is an eloquent proclamation of life out of death, of justification by faith, for it is independent of conditions on the part of the recipient and therefore is properly given to infants."²⁶

I find the arguments made by Luther, and his commentators, to be persuasive. Baptism is at once the New Covenant and the basic sign of the relationship between God and his people. As a work of God it does not need to be discerned. As the creator of faith it does not need to be present before it is bestowed. Once bestowed, it may not be perfected for some time; indeed it may require a lifetime to conform to Christ. The good news is the daily bath for the old man – the old Adam – is permanently available through the abiding presence of Christ on his mercy seat.²⁷

As for The Catechumenate Network, it is respectfully suggested that the appropriate vehicle for their very laudable program of discipleship is actually a

²² *ibid*, 254.

²³ Luther, *The Marburg Colloquy* (1529), in Lull, 278

²⁴ *ibid*, 279.

²⁵ Luther, *The Smalcald Articles* (1537), in Lull, 356.

²⁶ Mark Edwards and George Tavard, *Luther, A Reformer for the Churches*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), CD-ROM

²⁷ Trigg, 97.

renewed and revitalized form of Confirmation – a rite that does anticipate, indeed requires, discernment and a conscious decision for conversion.

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