

FOREWORD

“Why should I baptize my baby?” “Should I wait until my child knows what is going on before I have him baptized?” “Should my relative, who is joining a new church, allow herself to be baptized—even though she was baptized as an infant?” These three questions have, somewhat unfortunately, become common nowadays within Lutheran congregations.

I suppose that the question “Why?” should be discussed a bit here, as in, “Why are such questions asked at all?” Even fifty years ago, the birth of a child signaled the baptism of that child soon thereafter; and it was generally understood (among Lutherans at least): One baptism is enough—even if a person leaves Lutheranism for another Christian denomination.

One answer to the question as to “Why?” may be that the theology of baptism, and especially infant baptism, had ceased long ago to be formally taught, for since cultural pressure still drove young married couples to the baptismal font with their newborn children (multiple times!), and such a joyous occasion was accompanied by significant celebration of extended family, all seemed good and right within the Church. Why teach what so often was practiced before congregation? If parents were bringing their children for baptism, what more needed

to be said?

Changing demographics within the United States, however, have somewhat altered this situation. In that farms have increased in size from the once-standard 80 acres per-family to thousands of acres per family, the chances of the children of farm families staying in their communities to raise their own families have decreased. In large cities, the suburbs teeming with young families in the 1960's and 70's have become suburbs of the retired. Finding no housing for their own families, the children raised there moved outward to form new suburbs. But unfortunately, with the postponement of marriage, and the reticence among married couples to give birth before their late twenties or early thirties, the frequency of trips to the baptismal font in newly formed suburbs does not match the rate of that of the older.

The frequency of single-motherhood and other forms of parenting has also affected the cultural understanding of baptism. With single-mothers, the challenge becomes the baptism ceremony itself. Although they have the best of intentions, the awkwardness of their new situation frequently causes the parent to avoid some sort of public baptism—especially one that takes place in a church service. Of course, the opposite does occur as well, with the single-mother and live-in boyfriend insisting that the baptism take place within the service of the church (thus somehow legitimizing the entire situation). Here then, the congregation finds itself feeling awkward. Why? Although members certainly rejoice that a child is baptized, and are willing to forgive the action leading

to the child's birth, a baptism within the service of the church can give them the feeling they are being asked to approve of an ongoing situation (adultery) which they cannot.

The break-up of families has also affected baptism as an event occurring with regularity in the Church. Couples with young un-baptized children who divorce can find themselves viewing the baptism of the children as just another bone of contention. When will it occur? Who will stand up at the baptismal font? Who will be the sponsors? Where will the reception take place? Who will be responsible for the spiritual life of the child? A result can be that the baptism of a child is simply put off until custody matters are settled, a second marriage occurs, or some sort of stability is reestablished.

Related to this situation somewhat is the baptism of children of non-members. Although the Church should and does baptize all children, all nations, that are brought to it, the challenge of baptizing the children of non-members is that of parental guidance in spiritual matters. Is it not simply hypocritical on the parents part to bring a child to baptism with the full intention of never stepping foot in the Church again? What meaning then remains to the pledges of parents and sponsors to train-up the newly baptized child in the way in which he should go?

Some congregations, realizing the inherent problems with such a situation, have even begun distinguishing such baptisms from baptisms of Church members by calling them "community baptisms." A "community

baptism” as it was described to me, is a baptism done by a congregation in which the congregation itself does not then take on the spiritual responsibility for the one baptized. In other words, the child is baptized, but is not made a member of the congregation.

In promoting such a practice, however, a congregation unwittingly approves of what the parents are doing by, for all intents and purposes, doing the same thing! What is even worse, by denying membership in the congregation to the one baptized, the congregation is publicly denying what has indeed happened, and that is, the child has—in spite of everything—been made a member of the one holy Christian and Apostolic church.

Even more tragic, however, and befuddling, are instances in which an adult relative of a child (uncle, aunt, grandmother, etc.) seeks to have the child baptized against the wishes of the parents. Certainly the adult relative is doing the right thing by seeking such a baptism. Not being the parent of the child, however, an issue of authority and responsibility is raised.

In spite of all these challenging issues of pastoral practice, however, perhaps the main reason why more and more questions like “Why should I baptize my baby?” and “Should I be baptized again as an adult” are being asked today is the rise of Evangelicalism. What is Evangelicalism? Evangelicalism is not a specific church body or denomination, but a movement within church bodies and denominations. According to a recent article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Evangelicalism in the state of Minnesota now claims more membership than

all other mainline Protestant denominations (except Lutheranism) *combined*.¹ A list of church bodies which are members of the *National Association of Evangelicals* include 50 groups/associations from a vast spectrum of (mostly) the Reformed tradition: Assemblies of God, Baptists, Brethren, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Church of God, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Quakers, Methodists, Presbyterians, Four-square Gospel, Pentecostal, Reformed Episcopal, the Salvation Army, the Worldwide Church of God, and the Wesleyans.² Although a movement comprised of so many different traditions, to consider oneself an Evangelical Christian, one must simply: 1) have a personal relationship with Jesus; 2) believe in the accuracy or truth of the Bible; 3) have some kind of conversion experience; 4) possess a personal need to talk about faith with others in order to convert them.³

The absence of baptism, and especially infant baptism, as a plank in the theology of the Evangelical movement is a bit disconcerting. It is, after all, Jesus Christ Himself who proclaimed: “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved!” (Mark 16:16) and also “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). From the inception of the Church, baptism—including the baptism of infants—has been central to its worship and life. The German theologian Joachim Jeremias in his seminal but brief work *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) has demonstrated on the basis

partially of inscriptions on ancient tombstones that the question at least of infant baptism in the early church was not one of when it began, but when the attempt was made to stop it! (A more accessible treatment of this question is found in A. Andrew Das' *Baptized into God's Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991)).

It is not as if baptism is completely absent from the Evangelical movement. Strangely enough, many such churches “bless” infants, meaning supposedly, that God can affect them in some sort of beneficiary way—even though the wishes of the baby in this regard cannot be known. Granted, some churches within the movement still practice infant baptism. By and large, however, the mega-churches associated with the Evangelical movement stick to infant blessings, and the baptisms of adults they conduct are not part of their weekly worship services. With the popularization of the theology of Evangelicalism among the members of other Christian traditions via radio stations dedicated to its dissemination, a cultural emphasis upon baptism in general seems to have decreased, and thus a general understanding of baptism among Christians, especially infant baptism, lost.

This brings us then to the work printed here. Interestingly enough, a number of the denominations listed above are direct theological descendants of those in Luther's day, who insisted that infant baptism was invalid and that the only baptism of any significance is believer's (or “believers” or “believers'”) baptism. What

is believer's baptism? Believer's baptism is the practice of baptizing those only whom, as consenting teenagers or adults, come forward to have themselves baptized—even if they were baptized already as infants.

Why did such a practice become popular in the 16th century? I suppose two causes could be forwarded here, both somewhat speculative: 1) Since every person within the Holy Roman Empire was baptized as an infant, a lack of piety as an adult was believed to prove the ineffectiveness of their baptisms as infants; 2) Since baptism to a certain extent brought one not only into the Church, but into the government as well, the baptism of infants become somewhat subtly a question of governmental authority. To put it another way, by allowing oneself to be baptized again as an adult, one was rejecting the authority of both the Church and the state.

The occasion for the following work was a letter Martin Luther (1483-1546) received from two pastors asking him about the practice of baptizing a Christian a second time. Luther's response, written at the end of 1527 and the beginning of 1528 addresses the issues raised by the pastors and in so doing, provides a nice summary of the theology of baptism in general, and infant baptism in particular.

¹ "Evangelical Christianity comes of age," Martha Sawyer Allen, *Star Tribune*, Sunday, March 2, 2003, p. A20.

² "NAE Member Denominations", *Star Tribune*, Sunday, March 2, 2003, p. A20.

³"Q: What makes someone an evangelical? A: At least four criteria must exist: Having a personal relationship with Christ. Belief in the accuracy and truth—some would say inerrancy—of the Bible. Some kind of faith conversion experience often called being “born again.” A personal need to talk about faith with others, to convert them to one’s faith.” Martha Sawyer Allen, “What makes Evangelical Christians who they are,” *Star Tribune*, Sunday, March 2, 2003, p. A20.