

Martin Luther and Menno Simons on Infant Baptism

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Martin Luther and Menno Simons never met face to face. In fact, Luther¹ knew relatively little about the Anabaptist movement² as it developed, yet held certain firm and negative opinions about it. Menno had read some of Luther's writings and was acquainted with several of Luther's arguments from other sources. Their respective views on infant baptism³ and "evangelical believer's baptism"⁴ have often been accepted by their followers, sometimes without further examination and evaluation. In seeking to review both positions, this study will attempt to single out issues of conflict and agreement.

I

The basic positions, of course, were mutually exclusive. Viewing the pope as the Antichrist,⁵ Luther had classified the Anabaptists as the "devil's rebels." And Luther did not doubt that through the denial of infant baptism, "the devil confuses the world through his sects."⁶ Initially, Luther had opposed persecution for heresy. By 1528, when the persecution of Anabaptists was at its height, Luther could muse:

... it is not right, and I truly grieve, that these miserable folk should be so lamentably murdered, burned, and tormented to death. We should allow every-

one to believe what he wills. If his faith be false, he will be sufficiently punished in eternal hell-fire. Why then should we martyr these people also in this world, if their error be in faith alone and they are not guilty of rebellion or opposition to the government?⁷

By 1536 Luther had changed his mind and did not oppose the death penalty.⁸ That was the situation which Menno faced during his life as an Anabaptist leader. If apprehended, he would have been executed along with the more than 4,000 Anabaptist martyrs. Obviously, in such a dreadful situation Menno's outcries on behalf of his people were authentic and at times fierce. For example, he described infant baptism—for the rejection of which came these fiendish tortures and death penalty—as “accursed abomination and idol,”⁹ “a ceremony of Antichrist, open blasphemy, a bewitching sin, a molten calf; yes, abomination and idolatry,”¹⁰ “calf worship,”¹¹ “fearful mockery,”¹² “abominable serpent,”¹³ “anti-Christian bath and baptism,”¹⁴ and “baptism of Antichrist.” At the same time, however outspoken, Menno did not use popular but non-biblical terms, such as “dog's bath.”¹⁵

In regard to some initial terminology, however, both Luther and Menno were in agreement. Luther was prepared to speak of a baptism as a “spiritual rebirth”¹⁶ while Menno wrote an entire tract entitled “The New Birth.”¹⁷ Both of them understood the meaning of the term. Thus Luther defined baptism: “the Greek *baptizo* means ‘I immerse,’ and *baptisma* means ‘immersion.’” Luther even suggested the practice which generally was not followed: “...I would have those who are to be baptized completely immersed in the water....”¹⁸ Similarly, Menno, even though on occasion speaking of “immersion,” ordinarily assumed sprinkling or pouring.¹⁹

At the same time, the areas of conflict were several and weighty.

1) Luther knew that there was no explicit New Testament command to baptize infants; but Luther did not hesitate to appeal to tradition: “... our baptizing has been thus from the beginning of Christianity and the custom has been to baptize children...”²⁰ And again: “... And, as St. Augustine writes, child baptism has come from the apostles.”²¹

Here Menno Simons—who had read Luther's writings, while Luther had not read anything of Menno—was quick to respond:

Luther writes in his preface to Isaiah, God will not be told how He is to be served. He wishes to teach and to lead us. His Word must stand. It must lead and enlighten us, for without His Word all is idolatry and vain falsehood, no matter how fine and pleasing it may appear. And in the third chapter of Daniel [Luther writes], Worship without God's Word is always idolatry.²²

Therefore Menno argued: “Even if infant baptism was begun as soon as the apostles were dead, or perhaps even in their time, and was practiced for many centuries, length of time does not prevail against the Word of God...”²³

In contrast, Luther viewed tradition,²⁴ at least on the occasions where he heartily agreed with it, as proof of God's guidance and help in sustaining the church. It is in this sense that Luther especially valued infant baptism:

That the baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ is sufficiently proved from his own works. God has sanctified many who have been thus baptized and has given them the Holy Spirit. ... Now, if God did not accept the Baptism of infants ... all this time down to the present day no man on earth could have been a Christian.²⁵

Moreover, when as in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church 1520*, Luther undertook to list the Roman Catholic departures from truth, he could point to infant baptism as the one and only incorrupt sacrament. It had been offered to children, who due to their age, could not pervert the sacramental gift of grace into workrighteousness!²⁶

2) At times Luther argued that the general Anabaptist practice, to wait until a child arrives at the age of discretion, was not explicitly commanded either:

... we cannot prove that children do believe with any Scripture verse that clearly and expressly declares in so many words, or the like, "You are to baptize children because they also believe." Whoever compels us to produce such a statement has the upper hand and wins, for we cannot find such words. But sincere and sensible Christians do not require such proof. The quarrelsome, obstinate rebellious spirits do in order to seem to be clever. But on their side they can produce no statement which says, "You are to baptize adults but no children." We are however persuaded by many good reasons to hold that child baptism is right and that children do believe.²⁷

Here the ordinary Anabaptist response was to list the scripturally given order of salvation (see below). In addition, Menno continued to insist on the need for a direct divine command:

We have given you the principal reason why we oppose infant baptism not only in doctrine, but also with the sacrifice of our lives and possessions. For we know by the grace of God that there is not one iota in the Scriptures with which they can support it.²⁸

3) While there were no explicit accounts in the Scriptures instituting infant baptism, several texts had been traditionally used in support of infant baptism. As Luther turned to these, Menno, who had also reflected on these references, did not hesitate to offer his careful objections. Here the so-called household baptisms received prominent attention. Luther had written:

... you say, he has not commanded the baptism of children, there is no reference to it in the writings or epistles of the apostles. 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. We read in Acts and the Epistles of St. Paul how whole households were baptized, and children are surely a good part of the household. So it seems that just as Christ commanded us to teach and to baptize all heathen, without exception, so the apostles did, and baptized all who were in the household."²⁹

Initially, in his *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* (1539), Menno had stated in a general way:

...they say, The Scriptures indicate that the apostles baptized whole families from which we may readily conclude that there were infants among them. To this we reply first of all: Since they endeavor to justify their position with conjecture, they acknowledge thereby that they have no Scriptural authority for this doctrine.

In the second place, we answer: In things of such importance, we dare not build upon uncertain conjecture but upon the sure Word which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.³⁰

This observation was followed by a brief survey of household baptisms mentioned in the New Testament. But the issue was significant and Menno returned to it in *Christian Baptism* (1539):

Pedobaptists object quite foolishly, saying that the apostles baptized whole households, as the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:48); the household of Stephanas (I Cor. 1:13); the household of Lydia, and of the jailer (Acts 16:15,33); included in which they say it may be presumed that there were also small children. From this argument, beloved brethren, they show unwittingly that they cannot produce Scriptures to prove that infants should be baptized. For wherever mere presumption is followed, there evidently no proof is available.

And then Menno proceeded to dismantle the opponents' arguments with care:

The first three households, namely, of Cornelius, Stephanas, and the jailer, were all believing. Of the first household it is written, There was a certain man in Caesarea, called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band; a devout man and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always. Acts 10:1,2. If they all served and feared God, as Luke writes, then they were not baptized without faith, as is plainly shown in the same chapter; for Peter commanded that those should be baptized who had received the Holy Ghost, who spoke with tongues and glorified God, which are all fruits of faith, as every intelligent person will admit.

Again, of the household of Stephanas it is written, I beseech you, brethren, you know the household of Stephana, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints. That you submit yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with us, and laboreth. I Cor. 16:15,16. I repeat it, to serve the saints is a work of faith.³¹

The argument in regard to the jailer's household was identical, as was Menno's conclusion: "Inasmuch as they all heard the Word and rejoiced in God, therefore it follows incontrovertibly that the holy apostles did not baptize them without faith." The situation is similar in reference to the household of Lydia:

Because the world tries to establish its cause on presumption, therefore we would say first that presumption ought not to establish faith. And even if mere presumption could count before God, then still the presumption in the case of the house of Lydia would not be in favor of the world but against it. It is the custom in the Holy Scriptures and also with the world that a house is named after the man and not after the woman so long as the husband lives, because the husband is the

head of his wife and household. Since in this case the house is named after the woman and since there is no mention made of the man, therefore it follows that she at the time was not married.

Moreover, since the New Testament also knows of the “subversion” of entire households—which certainly cannot mean that infants are being “subverted”—the term “household” refers only to those who were able to believe or to deny their faith, i.e. to adults.³² (Although contemporary Lutheran scholars³³ have developed a baptismal theology in reference to the dynamics of family life, Luther did not attempt it. It would not have met Menno’s demand for a clear proof.)

4) In any event, Luther continued to teach infant baptism, and in this connection affirmed his belief in the existence of infant faith. Initially, Luther stated that infants were baptized on the faith of the sponsors who at the baptism spoke on their behalf. Yet that observation was not exclusive, as Luther was also willing to acknowledge the traditional role of baptism as a means of grace. In his famed tract *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther formulated: “...unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing.”³⁴ Yet while real, the role of such faith was limited. Luther noted:

True, one should add faith to baptism. But we are not to base baptism on faith. There is quite a difference between having faith, on the one hand, and depending on one’s faith and making baptism depend on faith, on the other. Whoever allows himself to be baptized on the strength of his faith, is not only uncertain, but also an idolator who denies Christ. For he trusts in and builds on something of his own, namely, on a gift which he has from God, and not on God’s Word alone.³⁵

Moreover, according to Luther, this faith was not naturally present in infants from birth, but was awakened “by the faith of others” and under the creative impact of the Word of God.³⁶ It is this emphasis on the creative role of the Word of God which received Luther’s major attention in the *Large Catechism* (1529):

... we are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that Baptism is simply water and God’s Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.”³⁷

Luther scholarship has traditionally insisted that Luther had not merely returned to the medieval *ex opere operato* validity of the sacramental action.³⁸ Rather, Luther had placed the main emphasis on the external Word and sacrament, proffered by God. Despite such a claim, Luther may very well have been influenced by the insights which he intended to reject, at least insofar as Luther asserted the objective validity of baptism.

Now to Menno the entire notion of an infant faith appeared unbiblical and absurd—and he said so loudly and repeatedly. Of course, as we noted above,

Luther had not read any of Menno Simons' writings, but responded to what had been a widely shared Anabaptist criticism. Luther wrote:

When they say, "Children cannot believe," how can they be sure of that? where is the Scripture by which they could prove it and on which they could build? They imagine this, I suppose, because children do not speak or have understanding.³⁹

On the one hand, Luther disassociated faith from reason, regarding the latter as the epitome of sinful self-assertion and therefore as a hindrance for the acquisition of faith.⁴⁰ On the other hand, believing that faith was a gift of God, Luther was not prepared to exclude infants from the reception of this gift:

Infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when offered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant. So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible [Mark 9:23], the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by in-poured faith.⁴¹

Menno Simons' understanding of baptism both paralleled and opposed Luther. Like Luther, Menno regarded the Word of God as powerfully effective. Yet, in contrast to Luther, Menno believed that the Word worked directly rather than through a sacrament as a means of grace. Accordingly, as Alvin J. Beachy has formulated, "Baptism is not a sign of grace but a sign of obedience."⁴² In other words, baptism does not precede, but follows faith. Menno put it this way:

They therefore receive the holy baptism as a token of obedience which proceeds from faith, as proof before God and His church that they firmly believe in the remission of their sins through Jesus Christ as it was preached and taught them from the Word of God.⁴³

In short, "the ceremony makes no Christian."⁴⁴ From this perspective the problem of infant baptism could be solved quickly and precisely: "Only show us the Word of God, and the matter is settled."⁴⁵ Yet the case was not settled. Despite the magisterial reformers' appeal to *sola scriptura*, their actions showed disregard, at least from an Anabaptist point of view:

...if anyone is baptized upon his faith because the Lord has so commanded, and if for conscience' sake he dares not have his children baptized because God does not command it, such a man must bear a hateful name [i.e. Anabaptist—E.G.], and torture, misery and death besides.⁴⁶

This now became Menno Simons' repeated appeal. If *sola Scriptura* is the way to reform the church and its theology—then quote a text! When no clear texts were presented, Menno Simons concluded:

Because this infant baptism is nowhere commanded nor implied in the divine Word, therefore we testify before you and all the world that we have no regard for it, but believe and proclaim it to be idolatrous, useless, and empty, and we do this, not only with words, but also at the cost of our lives, as has been proved by events in many Germanic lands.⁴⁷

Indeed, Menno had no choice. He followed the Scriptures as he understood them, and defended “evangelical believer’s baptism.”⁴⁸ While the baptism of “irrational children”⁴⁹ is not prohibited by Scripture, common sense prohibits it on account of the scripturally taught order of salvation! The *ordo salutis* which Menno had in mind was the following: first hearing, then understanding the Word, which evokes faith that leads into regeneration.⁵⁰ Only then comes baptism:

... we are not regenerated because we are baptized, as may be perceived in the infants who have been baptized; but we are baptized because we are regenerated by faith in God’s Word. For regeneration is not the result of baptism, but baptism the result of regeneration.⁵¹

Most of all, however, Menno called attention to the fact that the Apostle Paul “also calls baptism the washing of regeneration.” That is not “simply a matter of immersing in water.” And regeneration, while an “inward change,”⁵² is visible in behaviour. In other words, Menno had a clear idea in mind what a regenerated person would be like. The infants, baptized by the magisterial reformers, did not fit that standard:

For if the infants were regenerated as the learned ones say, then their whole course would be humility, long suffering, mercy, pure and chaste love, true faith, certain knowledge, sure hope, obedience to God, spiritual joy, inward peace, and an unblamable life; for these are the true and natural fruits of the new, heavenly birth; but what fruits are found in infants every intelligent reader may judge from everyday experience.⁵³

Then, as if to make his point even clearer if that were still necessary, Menno pointed to the great Reformation text “the just shall live by faith” which he immediately joined with the observation that “a good tree brings forth fruit.”⁵⁴ Such was his repeated emphasis: “Faith which comes by the Word of God cannot be without fruit....”⁵⁵ Most eloquently Menno put it in a statement which these days is displayed by his own church as a public proclamation of faith: “For true evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot lie dormant, but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love....”⁵⁶ It was Menno’s judgment that such fruits are not visible in the lives of those merely “baptized” as infants.⁵⁷ Thus experiential proof had settled the argument as far as Menno Simons was concerned. Still, he was prepared to respond to further claims for infant baptism.

As Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out,⁵⁸ Luther had made use of the scriptural texts in defence of infant baptism which had been collected by Gratian in the *De consecratione*, Distinctio 4. The list concluded with a reference to John the Baptist, already believing in his mother’s womb.⁵⁹ Menno Simons delivered a stinging refutation:

Perhaps it may be asked whether God is not able to work faith in children, because John the Baptist, as yet unborn, leaped for joy in his mother’s womb. We reply to this that we are not speaking of the power of God; He made aged and barren Sarah fruitful and caused Balaam’s ass to speak. From this it does not follow that all old,

barren women will become fruitful and that all asses will speak. He does not at all times do all that He could or might do. We speak only of the precept of the scriptures, what it has taught and commanded us in this matter.⁶⁰

On another occasion Luther had pointed to the universal necessity of sleeping. Even while asleep, a believer still has faith, thus may we not see here an analogy with believing children? Luther cautiously put it this way:

Besides, tell me, where is the reason of the Christian believer while he is asleep, since his faith and God's grace admittedly never leave him? If, then, faith can continue without the co-operation and awareness of reason, why should it not also begin in children before reason is aware of it?⁶¹

Menno Simons' response was filled with biting irony:

I know there are great many who will ask why I, an unlearned man, am not satisfied in regard to this matter with the doctrine of Martin Luther and other renowned doctors, who are versed in the Scriptures and many languages and sciences, who teach, and particularly Luther, that faith lies dormant in a sleeping believer.

To this I answer: In the first place, if there were such dormant faith in little children (which, however, is nothing but an invention), then it would not be proper to baptize such children, so long as they would not confess this fruit with their mouth, and show it in their fruits and their deeds. For the holy apostles did not baptize any believers while they were asleep....⁶²

5) Without giving an exhaustive account of the differences between Luther and Menno Simons, we will note that the discussion on the spiritual condition of children was complex. According to Luther, Christ blessing the children could be seen as a paradigm for infant baptism. "[Christ] commands us to bring the children to him. In Matt. 19[:14] he embraces them, kisses, and says that theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁶³ Menno Simons, reading the same text, found no support for such a position: "[Christ] took them in His arms, blessed them, laid His hands upon them, ascribed to them the kingdom, and let them go. But he did not baptize them."⁶⁴

Here the conflict was far-reaching. Luther, without saying so explicitly, assumed that the text described what in effect occurs in baptism. According to Luther, these children were "holy" in virtue of "their coming and being brought to Christ." And immediately Luther asserted 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, and make them holy, because his Word and work cannot be without fruit.⁶⁵

And the great need for such a baptism of infants Luther inferred from what is accomplished in baptism. In the *Small Catechism* he wrote: "It effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare."⁶⁶ The accomplishment was regarded as continuous, since baptism serves as the foundation for daily

repentance and forgiveness. In the *Small Catechism* Luther also posed the question, "What does such baptizing with water supply?" His answer:

It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and raise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence.⁶⁷

While this could be viewed as assuring for those who had been baptized, it did not settle the problem of the unbaptized infants. In a cultural context where for centuries the Roman Catholic Church had taught that unbaptized infants, should they die, would end up in Limbo rather than in heaven, Luther's denial of the existence of a Limbo and the affirmation that in baptism sins are forgiven, could lead to the despairing concern that unbaptized infants are lost.⁶⁸ When confronted, Luther gave the following ambiguous reply:

God is able to save without Baptism. Thus we believe that infants who at times through the neglect of their parents or for some other reason do not receive Baptism are not for this reason damned. But in the church we are to judge and teach in accordance with the manner in which God ordinarily exercises His power, that is, that no one is saved without the external administration of this Baptism, just as water moistens and fire burns according to the ordinary working of God's power. But in Babylon Daniel's friends lived unharmed in the midst of fire (Dan. 3:25). This was a manifestation of the absolute power of God, according to which He then worked; but He does not enjoin upon us to do anything in accordance with *that* power. He rather wants us to act in accordance with the manner in which He ordinarily exercises His power.⁶⁹

While the hope of salvation for unbaptized infants was not denied outrightly, it was not assured with certainty. Examples of miracles stated the possibility, but hardly the probability of salvation!

Not surprisingly, Menno Simons took a different position:

To innocent and minor children sin is for Jesus' sake not imputed. Life is promised, not through any ceremony, but of pure grace, through the blood of the Lord, as He Himself says: Suffer the little children to come to me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of heaven. But concerning baptism He did not command anything.

And although infants have neither faith nor baptism, think not that they are therefore damned. Oh, no! they are saved; for they have the Lord's own promise of the kingdom of God; not through any elements, ceremonies, and external rites, but solely by grace through Christ Jesus.⁷⁰

Menno did not deny original sin, or its transmission from generation to generation. Nevertheless, to infants and to children until they could freely decide, the guilt of original sin was not imputed. At times Menno could state this insight positively as well, appealing to the salvific effects of Christ's atonement.⁷¹

II

In addition to areas of clear conflict, there were also issues in regard to which Luther and Menno offered divergent solutions, yet shared certain presuppositions and insights.

1) Generally speaking, both Luther and Menno looked to Scriptures as the foundation of all truth, and disparaged references to tradition. And, at least in principle, neither of them thought of himself as a definitive authority for others. Luther pleaded: "I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans."⁷² And Menno Simons confessed: "I have preferred to be the fool of the world's learned ones, in order that I might be found of God to be wise, rather than to be one of the most famous of the worldly wise, and at the last be a fool in God's sight."⁷³ Yet both men exercised authority and built traditions. Although neither one ever claimed to be infallible or demanded blind obedience, the fact remains that their writings have had an impact on their respective followers. While Luther may be more readily recognized as an initial formulator and Menno as a creative synthesizer of an entire tradition, each one of them has established a hermeneutical point of departure, and very often supplied clear doctrinal formulations as well. Although divergent in content, from *asola scriptura* affirmation in the course of time there has emerged, in both Lutheran and Mennonite denominations, an almost equally powerful acceptance of *scriptura et traditio*.

2) Both men also believed that God's providential preservation served as a sign of divine approbation. Luther applied this insight in defense of infant baptism. He observed:

No heresy endures to the end, but always, as St. Peter says, soon comes to light and is revealed as disgraceful. ... Were child baptism now wrong God would certainly not have permitted it to continue so long, nor let it become so universally and thoroughly established in all Christendom, but it would sometime have gone down in disgrace. ... This miracle of God is an indication that child baptism must be all right.⁷⁴

Admittedly, Luther was well aware that this was an argument from probability. Still, it was a very high probability indeed:

You say, this does not prove that child baptism is certain. For there is no passage in Scripture for it. My answer: that is true. From Scripture we cannot clearly conclude that you could establish child baptism as a practice among the first Christians after the apostles. But you can well conclude that in our day no one may reject or neglect the practice of child baptism which has so long a tradition, since God actually not only has permitted it, but from the beginning so ordered that it has not yet disappeared.⁷⁵

Moreover, the very high probability of the truth of infant baptism, according to Luther, increased on account of the following positive considerations:

... it is likewise the work of God that during all the time children were being baptized, he has given great and holy gifts to many of them, enlightened and

strengthened them with the Holy Spirit and understanding of the Scripture, and accomplished great things in Christendom through them.⁷⁶

Today this double-sided argument by Luther is a kind of a double-edged sword. Certainly, longevity and virtuous accomplishment extol the Christian character of the pedobaptists. But if longevity and virtuous accomplishments are such excellent witnesses for Christian truth, then today tradition speaks in favour of the Mennonites as well. Both infant baptism and what Menno Simons designated as “evangelical believer’s baptism” by now represent traditions of long standing!⁷⁷

3) What may very well have been Luther’s best defense of infant baptism was his interpretation of the covenant, namely: as in the Old Testament entrance into God’s covenant was established by circumcision, so in the new covenant that purpose is achieved through infant baptism. Luther outlined his theory with vigorous, broad brushstrokes:

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 has 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 my 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.⁷⁸

It may be readily overlooked (but should not be, as this happened to be central to Luther’s argument) that the “new” covenant was made with the heathen. That is how Pauline *sola gratia* was transposed in covenantal categories. Of course, the “heathen” did not deserve it any more than any one else. The new covenant reached out beyond an in-group to the whole world. In this sense “heathen” meant everyone. And when everyone was included then, obviously, infants could not be excluded.

However, the New Testament had not clearly designated a specific sign of inclusion. Nevertheless, Luther believed that the equivalent to the sign of circumcision in the Old Testament was—as he had learned from tradition—none other than baptism. Here Luther noted that circumcision, a ceremonial rite, had been characteristic of the first covenant, while preaching, a mode of communication, was characteristic of the second. The sacrament of baptism, understood in the customary Augustinian sense as word and element, was thus included in this communication, which did not merely transmit information, but also established a relationship of salvation. While acknowledging the significance of faith, Luther underscored that in the final analysis baptism rested on the

covenant, and not on faith even though the latter was present.⁷⁹

Luther, who had often been plagued by many scruples, knew how this temptation would work. Having been baptized, and then re-baptized, one would look back and worry whether one's faith was authentic:

I would compare the man who lets himself be rebaptized with the man who broods and has scruples because perhaps he did not believe as a child. So when next day the devil comes, his heart is filled with scruples and he says, Ah, now for the first time I feel I have the right faith, yesterday I don't think I truly believed. So I need to be baptized a third time, the second baptism not being of any avail. You think the devil can't do such things? You had better get to know him better. He can do worse than that, dear friend. He can go on and cast doubt on the third, and the fourth and so on incessantly (as he indeed has in mind to do), just as he has done with me and many in the matter of confession. We never seemed able to confess sufficiently certain sins, and incessantly and restlessly sought one absolution after the other, one father confessor after the other. Just because we sought to rely on our confession, as those to be baptized now want to rely on their faith.⁸⁰

Now, what in terms of adult baptism could remain a potential temptation was excluded in infant baptism, since it was not preceded by an experience that could be measured.⁸¹ Although the doctrine of the covenant did not play as central a role in the entire theology of Luther as in the thought of John Calvin, in the discussion of baptism it had a pivotal role—and probably offered the best rationale for the baptism of infants.

While the idea of the covenant did not play a central role in the theology of Menno, he did not neglect it, and in interpreting the covenant he brought to light the insights which supported “evangelical believer's baptism.” *Firstly*, being in covenant did not automatically assure one's salvation; obedience and faithful perseverance were mandatory:

What did the pure blood of the eternal covenant benefit Cain and Judas seeing they have despised Thy grace and by their traitorous murder have excluded themselves from the merits of Thy Son?⁸²

Secondly, while circumcision on the eighth day was a sign of the old covenant, it applied to males only; hence baptism, which is applied to both males and females, is not a sign of the new covenant: “...for although Abraham believed God only one half of his seed was circumcised, namely, the male children and not the female....” And again: “...But that the children of believers should be baptized because Abraham's children were circumcised, can in no wise be sustained by Scripture.”⁸³ *Thirdly*, adults who were circumcised under the old covenant were baptized in accordance with Jesus' command in which infants were not included:

Although they were circumcised, He nevertheless commanded that adults should be baptized upon their faith. But concerning infants He gave no such command. He took them in His arms, blessed them, laid His hands upon them, ascribed to them the kingdom, and let them go. But He did not baptize them.⁸⁴

Fourthly, neither circumcision nor baptism serve as means of incorporation into covenant:

...Abraham was in the covenant of the Lord many years before he was circumcised; ... the children were circumcised on the eighth day, although they were in the covenant before that.⁸⁵

We know that they say infants are cleansed of their original sin, and that therefore their baptism is not in vain. To this we reply with the Word of God: that such belief is an abominable idolatry, for only the blood of Christ avails, and not the outward baptism....⁸⁶

At the same time, entrance into the covenant was “only through the gracious election of grace (Eph. 1:6); for it is grace and not merit (Rom. 11:6).”⁸⁷ *Fifthly*, Menno Simons denied that “the circumcision of the Israelites was the prototype of infant baptism.” His interpretation, Menno thought, agreed with the Apostle Paul in Romans 2:29, who “teaches that the literal circumcision was a figure of the spiritual circumcision, but not of infant baptism.”⁸⁸ Moreover, underscored Menno Simons, “This circumcision cannot be applied to any but the believing, as may be plainly inferred from the figure of the literal practice.”

For the literal circumcision was to be performed with stone knives on the foreskin. Josh. 5:2,3; Gen. 17:23. This spiritual Rock is Christ Jesus. I Cor. 10:4. The knife with which the believers are circumcised is the holy Word.⁸⁹

On the one hand, it needs to be acknowledged that Menno Simons had made his position very clear. He had rejected the medieval understanding of sacraments as effective means of grace and viewed them as signs of an already existing reality. (At this point the gulf between Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism and Menno Simons is wide indeed and a great deal of ecumenical discussion will be needed before one will be able to observe some areas of possible convergence.) On the other hand, since Menno Simons viewed the children as saved and at times as members of the covenant, it is reasonable to ask why not offer them the sign since that which it signifies is already present? Huldrych Zwingli was prepared to baptize infants on such ground. The answer is not difficult. Menno Simons would not consent to it because there was no explicit biblical command to baptize infants.

III

The comparing of the two sixteenth-century understandings of baptism may have in some way called to attention that specific insights have their deeper sources and larger context. These can only be adumbrated rather than fully explored. Certainly, Luther was somewhat nearer to the Roman Catholic Church when he—often a fierce critic of medieval tradition—now appealed to it in defense of infant baptism. At the same time, Menno Simons showed some significant affinity with late medieval evaluation of “good works.” What

accounted for the borrowing of some and the rejection of other insights? Could we point to Renaissance individualism and suggest that Menno was more imbued by it? Or was Luther more of a Renaissance person, as one could argue in reference to the abundance of classical sources which can be found in his writings?

Or was the real difference between Luther and Menno in their divergent understanding of the essence of the church? Can we say that Luther was more all-inclusive, more inclined to think in terms of an entire Christian society, while Menno preferred elitist quality, and therefore a disciplined, small church, separate from society at large? While such preferences seem visible their causes can be debated both ways, at least in reference to individualistic and corporately directed existence. On the one hand, in the smaller "elitist" church there were more opportunities for an intensive experience of corporate existence of Christian fellowship. On the other hand, in believer's baptism one may recognize a very personal occasion for an individualistic choice. Likewise, in the larger church coinciding with the entire community, one may also recognize the possibilities for both dimensions. Precisely when the church membership is large there is more "space" for each individual, hence more freedom for shaping one's life of faith in a personally acceptable manner. Yet insofar as membership is granted here by way of infant baptism, corporate existence is most inclusive in its membership.

Certainly, as the oppressed and persecuted believer Menno Simons does elicit contemporary sympathy. Persecution—and especially in the name of religion—is abhorrent. Yet unresolved issues remain here as well. For example, what measure of tolerance would Menno have exhibited toward radical dissent if his followers had gained control in society?

In conclusion, two observations will serve to acknowledge the import of religious experience. Firstly, in a negative sense it appears undeniable that the actual practice of infant baptism in the sixteenth century had not fulfilled the hopes of the theory of infant baptism. A life-style which in a large measure had departed from authentic Christian standards—most clearly visible in intolerance and persecution—at the very least should have been a warning sign that all was not well. Yet Luther's defense of infant baptism concentrated on theological argumentation and largely ignored the criticisms raised by the variegated Anabaptist movement. In this way an early opportunity for dialogue was lost. Moreover, since the case was viewed as closed, Luther's successors inherited no mandate for a future agenda of research and reflection.

Secondly, in a more positive sense both Lutherans and Mennonites developed an experiential understanding of baptism which was exclusive in the sense that one did not generally share the religious experience of the other. In this way what had been personally and existentially alien, tended to appear unimportant. This factor alone has had a divisive impact insofar as at this point an evenhanded account of both experiences is a practical impossibility. Inevitably, anyone who has experientially cherished theological reflection on

having been baptized as an infant—as this writer has—is necessarily excluded from knowing what it means personally and existentially to have experienced an evangelical believer's baptism—and *vice versa*.

Yet the observation that the two types of baptism are ordinarily mutually exclusive should not be viewed as the conclusion of the discussion, but rather as an invitation for dialogue and concern.

Notes

¹ Jaroslav J. Pelikan, "Luther's Defense of Infant Baptism," pp. 200-218, in Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Luther For An Ecumenical Age: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation* (St. Louis, MO and London: Concordia Publishing House, 1967; John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers Against Anabaptists: Luther, Melancthon and Menius and the Anabaptists of Central Germany* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), pp. 114-139; Harry Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1974), pp. 26-28.

² Rollin Stely Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism: A Representative Study* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1966; Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Die Täufer: Geschichte und Deutung* (München: C.H. Beck, 1980), pp. 95-97; Walter Klaassen, "The Rise of the Baptism of Adult Believers in Swiss Anabaptism," pp. 85-97, in: Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C.J. Dyck* (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1992).

³ For recent scholarly overview, cf. Joseph F. Eagan, S.J., "The Authority and Justification for Infant Baptism," *Review and Expositor*, 77,1 (1980):49, who states: "...there is no conclusive evidence that Christians baptized their babies in the New Testament period. Nor do we have any conclusive evidence for infant baptism in the second century. However, in the third century there is considerable evidence that infants were baptized. By the fifth century the practice of infant baptism seems to have been virtually universal." Cf. also David F. Wright, "The Origins of Infant Baptism—Child Believers' Baptism?" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 40(1987):1-23.

⁴ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 389 points to Theobald Billicanus and Christoph Bornhäuser, *Leben und Lehre Menno Simons'* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), p. 11 to Sebastian Franck's *Chronica*, 1531.

⁵ D. Martin Luther *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883 ff.) [abbreviated as WA], 26:147.29. Luther's Works: American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958) [abbreviated as LW], 40:232.

⁶ WA 26:145.19; LW 40:230; *Large Catechism, The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 442.47.

⁷ WA 26:145.22-146.4; LW 40:230.

⁸ Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1941), pp. 59-64; Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 374-376 interprets the legal basis of persecution.

⁹ Menno Simons, *Opera Omnia Theologica* (Amsterdam: Joannes van Veen, 1681. rpr. Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1989), [subsequently referred to as *Opera*], p. 16B; John Christian Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. by Leonard Verduin with a biography by Harold S. Bender (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956) [subsequently referred to as CW], p. 128.

¹⁰ *Opera*, p. 19 B; CW, p. 133.

¹¹ *Opera*, p. 38 A; CW, p. 166.

¹² *Opera*, p. 410 B; CW, p. 251.

¹³ *Opera*, p. 429 A; CW, p. 280.

¹⁴ *Opera*, p. 116 A; CW 397.

¹⁵ WA 26:170.5 and 20; LW 40:258.

¹⁶ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), p. 538.29.

¹⁷ *Opera*, p. 123; CW, p. 89.

¹⁸ WA 6:531.27-28 and 534.20-21; LW 36:64 and 68.

¹⁹ *Opera*, p. 13 B; CW, p. 123 and *Opera*, p. 22 B; CW, p. 139.

²⁰ WA 26:155.29-30; LW 40.241.

²¹ WA 26:159.3-4; LW 40:245 cf. Migne 34:426.

²² *Opera*, p. 281 A; CW, p. 711.

²³ *Opera*, p. 418 B; CW, p. 264.

²⁴ WA 50:509-653; LW 41:9-178.

²⁵ *Large Catechism, The Book of Concord*, pp. 442-443.49-50.

²⁶ "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of his mercy [Eph. 1:3,7] has preserved in his church this sacrament at least, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men..." WA 6:526.35-38; LW 36:57. For Luther's affirmation of the real presence in the eucharist, and nearness to Catholicism, see his statement "Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood" WA 26:462.4-5; LW 37:317.

²⁷ WA 26:166.12-21; LW 40:254.

²⁸ *Opera*, p. 16 B; CW, p. 129.

²⁹ WA 26:158.28-38; LW 40:245.

³⁰ *Opera*, p. 21 A; CW, p. 136.

³¹ *Opera*, p. 429 B-430 A; CW, pp. 281-282

³² *Opera*, p. 430 A-B; CW, p. 282.

³³ Paul Althaus, *Die Christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1949), 2:342-362.

³⁴ WA 6:527.38-39; LW 36:59.

³⁵ WA 26:164.39-165.5; LW 40:252.

³⁶ WA 6:538.7; LW 36:73.

³⁷ *Large Catechism, Book of Concord*, p. 443.52-53.

³⁸ Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Lutheran Understanding of Baptism--A Systematic Summary," pp. 27-60, in: Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, II*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, n.d.; Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, "Luthers Tauflehre und seine Stellung zu den Täufern," 1:119-138 and 2:765-770, in: *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983).

³⁹ WA 26:156.3-6; LW 40:241-242.

⁴⁰ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 366-367; Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und Fides: Eine Untersuchung über die RATIO in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), pp. 95-98; on occasion, however, Luther also understood "reason" as an ability for thinking, reached in maturing, cf. B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 70.

⁴¹ WA 6:538.7-11; LW 36:73. Lorenz Grönvik, *Die Taufe in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Göttingen and Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), pp. 160-161; Karl Brinkel, *Die Lehre Luthers von der Fides Infantium bei der Kindertaufe* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958), pp. 34-37; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luthers Geistige Welt* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1953) p. 121. The problems on hand have been best summarized by Arthur Carl Piepkorn: "In general Lutheran sacramental principles create a problem if they are too literally applied to baptism. The first principle is that sacraments create faith. That in a given case an adult candidate for baptism may possess faith in the sense of *offiducia* prior to baptism is probable. But there is no explicit statement in the sacred scriptures which affirms that baptism creates faith. And it is not experimentally demonstrable that in the case of an infant holy baptism creates anything that can be called faith in any of the usual senses of that word. The second principle that creates a problem if applied too literally is the principle that for their fruitful use sacraments require faith." (cf. fn. 38), p. 46.

⁴² *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1976), pp. 108-109.

⁴³ *Opera*, p. 406A-B; CW, p. 244.

⁴⁴ *Opera*, p. 469A; CW, p. 516.

⁴⁵ *Opera*, p. 17 A; CW, p. 129.

⁴⁶ *Opera*, p. 18B; CW, p. 132.

⁴⁷ *Opera*, p. 409 B; CW, p. 249.

⁴⁸ *Opera*, p. 408 A; CW, p. 247.

⁴⁹ *Opera*, p. 402 B; CS, p. 238.

⁵⁰ *Opera*, p. 14 A-B; CW, p. 124. Marlin E. Miller observes: "In comparison to Schleithem or Marpeck, Menno's view focuses more on the individual believer than on the corporate reality of the believing community. In his emphasis on baptism as a symbol of obedience to Christ's command, Menno gives very little attention to the 'objective' side of baptism, which Marpeck also articulated in his debate with spiritualistic tendencies." "The Mennonites," p. 21, in: Merle D. Strege, ed., *Baptism & Church: A Believers' Church Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Sagamore Books, 1986). Cf. Marlin E. Miller, "Baptism in the Mennonite Tradition," pp. 45-46, in: Ross T. Bender and Alan P.F. Sell, eds., *Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991).

⁵¹ *Opera*, p. 418 B; CW, pp. 264-265.

⁵² *Opera*, p. 13 B; CW, p. 123.

⁵³ *Opera*, p. 419 A; CW, p. 265.

⁵⁴ *Opera*, p. 46 B; CW, p. 182.

⁵⁵ *Opera*, p. 420 B; CW, p. 267.

⁵⁶ *Opera*, p. 447 A; CW, p. 307.

⁵⁷ *Opera*, p. 450 B; CW pp. 312-313.

⁵⁸ (cf. fn. 1), p. 204, fn. 24, referring to Aemilius L. Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1879), I:1382.

⁵⁹ WA 26:156.16-17; LW 40:242.

⁶⁰ *Opera*, p. 20A; CW, p. 134; cf. *Opera*, p. 274; CW, p. 699. Such a conclusion had already been reached by St. Augustine: "Yet, even if the use of reason and will were so advanced in the child that he was able, from within his mother's womb, to recognize, believe, and assent to what in other children has to await the proper age, even this is to be considered among the miracles of divine power, not adduced as an example of human nature. For, when God willed it, even a dumb beast spoke rationally [Gen. 25:22-23] yet not for this are men advised to expect the counsel of asses in their deliberations. Therefore, I neither reject what happened to John, nor do I set it up as a norm of

what is to be thought of infants; on the contrary, I pronounce that in him it was miraculous, because I do not find it in others." *Epistola*, 187.24 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Wien: F. Tempsky and Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1911, rpr. New York and London, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1961), 57:101.15-102.4; *Letters* (Fathers of the Church, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), 4:239.

⁶¹ WA 17.2:84-85; Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1:52.

⁶² *Opera*, p. 404 B; CW, pp. 241-241.

⁶³ WA 26:157.7-8; LW 40:243.

⁶⁴ *Opera*, p. 18 B; CW 132.

⁶⁵ WA 26:157.38-158.3; LW 40:244.

⁶⁶ *Book of Concord*, pp. 348-349.6.

⁶⁷ *Book of Concord*, p. 349.11-12.

⁶⁸ Luther's followers further enhanced that implication, e.g. *Book of Concord*, pp. 178.2, 498.6, 634.13; cf. Piepkorn (fn. 38), 2:53.

⁶⁹ WA 43:71; Plass (fn. 61), 1:50, cf. also WA 52:816-817.

⁷⁰ *Opera*, pp. 18 B and 20 B; CW, pp. 131 and 135.

⁷¹ Already Huldrych Zwingli had taught: "So ist klar wider alle theologen, dass die kind der glöubigen umb der erbsünd willen, all die wyl sy das gsatz nit wüssend, nit mögen verdampt werden." (Corpus Reformatorum, 91:309.30-310.2, quoted by Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen (fn. 38), p. 124, fn. 55. Cf. Richard E. Weingart, "The Meaning of Sin in the Theology of Menno Simons," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 41(1967)30-31; William Klassen, "The Role of the Child in Anabaptism," pp. 17-32, in: Harry Loewen, ed., *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essays Dealing With Mennonite Issues* (Winnipeg, MB: Hyperion Press Limited, 1980). For a sharply critical viewpoint, cf. Peter C. Erb, "Traditional Spirituality and Mennonite Life," pp. 291-292, in: Harry Huebner, ed., *The Church as a Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder* (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1990): "In our rejection of infant baptism, we Mennonites have been forced to de-emphasize the total depravity of the human creature. It is taken for granted, that at least until the age of accountability the matter is looked after; God will not condemn innocent souls to hell. By dogmatically maintaining this we can legitimately be charged with heresy."

⁷² WA 8:685.4-6; LW 45:70.

⁷³ *Opera*, p. 358 A; CW, pp. 791-792.

⁷⁴ WA 26:167.19-21.

⁷⁵ WA 26:167.36-168.5; LW 40:255-256.

⁷⁶ WA 26:168.12-15; LW 40:256.

⁷⁷ *Opera*, p. 408 A; CW, p. 247.

⁷⁸ WA 26:164.24-38; LW 40:252.

⁷⁹ WA 26:164.39-165.5; LW 40:252.

⁸⁰ WA 26:154.33-155.6; LW 40:240.

⁸¹ WA 26:157.39-158.5; LW 40:244.

⁸² *Opera*, p. 169 A; CW, p. 72.

⁸³ *Opera*, p. 12 B; CW, p. 121.

⁸⁴ *Opera*, p. 18 B; CW, pp. 131-132.

⁸⁵ *Opera*, p. 19 A; CW, p. 132.

⁸⁶ *Opera*, p. 409 A; CW, p. 249.

⁸⁷ *Opera*, p. 409 A; CW, p. 249.

⁸⁸ *Opera*, p. 416 A-B; CW, p. 260-261.

⁸⁹ *Opera*, p. 416 B; CW, pp. 260-261.