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**LUTHER ON INFANT BAPTISM:  
«ON REBAPTISM» (1528)  
AND «LARGE CATECHISM» (1529)**

Martin Luther's two primary writings concerning the baptism of infants — «On Rebaptism» (1528) and the Excursus on Infant Baptism contained in «Large Catechism» (1529) — are presented and reviewed in this article. In the 1528 tractate written in response to a letter asking for assistance in answering the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism, Luther lays out the evangelical defense of «one baptism» for all — young, old, male, female, etc. — from Scripture and history. Luther's defense remains a primary answer to the same questions today. Likewise, the Excursus in «Large Catechism» is developed by Luther in this same time period and is a confessional statement for the Lutheran Church concerning the sacrament of Holy Baptism and its blessings for all the baptized.

*Key words:* sacraments, Augustine, faith, John Chrysostom, Anabaptists

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***ЛЮТЕР О ДЕТСКОМ КРЕЩЕНИИ:  
«О ПЕРЕКРЕЩИВАНИИ» (1528)  
И «БОЛЬШОЙ КАТЕХИЗИС» (1529)***

Два главных сочинения Мартина Лютера — «О перекрещивании» (1528) и экскурс «О крещении младенцев», который содержится в «Большом катехизисе» (1529), — освещены и проанализированы в данной статье. В трактате 1528 г., написанном в ответ на письмо, в котором Лютера попросили о помощи в опровержении анабаптистского отрицания крещения младенцев, Лютер формулирует евангелическую защиту «единого крещения» для всех — для молодых и старых, мужчин и женщин, основываясь на Писании и истории. Положения Лютера остаются основным ответом на этот вопрос и сегодня. Подобным образом экскурс, включенный в «Большой катехизис», был составлен Лютером в этот же период и являет собой конфессиональное заявление лютеранской церкви относительно святого таинства крещения и благословений для всех крещенных, которое оно дает.

*Ключевые слова:* таинства, Августин, вера, Иоанн Златоуст, анабаптисты

*There is no greater comfort on earth than baptism...<sup>1</sup>*

To say that Martin Luther held baptism in high regard is to state the obvious. The above quote from the Reformer's 1519 tract, «The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism», comes early in his career and serves as an early marker of the fact. Indeed, from this 1519 tract onward — through his 1520 major Reformation tract on the sacraments, «The Babylonian Captivity of the Church» — to his final lectures on «the dear Genesis» (1535–1545) — Luther's devotion to the sacrament of baptism only continued to grow<sup>2</sup>.

Just as obvious, perhaps, is the fact that Luther did not view the baptism of infants as some sort of subset of the sacrament or special case of baptism. Quite the opposite. Infant baptism had been the norm in Christendom «for over a thousand years»<sup>3</sup> before Luther's time and his anticipation of its continuing prominence is witnessed to by his liturgical reforms of the rite for Holy Baptism (1523, 1526) written with infant baptism as its «default» occasion<sup>4</sup>. Luther was forced to defend infant baptism as a response to the course and

<sup>1</sup> «The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism»: «Drumb ist kein grosser trost auff erden dan die tauf» (Martin Luther. Luther's Works. Minneapolis, 1960. Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I. P. 34; D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe / Hrsg. von J. K. F. Knaake. D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe / Hrsg. von J. K. F. Knaake. Bd 2. Weimar, 1883. S. 731).

<sup>2</sup> Trigg J. D. Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther. Leiden, 1994. P. 1. Special note at the outset needs to be given to this resource regarding Luther and baptism for its importance and excellence. The present study «plunders lavishly» (to further «plunder» from Scaer) Trigg's thought and insights and gratefully acknowledges them. In regard to the cited material for this note, Trigg examines the special place of baptism in Luther's Genesis Lectures and establishes how «baptism assumed a higher and yet higher profile in Luther's writings» (13) in a unique and valued way. His chapter «The Trysting Place: Baptism in the Lectures on Genesis (1535–45)» traces the depth and spread of the mature Luther's view of baptism, and especially the continuity of Luther's thinking concerning baptism and justification by faith. Trigg himself pays tribute to a little-known article by P. D. Pahl in the inaugural number of the Lutheran Theological Journal, an Australian Lutheran journal entitled, «Baptism in Luther's Lectures on Genesis» (Pahl P. D. In Luther's Lectures on Genesis // Lutheran Theological Journal. 1967. Vol. I. N 1. P. 26–35).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism // Luther's Works. Minneapolis, 1958. Vol. 40. P. 256.

<sup>4</sup> See: Martin Luther. 1) The Order of Baptism, 1523 // Martin Luther. Luther's Works. Minneapolis, 1965. Vol. 53. P. 96–103; 2) The Order of Baptism Newly Revised // Martin Luther. Luther's Works. Minneapolis, 1967. Vol. 54. P. 107–109.

currents of the wider Reformation. For instance, Luther's polemics with the enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*), although directed most prominently toward the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, engaged them also concerning baptism, but it was the denial of «first baptism» by the Anabaptists and the subsequent re-baptism of their adherents that led him to write specifically in defense of infant baptism.

Five hundred years afterward, present-day confessional Lutherans can remain grateful for Luther's responses. Luther, after all, was one of the earliest voices to defend infant baptism against the first serious objections to it in 1500 years of church history<sup>5</sup>. His defense remains timely and pertinent and his lines of argumentation are still followed<sup>6</sup>. Baptism has been appealed to in modern ecumenical dialogues as «a way forward» for Christian unity and the baptism portion of the World Council of Churches' document «Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry» reveals an impressive — if surface — degree of common ground in «the churches» concerning baptism<sup>7</sup>. But beneath the surface, baptismal theology remains sharply split along the same fault-lines that arose in the sixteenth century between *paedo-baptism* and «believer's baptism»<sup>8</sup>. As Jonathan Trigg notes,

Baptism continues to be the focus of a number of issues which are fiercely contested in the contemporary Church. But the same debates can be traced back to the beginnings of the Reformation

<sup>5</sup> Prior to the challenge mounted by the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, infant baptism was never questioned as to its legitimacy. The Albigensians of the twelfth- and early thirteenth-century rejected water baptism in toto, and the Waldenses rejected the validity of Roman Catholic baptism (Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*. Minneapolis, 1958. Vol. 40. P. 255). Neither attacked infant baptism on its own merits. Since the sixteenth-century the history of infant baptism in the early church has, of course, been widely debated. For a summary discussion of the historical evidence see: Cortright Ch. L. «Ego Te Baptizo»: The Church's Liturgy as Instrument of the Baptizing God // *LOGIA*. 2014. Vol. 23. N 2. P. 16–18.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Das A. A. *Baptized Into God's Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today*. Milwaukee, 1991. Das's defense of infant baptism incorporates Luther's «classic» arguments from both the Large Catechism and «On Rebaptism».

<sup>7</sup> *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* / Ed. by M. Root, R. Saarinen. Grand Rapids, 1998. P. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111. Geneva, 1982. P. 2–7. See also for an analysis of the current perspective of the modern church on baptism: Trigg J. D. *Baptism...* P. 6–8.

itself. Luther, the theologian of faith *par excellence*, stands at the hinge point of these questions. He had to face them all<sup>9</sup>.

Luther's voice concerning infant baptism is pertinent, too, in view of David Scaer's monograph (2011) concerning the defecation of nineteenth century Lutheran theologians from the Lutheran doctrine of *fides infantium* as taught by Luther and the Lutheran confessors. The more recent challenge of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth to infant baptism in his «Church Dogmatics IV» has had the effect of further eroding a clear confession among some Lutherans with regard to this central issue so that they have adopted a theological stance toward faith that essentially makes them «Baptists who baptize babies»<sup>10</sup>.

Of course, there was no question at the time of the Reformation of the importance of faith in baptism — the question was whose. Luther and the Lutherans excepted, infant faith was generally denied; it was considered a self-evident fact that infants could not believe. Catholic theology had long stipulated that infants do not believe «with the assent of the mind»; Roman Catholicism answered the faith question by pointing to *fides aliena*, that is, the faith of the god-parents or of the Church which substituted for that of the infant at baptism (*Summa Theologiae* IIIa, QQ 68, 69)<sup>11</sup>. For the Reformed, faith was a conscious decision of which infants were incapable. Emerging Reformed theology looked to a child's *future faith* via its attachment to God's covenant by birth into a Christian family<sup>12</sup>. However, unlike

<sup>9</sup> Trigg J. D. Baptism... P. 7–8.

<sup>10</sup> See: Scaer D. P. *Infant Baptism in Nineteenth Century Lutheran Theology*. St. Louis, 2011. Of particular interest to this point is the introduction and conclusion chapters which helpfully discuss the matter of infant faith and the position of various theological traditions concerning it.

<sup>11</sup> See also: Catechism of the Council of Trent. South Bend, 1972. P. 178: «It may not be doubted that in Baptism infants receive the mysterious gifts of faith. Not that they believe with the assent of the mind, but they are established in the faith of their parents...» Similarly, the current «Catechism of the Catholic Church» (Mahwah, 1994) stipulates, «Baptism is the sacrament of faith. But faith needs the community of believers. It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe. The faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a beginning that is called to develop. The catechumen or the god-parent is asked: «What do you ask of God's Church?» The response is: «Faith!»» (para. 1253; Catechism of the Catholic Church. Mahwah, 1994. P. 319).

<sup>12</sup> Jean Calvin. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 ed.) / Ed. by J. T. McNeill; Trans. F. L. Battles. Vol. 2. Philadelphia, 1960: «To sum up, this

Zwingli and Calvin who continued to allow infants to be baptized on that score, the Anabaptists denied the legitimacy of infant baptism entirely, deferring it until faith could be confessed («believer's baptism»).

As «the theologian of faith *par excellence*, Luther recognized that the New Testament requires faith for the reception of baptism's benefits, not for its validity and, in keeping with the central doctrine of justification by faith, denied any justification apart from faith (à la the Reformed), or on the basis of another's faith (as in Catholicism) in baptism. Luther's answer to the question of infant faith lies in his understanding of the nature of faith and the power of God's promise in the sacrament. In short, he affirmed the faith of infants, not as their decision or by proxy, but as the gracious working of the Holy Spirit through the divine word «in and with the water» of Holy Baptism. «Word» of course, is not simply the baptismal formula, but the «dominical command within the entire rite»<sup>13</sup>. It is this understanding that is especially operant in the familiar first three parts of the «Small Catechism» on baptism.

In his analysis of Luther's doctrine and defense of infant baptism, Trigg sees the most critical «test» of Luther's position to be how naturally the doctrine «sits» within Luther's overall treatment of baptism and into the wider context of his whole theology. The most important sources for exploring this directly are the 1528 «letter» «Von der Widdertauffe» — Luther's direct answer to the Anabaptist challenge against infant baptism — and the excursus on infant baptism that forms the penultimate portion of the article on baptism in the «Large Catechism»<sup>14</sup>. We will survey these two «critical

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objection can be solved without difficulty: infants are baptized into *future* repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit» (emphasis added) (4, XVI: 20).

<sup>13</sup> Scaer P. D. *Baptism // Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* / Ed. J. Stephenson. Vol. XI. Cresbard, 1999. P. 152. Scaer draws attention to the complex of meanings for the Word in Luther assessed in Trigg J. D. *Baptism... P. 70*: «(1) the preached Word in distinction from the sacramental Word; (2) the Gospel which unites all forms of the Word; and (3) the Word connected with and commanding Baptism. *Baptism has the same content as the Gospel, but has the benefit of being commanded and given with an element*» (Scaer P. D. *Baptism... P. 152, fn. 28; emphasis added*).

<sup>14</sup> Trigg J. D. *Baptism... P. 99–100*.

sources» for the sake of seeing Luther's theology of infant baptism in its setting and congruence à la Trigg's analysis.

VON DER WIDDERTAUFFE, 1528

At some point in mid-1527, Luther received an inquiry from two German parish pastors serving in a Roman diocese about how best to counteract the influence and arguments of the Anabaptists. Luther responded with his only tract written specifically against the Anabaptists, «A Letter from Martin Luther to Two Pastors Concerning Rebaptism»<sup>15</sup>. Despite being consumed with work on his tract «Confession Concerning Christ's Supper» (1528), Luther was disturbed enough by the inroads of the Anabaptists into central Germany that he decided to answer via a «letter» written between December 1527 and January 1528. «Von der Widdertauffe» was sent off to Spalatin for printing early in February 1528<sup>16</sup>.

Luther's greeting does not name his correspondents, but addresses them as «the worthy and beloved pastors N. and N., my dear friends in Christ»<sup>17</sup>. Despite the affability of his greeting, Luther opens the tract by chiding beloved N. and N. as papists («I must call you such, as long as you are under your tyrants») and for being somewhat anabaptistic themselves: «For many among you re-baptize in Latin when someone has been baptized in German...»<sup>18</sup>.

After delivering this barb, Luther enters into his main discussion by acknowledging that he cannot write definitively to the «ground and reason» (*ursache und grund*) of Anabaptist practices since he

<sup>15</sup> Von der Widdertauffe an Zween Pfarrherrn. Ein Brief Mart. Luther (D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Bd 26: Vorlesung über 1. Timotheus 1528; Schriften 1528. Weimar, 1909. S. 137–174; Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 229–262).

<sup>16</sup> Brecht M. Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532 / Trans. J. L. Schaaf. Minneapolis, 1990. P. 336; D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Bd 26. S. 137.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 229. No fruitful speculation exists as to the actual identities of the two pastors.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 230. Luther notes that the practice by Roman priests in Germany of re-baptizing via the Latin rite those who had been baptized in German (Luther's own revised German rite of baptism had been produced in 1526) was something not even the pope had commanded. «So you have your reward. You favor rebaptism, so you get plenty of Anabaptists...» (Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 231).

had not had to deal directly with them («God be praised and thanked in eternity»), nor had the two pastors included in their original petition for advice specific information about what the Anabaptists were teaching. As a result, Luther responds to what he assumed the Anabaptists were thinking and reasoning in support of rebaptism by conflating his knowledge of the anti-sacramentarian enthusiasts and their arguments with the Anabaptist view<sup>19</sup>. Luther begins, therefore, musing that like the anti-sacramentarians, perhaps the Anabaptists re-baptize Christians out of a desire that their adherents be completely free from anything connected with Rome. Accordingly, rebaptism was meant to demonstrate a complete rejection of Roman Catholic life and teaching. Luther dismisses such actions as «total nonsense» (*Narrenwerk*) because Christ himself encountered the errors of the Pharisees and scribes, but did not for that reason reject everything connected with them. Likewise, «we on our part confess that there is much that is Christian and good under the papacy». Abuses and human accretions to the truth and orthodox practice must be dealt with, but not by destroying the «temple of God itself»<sup>20</sup>. The Anabaptists err in the same manner as the enthusiasts if they think that rejection of everything Roman makes for a robust defense of the truth. Rather, «not realizing this they thus give [Anti-christ] most help, they hurt Christendom most and deceive themselves» because they «attack the temple of God and miss the Anti-christ who sits therein»<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Despite mentioning Balthasar Hubmeier (1481–1528), a noted Anabaptist leader, in the opening lines of his letter (Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 229), Luther could not be expected to be responding to some magisterially-conceived theology of Anabaptism: there was no such thing. There was the common tenet of rejection of infant baptism, but this was also held by others not normally considered to be Anabaptists such as Karlstadt. Carter Lindberg reminds that «in the upheavals of the Reformations [that plural is important!] the differences among theologies were not always so apparent as they sometimes seem today from the vantage point of time and relative stability. The Anabaptist label was applied to those who believed that only adults able to make a profession of faith may be baptized. Since the first generation of these Reformers had been baptized as infants, an adult baptism was literally a rebaptism. Discussion of the radical Reformers or Anabaptists is complicated by their heterogeneous origins, leaders, and visions of Reformation» (Lindberg C. *The European Reformations* / 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Malden, 2010. P. 189).

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 232.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 233.



Luther turns next to Anabaptist concerns about baptism made on the grounds that infant baptism is not part of a person's conscious memory. «[They] say that they know nothing of their baptism, and exclaim, "How do you know you have been baptized? You believe people who say you have been baptized. But you should believe God himself and not people, and you must be sure of your baptism"»<sup>22</sup>. Luther dismisses this as a «pretty shaky argument» (*ein loser fauler grund*). If one can accept and trust only that which is part of one's conscious experience and not rely on the report of others, then one can be sure of nothing pertaining to temporal or eternal things. How could someone even know that his own mother was truly his mother? More disastrously, «I might then claim that holy Scripture meant nothing, Christ meant nothing. The apostles, too, never preached. For I have not seen or felt these things»<sup>23</sup>. But order in the church, society, and public life depends upon trusting the word of man: this is your mother; this is your prince; you have been baptized. Such trust does not betray the need to obey God rather than man for God himself has established the temporal order of father, mother, and prince — and commanded baptism. Thus,

When anyone bears witness to the work of God it does not mean believing men, but God. In sum, when any one declares and bears witness to the work of God and which is not the figment of man's imagination, and this can be controverted neither by the devil nor man, then you believe God and not man, for it is the work of God which He so publicly discloses that even the devil cannot deny it<sup>24</sup>.

To further demonstrate his point, Luther proposes three tests that answer the kind of existential objection to baptism this kind of argumentation tries to make: First, is this a work of God? Second, is it witnessed to as a reality? Third, does it show the fruits appropriate to its nature? Accordingly, the proposition, «this woman is my mother» is affirmed by the fact that in the first place, I exist and therefore must have a mother because God has ordained that I be born of a father and a mother. In the second place, others have witnessed to me that *this* woman is my mother and their witness

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 234.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 236.

is consistent. Finally, only a woman who is my mother would take me as her natural child, care for me, nurture me, etc. as this woman has!

Luther applies the same chain of reasoning to the proposition, «I have been baptized» and shows that one should similarly trust his baptism in early life because

...baptism, too, is a work of God, not invented by man but commanded by God and witnessed to by the gospel. Secondly, there are people who can witness to the fact that you have been baptized, and no one can contradict or prove the opposite. In the third place, there is the work, i. e., you are reckoned among Christians, admitted to the sacrament, and to the use of all Christian privileges... So all of this is clear proof of your baptism<sup>25</sup>.

Luther offers a critique of a third Anabaptist argument against infant baptism which claimed that Mark 16:16, «He who believes and is baptized will be saved», means that no one should be baptized before coming to faith. Those who claim this, Luther growls, are guilty of «great impudence» (*grossen vermessenheit*). If the Anabaptists' interpretation of the passage were correct, no one could presume to rightly baptize another since faith cannot truly be ascertained by any but God himself. It is important to read the passage for exactly what it says: «The text does not say, "He who confesses", but "He who believes"» Mark 16:16 is not speaking about *confession* of faith, but the *reality* of faith. Thus, the Anabaptists presume the presence of faith, thereby contradicting the plain meaning of Mark 16:16. Indeed, if faith must be assured before baptism may be given, then no baptism may be administered for «God alone knows the heart.» Moreover, because faith is not a static condition, and cannot be absolutely ascertained even by the believer himself, «I say the same thing about the baptized one who received or grounds his baptism on his faith»: under the conditions set by the Anabaptists reliance upon one's own fluctuating faith would lead to an unending desire for re-baptism. Luther concludes:

All this is nonsense. ...[I]f they want to do justice to this passage, «Whoever believes,» according to their understanding, they must condemn rebaptism much more earnestly than the first baptism. Neither the baptizer nor the baptized can maintain his position, for both are uncertain of their faith. ...[T]his verse, «Whoever believes,»

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 239.

does not compel us to determine who has faith or not. Rather, it makes it a matter of every man's conscience to realize that if he is to be saved he must believe and not pretend that it is sufficient for a Christian to be baptized. For the verse does not say, «Whoever knows that he believes, or, if you know that anyone believes,» but it says, «Whoever believes.» Who has it, has it. One must believe, but we neither should nor can know it for certain<sup>26</sup>.

The consideration of Mark 16 segues into Luther's discussion on infant faith. Luther introduces this central matter by noting that baptism has been administered «from the beginning of Christianity», and that the early church's practice was to baptize children<sup>27</sup>. To now raise doubts as the Anabaptists do about whether or not children have faith and to change the church's historic practice on the strength of such doubts is warrantless and unwise. It is not that historic practices are *ipso facto* sacrosanct. Luther notes that «we have indeed over-thrown monasteries, mass-priests, and clerical celibacy» but only on the strength of clear scriptural arguments. So also must the Anabaptists do: «Where is the Scripture by which they would prove it and on which they would build?»<sup>28</sup>. To object to infant faith because «they do not speak or have understanding» is to be deceived by presumption (*duenkel*), «and we cannot build on our presumption»<sup>29</sup>.

Indeed, contrary to what the Anabaptists assert on the basis of outward appearances, Scripture declares that «children may and can believe» (*kinder wol muegen und können glewben*)<sup>30</sup>. Luther adduces Psalm 106:37 and Matthew 2:16 as examples of children who were considered «pure and holy» (*rein und heilige*) — something they could not be without spirit and faith — as examples<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 241.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 245. See also: P. 245, fn 7: Luther cites St. Augustine as an authority that «child baptism has come from the apostles».

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 242.

<sup>29</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke. Bd 26. S. 156: «und ist auff unser duenkel nicht zu bawen» (The translation is mine).

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 242.

<sup>31</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 242. In his letter Luther cites Psalm 72 evidently without checking the reference. The *WA* and *LW* editors correct the citation as Psalm 106:37f on the basis of Luther's discussion. See: D. Martin Luthers Werke. Bd 26. S. 156; Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 242. Psalm 106: 37–38 states, «<sup>37</sup>They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons.<sup>38</sup>

More telling yet is Christ's command to the disciples (Mt 19:14) to permit the children to come to him for, «the kingdom of heaven belongs to children» (*Das hymel reich sey der kindlin*). Most telling of all, however, is the case of John (Lk 1:41) who in his mother's womb reacted in faith to the presence of the unborn Savior. John's case is significant not because it establishes that «all children have faith», but because it establishes the *capacity* of faith in infants. Thus the Anabaptist argument for rebaptism

...is uncertain and false inasmuch as you cannot prove that there may not be faith in children. Inasmuch as John had faith, though he could not speak or understand, your argument fails, that children are not able to believe. To hold that a child believes, as St. John is an example, is not contrary to Scripture. If it is not contrary to the Scripture to hold that children believe, but rather in accord with Scripture, then your argument, that children cannot believe, must be unscriptural<sup>32</sup>.

Luther presses the matter for its ramifications by pointing out that this unscriptural judgment concerning the capacity of infants for faith further renders the Anabaptists' disregard of the first baptism of those they re-baptize doubly rash since the same Christ before whom John leapt for joy is *in* Christian baptism, «in fact is himself the baptizer»<sup>33</sup>. This is the same Christ who commands that the *children* be brought to him. And let not the «mised spirits» circumvent the truth by parsing «children» here as the «humble»:

[T]his is a false note, for the text clearly says that they brought to him children, not the humble. And Christ does not say to let the humble come to him, but the children, and reprimanded the disciples, not because they kept the humble, but the children away. He embraced and blessed the children, not the humble, when he said, «Of such is the kingdom of heaven». So also Matt. 18[:10], «Their angels behold the face of my Father,» is to be understood as referring to such children, for he teaches us that we should also

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They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood». The Matthew reference is to the «Holy Innocents» the boys of Bethlehem slain by Herod's soldiers.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 242.

<sup>33</sup> «...der selbige Christus bey der tauffe und yn der tauffe ist, Ja, er is der tauffer selbs...» (D. Martin Luthers Werke. Bd 26. S. 156).

be like these children. Were not these children holy, he would indeed have given us a poor ideal with which to compare ourselves. He would not have said, you must be like children, but rather, you must be otherwise than children. In sum, the misled spiritualist cannot make children here to mean the humble, except through his own imagining, for the words are too clear and forceful<sup>34</sup>.

Luther continues on in this fashion dealing with various objections to the passages offered thus far which he anticipates on the part of the Anabaptists. Concerning the purity and innocence of the Jewish children cited on the basis of Psalm 106, some who «want to take the force out of this text» will cite circumcision as the basis for the children's spiritual standing. But the explicit mention of girls in Psalm 106:37–38 renders mere physical circumcision moot in this regard. Rather, girls were not excluded from God's promises with Abraham despite not participating in circumcision as Genesis 17:7 makes clear, a fact which allows Luther to make a strong counter argument:

If they now believe that through the covenant of circumcision God accepts both boys and girls and is their God, why should he not also accept our children through the covenant of baptism? He has in fact promised us that he wants to be God not alone of the Jews but also of the Gentiles (Rom. 3[:29]), and especially of the Christians and those who believe. If the circumcision of boys avails both boys and girls, so that they become the people of God because of the faith of Abraham from whom they are descended, how much more then should not baptism help each one to become a member of the people of God because of the merit of Christ to whom he is brought and by whom he is blessed<sup>35</sup>.

Likewise, the argument that there is no direct command in Scripture to baptize infants is met with the observation that the Lord has not directly commanded the baptism of adults either — or just of men, or just of women. Rather, the Scripture employs the general command to baptize «all heathen» (*Heiden*), and the accounts in Acts and Paul's epistles of whole households being baptized — «and children are surely a good part of a household» — secures the legitimacy of children as subjects of baptism. The Anabaptists tread on dangerous ground: «for in divine matters one should act on certain, not dubious, grounds»<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 243.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 244–245.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther. Concerning Rebaptism. P. 245. Luther's argument concerning the inclusion of children in the so-called οἶκος baptism accounts

It is at this point in «Von der Widdertauffe» that Luther shifts his discussion to consider another key matter in the defense of infant baptism, *viz.*, baptism's independence from faith. Luther launches into this discussion by affirming again the core thought he has pursued thus far: Scripture does not deny the capacity of children for faith. It is therefore incumbent upon those who would deny this to cite specific Scripture to the contrary. But he then stipulates, «Yet even if they could establish that children are without faith when they are baptized, «it would make no difference to me»<sup>37</sup>. Baptism rightly administered is valid and as such does not require being repeated as the Anabaptists demand regardless of the way in which it was received. Luther cites the jurisprudence principle *abusus non facit cessare usum* in support and then illustrates the point by an analogy from marriage: a girl who married «without a wife's affection» for her husband, but who subsequently came to love him two years later would not be required to become engaged and married a second time.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Israel's failure with respect to the covenant of Sinai did not invalidate that covenant or require that God reinstitute it for those who repented or later came to faith with respect to it. Human error and failure is not stronger than God's institution, and this is true also of baptism. However, the Anabaptist view requiring faith for baptism via their misreading of Mark 16:16 reverses this and alters the nature of baptism. Luther draws a firm line asserting «baptism does not depend on faith»<sup>39</sup>.

Luther's point is to separate God's *institution* of baptism from its right *reception*, a demarcation enshrined in his two catechisms'

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of the New Testament was at the heart of the debate between Joachim Jeremias (*Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*) and Kurt Aland (*Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*) in the 1960s. The debate merely serves to underscore the impossibility of proving the matter on the basis of the historical evidence. See again: Cortright Ch. L. «Ego Te Baptizo»... P. 16–18.

<sup>37</sup> Luther's Works. Minneapolis, 1958. Vol. 40. P. 246. Emphasis added. Compare the original: «Wolan, ich setze gleich, das sie aller dinge kuendten gewis machen, das die kinder on glauben sind yn der tauffe...», i. e. «See here, it is the same to me, if they make it all certain that children are without faith in baptism...» (D. Martin Luthers Werke. Bd 25: Vorlesungen über Titus und Philemon 1527; Jesaja (1528/30); Reihenpredigten über 3. und 4. Mose 1527/28. Weimar, 1905. P. 159).

<sup>38</sup> «Abuse does not end right use».

<sup>39</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 248.

articles on baptism<sup>40</sup>. By this distinction between baptism-as-instituted and the right reception of the sacrament Luther denies the need for rebaptism theologically and practically. Even if one granted the Anabaptist thesis of the impossibility of infant faith (a stipulation Luther allows only for the sake of argument), all the Anabaptist could say truthfully would be that a «“genuine baptism” (*rechte tauffe*)... has been wrongly and not properly received». Luther affirms the juridical principle concerning *abusus* once again:

Abuse does not alter the nature of a thing. Gold does not become straw because a thief steals and misuses it. Silver doesn't turn to paper if it is dishonestly obtained by a usurer. Since then the Anabaptists demonstrate only the abuse of baptism, they fly in the face of God, nature, and reason, when they want to alter and make anew baptism itself in treating the abuse<sup>41</sup>.

This analysis unveils the «ungospel» inherent in the Anabaptist position. By misconstruing Mark 16 so that «faith» becomes part of baptism's *esse*, Anabaptist rebaptism becomes in its *esse* a work done in obedience rather than a gift received from God's grace. Luther ascribes this shift — made ostensibly in praise of «faith» («In reality they pay little attention to faith») — to the devil. It is Satan's *meister stuck* by which Christians leave a righteousness of faith for one of works. And that such things are happening among the German people? «What shall I say? We Germans are and remain true Galatians», Luther laments<sup>42</sup>. Nonetheless, those who listen and receive the Word know that the sacrament of baptism

...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 ...As a sign of this covenant he has instituted baptism, commanded and enjoined upon all heathen, as Matt. [28:19] declares... 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

<sup>40</sup> «Von der Widdertauffe» predated the Small and Large Catechisms by about a year. Their gestation was already under way, however, and both reflect the thinking Luther was doing with the present tract.

<sup>41</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 248.

<sup>42</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 249; D. Martin Luthers Werke. Bd 26. S. 162: «Was sol ich sagen? Wir Deuschen sind rechte Galater und bleiben Galater».

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...<sup>43</sup>

Luther does not wish to be misconstrued, however, concerning faith and baptism. His argument against the Anabaptists required strongly making the distinction between baptism's essential nature as entirely the work of God and the reception of baptism's blessings through faith. «[O]ne should add faith to baptism,» he affirms, but a lack of faith does not make *rechte* baptism «incorrect, uncertain, or of no meaning»<sup>44</sup>. With regard to infant baptism, the Anabaptists are wrong to re-baptize because the sacrament is valid apart from faith. And while it is true, «...we cannot prove that children do believe with any Scripture verse that clearly and expressly declares [infant faith] in so many words,» neither can the Anabaptists produce any similarly clear, express Scripture restricting baptism only to adults. Luther does not allow this assessment, however, to leave the matter as if it were a mere stand-off between opinions: «We are... persuaded by many good reasons to hold that child baptism is right and that children do believe».

The final portion of «Von der Widdertauffe» gives six such «good reasons.» Foremost of these is the witness of the early church which Luther cited earlier in the treatise. Infant baptism «derives from the apostles» and has an ancient and continuous history; in view of the impossibility of proving that infant faith is impossible or that infant baptism is forbidden, «we cannot oppose it, but must let it continue» (*so koennen wirs nicht weren, mussens so lassen bleiben*)<sup>45</sup>. Even if one were unsure of infant faith, one should rather err by maintaining infant baptism rather than the alternative.

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<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 252.

<sup>44</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 252.

<sup>45</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 254; D. Martin Luthers Werke. Bd 26. S. 166.

<sup>46</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 254.



In the second place, one must ask why God would have permitted baptism to arise and continue to the point that it is now universal, if it was counter to his will. «No heresy endures to the end, but always, as St. Peter says, soon comes to light and is revealed as disgraceful.» The dishonor of baptism by the Anabaptists does it no final injury; rather, God has maintained child baptism along with the Bible and the Lord's Prayer as a miracle of his grace.

Luther's third point builds off the latter: infant baptism is seen as godly in that God has given «great and holy gifts» to many who have received baptism as infants. This he would not do if it was against his Word and will. «Since he thus gives such gifts as we must admit to be holy gifts of God, he confirms, of course, thereby the first baptism and considers us rightly baptized»<sup>47</sup>.

In fourth place Luther argues that the very existence of the church over the span of «more than a thousand years» during which time virtually all baptisms were *kinder teuffen* attests to the validity of child faith. For if infant faith was impossible, and infant baptism no real baptism, then there would be no Christian church either, which is both patently false and counter to the Creed. Again, the universality of the practice coupled with the continuity of the church under infant baptism «gives rise to no probability that [infant baptism] is wrong, but rather to a strong indication that it is right»<sup>48</sup>.

In the fifth place, Luther cites 2 Thessalonians 2:4, «[Antichrist] will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God» and notes that accordingly, even under Antichrist, the temple of God has the truth, is «true Christendom» (*rechte Christenheit*), and must, therefore, authentically have and practice baptism. Since no other baptism than child baptism is visible «whether under the pope, among the Turks, or in all the world,» it is the true baptism and not to be doubted.

In sixth and final place, God's express commission to his church declares a covenant with *allen Heiden* through the gospel and baptism. The inclusive nature of «all» cannot be disregarded so as to exclude children. Baptism, moreover, parallels the covenantal

<sup>47</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 256.

<sup>48</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 256.

sign of circumcision which, as Luther noted earlier, transcended merely being a sign in the flesh of boys to encompass all of Israel's children, male and female and «made the children of Abraham believe that they were... the people of God, according to the promise» of Genesis 17:7. Since that is true, then «this new covenant and sign must be much more effectual and make those a people of God who receive it... If we follow his command and baptize everyone, we leave it to him to be concerned about the faith of those baptized»<sup>49</sup>.

*THE LARGE CATECHISM: EXCURSUS ON INFANT BAPTISM, 1529*

Luther had been contemplating the development of his catechisms since the early 1520s, however, the story of their development is readily available and does not need to be rehearsed here<sup>50</sup>. «Von der Widdertauffe» may be considered in some ways a preliminary essay in Luther's thought and argumentation on infant baptism that becomes incorporated into the excursus of the «Large Catechism».

Baptism comprises Part IV of the «Large Catechism». Luther develops this chief part along the same basic outline as the questions on the sacrament in the «Small Catechism» with the interpolation of the discussion of infant Baptism between the use and significance of the sacrament:<sup>51</sup>

- Baptism's nature §3–22
- Baptism's blessings, §23–31
- Baptism's use, §32–46
- Infant Baptism, §47–63
- Baptism's significance, §64–86

Luther opens the excursus by posing two questions «that the devil uses to confuse the world through his sects,» that is, «Do children believe, and is it right to baptize them?». Before answering Luther inserts an encouragement that «the simple» (*Wer einfältig ist...*) dismiss the matter from concern. Trigg notes that this double-pronged nature of the discussion and the admonition to not worry about objections to infant

<sup>49</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 258.

<sup>50</sup> For Brecht's treatment of the development of the catechisms see: *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, 273ff.

<sup>51</sup> K-W, 462, fn 208 notes that a separate heading for the excursus was added to the margin of the second edition of the «Large Catechism» and was inserted into the text in the Book of Concord, 1580.

baptism were interpreted by Karl Barth in his critique of infant baptism as «signs of irritability» that betray an uneasy and weak argument for infant baptism<sup>52</sup>. But this betrays in its own right a failure on Barth's part to comprehend the *pastoral* nature of the «Large Catechism» and Luther's typical *pastoral* concern that «Hans and Greta» in the pew not be burdened unnecessarily<sup>53</sup>. The discussion of infant baptism that follows combines with «Von der Widdertauffe» to offer to parish pastors «at least five main lines of defense»<sup>54</sup>.

Luther's first argument in the excursus is an appeal to the blessings on infant baptism throughout the Christian centuries. The baptism of infants is «pleasing to Christ» and is «his own work» as can be seen in the sanctification of Christians throughout history who received baptism as infants. This would not be the case if infant baptism was not acceptable to God. The Holy Spirit is not given contrary to God's will, but «even today there still are many whose teaching and life attest that they have the Holy Spirit» (LC, IV, 49) and who were baptized as infants. Luther reaches back in history and adduces Bernard of Clairvaux, John Gerson, and Jan Huss as exemplars of such sanctification<sup>55</sup>. Trigg notes that Luther's argument here implies censure of the Anabaptists because of their isolation in church history via their rejection of *Kinder tauffe* (an argument that is somewhat weak in Luther's case because of his own defiance of «Councils, Popes, and Christendom itself»). Likewise, there is the strand that God would not have permitted such a «wholesale and universal error.» But at its root, Luther's first defense is the very existence of the church: baptism is one of the very marks of the church:<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Barth's position is cited in: Trigg J. D. *Baptism...* P. 99, fn. 174.

<sup>53</sup> See: *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Pastoral Theology* / Ed. T. Wengert. Grand Rapids, 2009. The pastoral side of Luther ought not be overlooked in this regard. See the discussion of this in the introduction of this volume, especially pages 23–27.

<sup>54</sup> Trigg J. D. *Baptism...* P. 100.

<sup>55</sup> K-W, 463, fn. 210–212 notes Luther's frequent use of Bernard [1090–1153] as a well-known and accepted exemplar of genuine piety. Gerson [1363–1429] was a highly respected conciliarist and practical theologian to many of the reformers. Huss [c. 1370–1415] was widely seen as a forerunner to the evangelical reformation who was condemned and executed at the Council of Constance.

<sup>56</sup> See: *On the Councils and the Church* [1539], especially Part III, in which Luther discusses seven marks of the church with baptism as the second

Baptism has a particular place and importance. Without valid baptism, there can be no Church. Thus, on Anabaptist presuppositions, there can have been no Church for hundreds of years, as there has been no true baptism... Luther's unwillingness to accept the possibility of God allowing heresy to continue for so long is more thoroughly theologically grounded than might at first appear. Baptism, along with the scriptures and the sacrament of the altar, is a mark of the Church, and essential to it<sup>57</sup>.

Luther considers this defense to be «about the best and strongest proof for the simple» (LC, IV 51): God has promised that the church will never disappear in this world and cannot contradict himself. Let the Christian take comfort in the truths confessed in the third Article of the Creed.

The excursus next repeats the defense that baptism's validity is not dependent upon the faith of the baptizer or the baptized. Rather, «everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God» (LC, IV, 52). This point is discussed at length in «Von de Widder-tauffe» and Luther does not expand the substance of the argument in the excursus. It is important to note again that this truth is not confined to infant baptism, but is «of general applicability» to the sacrament in every case. It is also important to note, as Trigg does here: «Issues right at the heart of Luther's theology are engaged here; the nature of faith, the priority and all-sufficiency of God's word of command, the direction of religion from God to man [*Gottesdienst!*], and the identity of baptism as God's work, not man's»<sup>58</sup>.

The «Large Catechism» discussion proceeds from this point to answer casuistry concerns raised by the confusion of the validity of baptism via God's word and command with faith-concerns. Thus, «even though a Jew should come today deceitfully...and we baptized him in good faith, we ought to say that his baptism was nonetheless valid» (LC, IV, 54). Christians should therefore view their baptism in similar manner as the Sacrament of Altar, that is, «not on the strength of my own faith, but on the strength of Christ's Word». Thus,

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(Luther's Works. Minneapolis, 1966. Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III. P. 143–178). Baptism is treated on p. 151.

<sup>57</sup> Trigg J. D. Baptism... P. 101.

<sup>58</sup> Trigg J. D. Baptism... P. 102.

...we do the same with infant baptism. We bring the child with the intent and hope that it may believe, and we pray God to grant it faith. But we do not baptize on this basis, but solely on the command of God. Why? Because we know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I — in short, all people — may deceive and mislead, but God's Word cannot deceive (LC, IV, 57).

To argue causally from a lack of faith that a baptism is invalid is thus «presumptuous and stupid» (*vermessene [und] tölpische*) as if to say, «If I have no faith, then Christ is nothing». As in «Von de Widdertauffe», the key principle, «Abuse does not abolish the substance of a thing» is cited again for its pertinence (LC, IV, 58).

These two lines of argumentation, then — 1) infant baptism is *rechte taufe* because otherwise there would have been no church since the apostles; 2) *rechte taufe* is not *rechte* as a function of faith, but depends solely on the word and command of God — provide the main content of the excursus. Trigg suggests that Luther «hints» at a third line of argument — *fides aliena* — in his statement, «I come here [before God] in my faith and in the faith of others» (*Ich kome her ynn meinem glauben und auch der andern/Venio huc in mea et aliorum fide*) (LC, IV, 56)<sup>59</sup>. This is not *fides aliena* in the Roman sense, but an appeal to the fact that the faith and resulting prayers of other believers for God's blessing on baptism are answered. Scaer notes,

Luther holds that the faith of the church — who else has faith? — brings our children and those of others to Baptism. This faith helps but does not take the place of the child's. The church's faith is not a vicarious faith, a faith substituting for the child's. In fact, the church prays that God would give the child faith. Luther goes so far as to suggest that many people baptized as children turn out badly because their sponsors have not offered up sufficient prayers for them in their fight against the devil. Baptism and the church's prayer both are the cause of regeneration, but in different senses. Thus even before a child is born he is offered up to God by the prayers of the church...<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Trigg J. D. Baptism... P.102. «The reference to *fides aliena* is entirely general — there is no indication of the specific role of godparents. It is not present at all in «Von der Widdertauffe», and in general it has the aspect of an argument which Luther inherited from others, without making it fully his own».

<sup>60</sup> Scaer P. D. Baptism. P. 189. For Luther's remark cited by Scaer, see: Martin Luther. The Order of Baptism, 1523 // Luther's Works. Vol. 53. Minneapolis, 1965. P. 102.

Of interest and by way of contrast between the excursus and «Von der Widdertauffe» is the prominence in the latter treatise of the discussion of infant faith compared with its merely tangential inclusion in both the Large and Small Catechisms. As was seen in «Von der Widdertauffe», Luther had to admit «we cannot prove that children believe with any Scripture verse...in so many words», but that neither can the Anabaptists produce any similar clear, express Scripture that they do not<sup>61</sup>. Luther's argument is essentially to shift the burden of proof to those wishing to exclude infant faith. As Luther's argumentation in «Von der Widdertauffe» shows, he believed this shift was scripturally warranted<sup>62</sup>. Trigg cites research that the reason for the lack of argumentation in the excursus for infant faith — despite the initial question with which the excursus opens — is a notable shift in Luther's argumentation about infant faith that was prominent during Luther's conflict with Karlstadt and the enthusiasts between 1522–1526 and the different assault by the Anabaptists in the late 1520s. The Anabaptists' attack «caused Luther to lay more stress on the validity of baptism without faith than on the other arguments»<sup>63</sup>.

#### CONCLUSION

Infant baptism in Luther does not differ at all from the Reformer's theology of baptism taken generally. Indeed, it bears repeating that as Luther writes of baptism anywhere, he has in mind *Kindertaufe* as the default. It is not the age of the baptizand, nor his faith that is the core concern of Luther's theology, but «the water enclosed in God's command and connected with God's Word» (SC, Baptism, 1–2). As we see, even the staunch defense of infant faith is a function of the Lord's Word and promise in baptism. Trigg reminds that this Word is not merely historical in Luther. Rather, «The word of God to which the water is joined is a *present* word, which cannot be

<sup>61</sup> Luther's Works. Vol. 40. P. 252.

<sup>62</sup> This line of argumentation is used frequently in subsequent Lutheran discussions of the issue. See, for example: Hoenecke A. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics IV* / Trans. by J. Fredrich, P. Prange and B. Tackmier. Milwaukee, 1999. P. 102–104, and Das A. A. *Baptized...* P. 59.

<sup>63</sup> Trigg J. D. *Baptism...* P. 103. Fn. 193. Trigg is citing the research of Lorenz Grönvik (*Die Taufe in der Theologie Martin Luthers*. Åbo, 1968. P. 162–164). In any case, it merely represents and strategy of argumentation, not an abandonment of infant faith as Luther's belief.

confined to the moment of administration, let alone to the dominical institution of the sacrament... God is to be met, encountered, and above all, heard — now, at the trysting places of baptism and the other means of grace»<sup>64</sup>. Luther closes out his discussion of the sacrament in the «Large Catechism» with words to the baptized, infant or adult, man or maid, but all God's new creation:

...let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new (LC, IV, 84–85).

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