

# What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Luther and the Anabaptists

### Luther's Reasons for Infant Baptism and Infant Faith

Luther founded infant baptism and the faith of children on Matthew 19:14 or Matthew 2:16 (innocent children are "holy and blessed"), on John the Baptist who leaped in faith in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41), on the example of circumcision in the Old Covenant, on the baptism of whole families by the apostles (Acts 10:48; Acts 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16), and on Christian tradition "since the times of the apostles in all the world by all of Christendom," which God would surely not have allowed to continue if it had not been right, especially since all other heresies perished. But he admitted that there is in the New Testament no particular command to baptize children; they are included in "all the heathen" (Matthew 28:19). Just as the faith of a Christian remains with him in his sleep, unaware to him, so also faith can begin in children though they are unaware of it (WA 17, 2, 86).

### Luther's Opposition to Anabaptism

These above principles as held by Luther show that any understanding with the Anabaptists was for Luther theologically impossible. He remained true to his concept of baptism expressed in 1520 and only stiffened in the objectivization of his doctrine of the sacrament in his dispute with Karlstadt and Zwingli, in which he became more and more unyielding. God's word of promise remained for him superior to the symbol, the water. "It is more important to teach God's word than to baptize" (WA 26, 164). Baptism is also subordinated to faith; "even if someone had never been baptized but did not know any better or firmly believed that he has been properly and surely baptized, such faith would still be enough for him, for as he believes, so he is before God" (WA 26, 171). But the effectiveness of the word is so immediately put into the symbol that this symbol, i.e., the water, becomes its bearer and is therefore taken away from the profane. It is no longer "simple water"; but it is "with" and "by" the water that baptism carries the strength of the word of God, of the promise of the forgiveness of sin.

At the same time the baptism of children "is the surest baptism of all" (WA 26, 157), precisely because the child "cannot deceive" but possesses the true passivity and receptivity of the believer. These two facts together make the act of baptism appear as an opus operatum and of magical Catholic nature, which was not at all Luther's

intention. His religious interest lay in making the sacrament independent of human wishes, in the working out of the pure objectivity of God's work of grace. But Luther's formulation is theologically unsatisfying. His error lies in the impossibility of giving faith the theological significance here ascribed to it as a matter of principle. It is strange that this theologian of faith was unable to do this. He always feared "works," i.e., human self-righteousness, if faith should become "personal" in the modern sense.

### **Disputes with the Anabaptists**

Luther disputed theologically with the Anabaptists only in literary form, and principally in four writings: (1) his booklet *Von der Wiedertaufe an zwei Pfarrherrn* of 1528 (WA 26, 137ff.); (2) the foreword to the book by Justus Menius, *Der Wiedertäufer Lehre und Geheimnis* of 1530 (WA 30, 2, 209ff.); (3) his *Von den Schleichern und Winkelpredigern* of 1532 (WA 30, 3, 510ff.); and (4) his sermons of 2, 9, 16, and 23 February 1528 (WA 27), as well as in the *Kirchenpostille* of 1523 for the Gospel on the third Sunday after Epiphany (WA 17, 2, 72 ff.), also separately published under the title *Von der Kinder Tauf und fremdem Glauben* in the introduction to Urbanus Rhegius' *Widerlegung des Bekenntnisses der Münsterischen neuen Valentinianer und Donatisten und zur Neuen Zeitung von den Wiedertäufern zu Münster 1535* (WA 38, 336ff.). In addition there are his letters, his official opinions, and the expressions in his Table Talks.

Luther apparently did not have exact information on Anabaptist writings, however certainly he has "heard" and "read" and "knows" all manner of things (WA 26, 140). All individualization is missing, especially since Luther lumps the Anabaptists together with the Sacramentists (Zwingli, Karlstadt, Schwenckfeld, etc.), not entirely without justification, of course, to the extent that the Anabaptist doctrine of the communion was the same as that of Zwingli or Oecolampadius. It is of no significance that he declared "the error of the Anabaptists more tolerable than that of the sacramentists in this matter" (baptism), "for the Sacramentists completely destroy baptism, but they [the Anabaptists] make it new" (WA 26, 173); Anabaptists and Sacramentists remained for him still Pilate and Herod, who were united as one over and against Christ.

In the divisions of Anabaptism Luther sees a sign of its ungodliness. The Anabaptist limitation of baptism to the believer he considers entirely impossible, since the baptizer cannot look into the heart of a man to see whether he really believes. Such a baptism is a "baptism upon adventure" (Mark 16:16), even if there is talk of "the sure faith"; for the confession of the one to be baptized proves nothing, since he too is not "sure" of his faith since he is of course not free of temptation. (One is impressed with Luther's rejection of all anchoring of the grace of baptism in a human or emotional activity such as "trusting and building upon oneself and not upon the word of God alone.")

The Anabaptist practice of preaching in secret (in actuality the consequence of persecution) was to Luther "a certain sign of the devil," especially since they had no "call" to preach. The eschatological hope of certain Anabaptist circles for an earthly kingdom with the murder of all the ungodly (e.g., Müntzer) was to him an unchristian, seditious, and vengeful spirit (Luke 22:26). In Christology he accused the Anabaptists of Münster of teaching "that Christ did not receive His body from Mary, as they call it [but in Mary], although He was called the seed of David" (WA 38, 349). The claim of the Anabaptists to have authorization to speak because of the "Sitzrecht" (1 Corinthians 14:30, "If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent") he definitely rejected with the interpretation that Paul was speaking of prophets, i.e., "teachers who have the office of preaching in the churches" (WA 30, 3, 522).

Luther rejected the whole idea of rebaptism (which was among the Anabaptists merely the practical consequence of their demand for adult baptism, and not a principle) with the argument that the person who performs the act of baptism is irrelevant; baptism "under the papacy" was also right, and Augustine had opposed the Donatists (WA 27, 42 ff.). "It was a mistake to build baptism on the faith of the baptizer; I base baptism on God's Word." Luther was here referring to the Donatists of the fourth century who rejected the baptism of a bishop who had recanted under persecution and then was restored to office.

In the moral demands of the Anabaptists, based on the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount (rejection of the oath and holding magisterial office, stress on the holy living of the believing Christian), Luther saw legalism, sedition, and the denial of ineradicable human sinfulness. His entire polemic here is however completely doctrinaire in rejecting realism and individual differentiation.

But it is undeniable that there were unbridgeable theological differences between the two sides; and just as Luther failed to try to understand the Anabaptists, so also did the Anabaptists fail to understand him when they pointed out the ineffectiveness of infant baptism. This last argument in particular was not fair to Luther, since he had from the beginning attacked the inadequacy of the bare act of infant baptism as such and pointed out its ineffectiveness for the whole of life. (See also Bender summary at the end of the article)