

7-1-1984

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### Recommended Citation

Kamprath, Donna Herzfeldt (1984) "The nature of baptism: examining the instructional writings of Menno Simons and Martin Luther," *Consensus*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol10/iss3/1>

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*In the farming communities of western Canada and southern Ontario, Mennonites and Lutherans have grown up side by side since their immigrations to these regions. There is a peaceful coexistence and healthy curiosity about one another's traditions. Yet, in the case of marriage between a Lutheran and a Mennonite one encounters hidden resentment and family tension over the pressure put on a Mennonite spouse to agree to infant baptism. A study comparing the teachings of Menno Simons and Martin Luther is fitting for a discovery of some of the roots of this contemporary problem.*

# THE NATURE OF BAPTISM: EXAMINING THE INSTRUCTIONAL WRITINGS OF MENNO SIMONS AND MARTIN LUTHER

*Donna Herzfeldt Kamprath*

## INTRODUCTION

Both Menno Simons and Martin Luther were powerful influences in the traditions which bear their names. Their writings concerning baptism continue to be available for use in the instruction of members. The two never met, yet Menno directly addresses Luther in his writings on baptism, although without citing particular works.<sup>1</sup>

Harry Loewen claims Luther's influence on Menno was "profound" in his early years as a priest, although Menno was independent enough to adapt the issues Luther raised to his own situation and to criticize the "learned theologian" when he thought Luther erred. "Menno accepted, for example, Luther's principle of justification by faith alone, but believed the Lutherans were so one-sided in their teaching of

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1. Harry Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1974), p. 176, cites a work by Cornelius Krahn, *Menno Simons (1496-1561) Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Theologie der Taufgesinnten* (Karlsruhe, 1936), which lists titles of Luther's works read by Menno (pp. 43-44).

this doctrine that they neglected to stress the importance of Christian ethics.”<sup>2</sup>

It is ironic that Menno learned to question the validity of infant baptism from Luther, who had stressed the necessity of faith in his earlier references to baptism. The main critique of Luther which appears in Menno’s writings concerning infant baptism is that “Luther writes that children should be baptized in view of their own faith and adds, If children had no faith, then their baptism would be blaspheming the sacrament . . . .” Luther says that faith is dormant and lies hidden in children, even as in a believing person who is asleep, until they come to years of understanding.<sup>3</sup> Menno’s critique of Luther—based on his interpretation of Scripture, his context, and his common sense—still requires consideration: “. . . they, alas, still cling to this rude abomination [infant baptism], because they do not want to assume the cross nor the reproach of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

In his defense of infant baptism and critique of the Anabaptists, Luther mentions only Balthasar Hubmaier by name.<sup>5</sup> He may not have known Menno nor have read his writings, for Luther himself admitted his information of Anabaptism was primarily second-hand, since Anabaptists were not active in his area.<sup>6</sup> In the writings of Luther considered for this study, the phrase or imagery of “dormant” faith was not used. Luther does argue for the possibility that children can believe even though they do not have speech or reason. Jaroslav Pelikan points out that Luther’s argument is based on traditional exegetical proofs for infant faith. However, Luther does not base his whole defense of infant baptism on the faith of infants, but rather on his understanding of the nature of baptism.<sup>7</sup> Does Luther’s defense and understanding still stand for our contemporary practice, and adequately deal with Menno’s challenge? A comparison of the two teachings may lead the churches to areas for contemporary discussion.

Baptism as an issue to be defined and defended arose at distinctively different points in the lives of the two men. Discerning the nature of baptism played a key role in Menno’s conversion process. For Luther, the question of baptism’s nature arose after his initial insight into justification by grace through faith.

According to his own testimony of his conversion, Menno first had a troubled conscience as a Roman priest celebrating mass in Pingjum (north of Amsterdam). He turned to the New Testament and discovered the deception of the church concerning

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2. Loewen, p. 104. In his own confession, Menno said he was helped by Luther’s insight that “human injunctions cannot bind unto eternal death.” (*Menno Simons Complete Writings*, translated by Leonard Verduin and edited by John C. Wenger (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1966), p. 668.

3. Simons, pp. 126, 241-242.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 712.

5. *LW* 40:229, “Concerning Rebaptism”. Hubmaier had included Luther’s name on a tract on rebaptism.

6. *LW* 40:230. See also Loewen, pp. 70-71.

7. Jaroslav Pelikan, “Luther’s Defense of Infant Baptism,” *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*, edited by Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 203: “But once more it is methodologically important to keep the question of Luther’s knowledge of Anabaptism distinct from the question of his defense of infant Baptism: for the former could have been changed by more accurate reportage, but the latter could not have been changed by anything less drastic than a fundamental theological reorientation.”

the meaning of the Mass. Shortly afterward (in 1531) a tailor was executed in a neighboring city for being baptized a second time. This sounded strange to Menno, but he reports, "I examined the Scriptures diligently and pondered them earnestly, but could find no report of infant baptism."<sup>8</sup>

Systematically Menno consulted his pastor, the church fathers, Luther, Bucer, and Bullinger. "When I noticed from all these that writers varied so greatly among themselves, each following his own wisdom, then I realized that we were deceived in regard to infant baptism."<sup>9</sup> While he came to this understanding of baptism "through the illumination of the Holy Ghost, through much reading and pondering of the Scriptures, and by the gracious favor and gift of God," not through the "erring sects,"<sup>10</sup> it was the continued suffering of those who followed the sects (at both Munster and the Old Cloister, 1534-35, where great numbers died for their faith) which caused him to more openly preach the evangelical path and more inwardly seek to find peace with God for his tormented conscience. Finally in 1536, Menno said, "I, without constraint, of a sudden, renounced all my wordly reputation, name, and fame, my unchristian abominations, my masses, infant baptism, and my easy life, and I willingly submitted to distress and poverty under the heavy cross of Christ."<sup>11</sup> Although he renounced infant baptism, he does not mention being rebaptized.<sup>12</sup>

In his brief biography of Menno, Harold Bender points out that although the decision to reject infant baptism took years to be realized by the action of leaving the Catholic Church, "it sealed the breach with the Catholic Church and ultimately led him into the circle of the Anabaptists. Salvation by the sacrament of baptism was the cornerstone upon which the whole Catholic system of religion was built. One might conceivably remain a Catholic while denying transubstantiation, but how could one keep faith with a church whose essential mode of salvation was denied?"<sup>13</sup> Menno finally had no alternative but to leave the priesthood and Catholic church in order to be faithful to the Scriptures and the truth revealed by God.

Luther's conversion experience and separation from the Catholic Church also centered on the question of the "mode of salvation," but Luther was not moved to abandon the nature of baptism as a sacrament, valid for infants and adults alike. In fact, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who of his rich mercy has preserved at least this one sacrament in His church unspoiled and unspotted by man-made ordinances . . ." <sup>14</sup> In his revisions of congregational worship in 1523 and 1526 Luther modified and abbreviated the customary Roman order of baptism, but added nothing

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8. Simons, p. 668.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 669.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p. 671.

12. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 392: "It may have been true that Menno received instruction from Obbe Philips, who rebaptized him."

13. Simons, p. 8. Also, *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), Vol. I, p. 224.

14. John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther. Selections* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1961), "The Pagan Servitude of the Church," p. 291.



new.<sup>15</sup> Loewen suggests, "While still an Augustinian monk, Luther wrestled for assurance of certainty of salvation. Eventually he found this certainty in the promises of the written Word of God and in the sacraments which conveyed to him the grace of God. In all his doubts and spiritual struggles he came back to these external means of grace, claiming divine pardon and assurance of salvation."<sup>16</sup>

In regards to baptism, Luther took issue with the Catholic Church on the system of penance and satisfaction. This system was built on a teaching of Jerome that baptism was of no use after one fell into sin; the sinner must rely on repentance and works of penance to return to baptismal favor.<sup>17</sup> Luther emphasized that it was the individual's faith which received the forgiveness always available in baptism. His understanding of baptism also led Luther to teach the priesthood of all believers, minimizing the power of the Catholic Church hierarchy.<sup>18</sup>

The main controversy, then, over the nature of baptism and its validity for infants arose after Luther's initial conversion process, in contrast to its immediacy for Menno's conversion process. This is important for understanding their attitudes and decisions concerning the controversy over baptism.

By 1528, writing a letter to two pastors concerning rebaptism, Luther found himself in the position of defending "the common Christian tradition"<sup>19</sup> concerning baptism against the Anabaptists, at the same time he was challenging the traditional place of works in the question of salvation against the Catholic Church. In both issues Luther wrote to defend the truth of his understanding of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Doctrinally the issue was one of salvation, but in terms of context it was quite secondary for Luther since there was no confrontation with the Anabaptists in Wittenberg. At the same time, his following was taking shape as an established state church with the security and protection of such an institution.

Menno, on the other hand, felt deceived by the tradition when he examined the Scriptures for himself. His understanding of baptism, then, came to him as a new discovery, providing the motivation for decisive action. Menno chose to live his life with a group of Christians who were being persecuted severely for their faith. He was deeply affected by the executions going on around him which centered on the external activity of baptism. The confession and sacrifice of martyrs was a great contrast to the lack of discipleship and discipline which Menno saw in the established churches. For the Anabaptists, faith manifest in acts of obedience became crucial as personal experience was placed over against tradition which no longer seemed valid or Scriptural.<sup>20</sup>

Menno took on the work of binding together this persecuted community. Adult baptism played an important role as a sign of obedience and a testing of faith. Victor Harding writes, "In understanding all this, it is important never to forget the meaning

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15. LW 35:25, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism".

16. Loewen, p. 85.

17. *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), "The Large Catechism," p. 446.

18. Dillenberger, pp. 345, 349.

19. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 359.

20. Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 98.

of adult baptism in Menno's time. For to become an Anabaptist often *did* involve a tremendous conviction, and it demanded an act of commitment which might well signalize one's entire attitude toward discipleship."<sup>21</sup>

Luther wrote in 1528, "Still, 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 everyone to believe what he wills. If his faith is false, he will be sufficiently punished in eternal hell-fire."<sup>22</sup> This well indicates how much the issue of the nature of baptism was a life-and-death question of temporal and eternal stature for both these reformers.<sup>23</sup>

## DIFFERENCES: INTERPRETATION OR ESSENTIAL BELIEF?

Harry Loewen, in his study of the relationship between Luther and the radicals concludes at one point that "the difference between Luther and the dissenters was often a difference in interpretation and emphasis rather than a difference in essential beliefs."<sup>24</sup> Can this conclusion be applied to Menno and Luther concerning their respective teachings on the nature of baptism? To address this question it is important to isolate a set of "essential beliefs" for each man from selected texts and compare them.

"Essential beliefs" are those tenets which are necessary, nonnegotiable, and irrefutable in the author's beliefs and presentation. The texts chosen for primary comparisons are the sections on baptism in *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* (first published by Menno in 1539), and *The Large Catechism* by Luther (published in 1529). Both are fairly popular in their traditions, intended for instructional use, and they both tend to gather together arguments carried on at length in other documents. They also are still useful for teaching today.

"Menno wrote no words about baptism which were entirely outside the polemical arena,"<sup>25</sup> according to Harding. This is true of *Foundation* which was written both as a word to the world on behalf of Anabaptists and as a word to solidify the brothers and sisters in their biblical faith. Menno also wrote *Christian Baptism* in 1539 with the intention of clearly explaining and defending believers' baptism.

Luther did write one piece notably free of polemics, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, second in a trilogy on the sacraments in 1519. Next came *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in 1520 which was Luther's reworking of the sacramental system of the Catholic Church. In 1523 he replied to two pastors *Concerning Rebaptism* where he responded to what he understood to be the Anabaptist position. From 1528-1539 he preached at least 23 sermons on baptism, which also were

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21. Vincent Harding, "Menno Simons and the Role of Baptism in the Christian Life," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 33 (1959): 327.

22. LW 40:230.

23. Simons, p. 129: "We have given you here the principal reason why we oppose infant baptism not only in doctrine, but also with the sacrifice of our lives and possessions."

24. Loewen, p. 26.

25. Harding, p. 323.

the foundation for the Small and Large Catechism sections on the subject.<sup>26</sup>

## The Nature of Baptism: Menno Simons

Five “incontrovertible” beliefs concerning the nature of baptism can be summarized on the basis of *Foundation*. “Behold, this is the only and true position concerning baptism that can be sustained by the Scriptures; no other can.”<sup>27</sup>

First, baptism is a sign of obedience to the command of God, not a sign of grace. The command on which this teaching is based appears in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16, which Menno interprets in this way: “Here we have the Lord’s commandment concerning baptism, as to when according to the ordinance of God it shall be administered and received; namely, that the Gospel must first be preached, and then those baptized who believe it . . .”<sup>28</sup>

Faith, which is a gift of God’s grace, exists before baptism takes place.<sup>29</sup> God has acted; believers now act in obedient response with the commanded baptism. Menno summarizes this and several further points: “For our sign of grace is Christ Jesus alone, by whom God’s abundant love is freely dispensed and declared unto us . . . The seal in our consciences is the Holy Ghost, but baptism is a sign of obedience, commanded of Christ, by which we testify when we receive it that we believe the Word of the Lord, that we repent of our former life and conduct, that we desire to rise with Christ unto a new life, and that we believe in the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, baptism is a believer’s testimony or profession of faith.<sup>31</sup> Faith proceeds from hearing the Gospel. “It [faith] is the mother which bears all Christian virtues, and by reason of this, the Word of God ascribes everything to it, such as righteousness (Rom. 3:23; 5:1); blessing (Gal. 3:14), salvation (Mark 16:16), and life everlasting (John 3:36; 17:4).”<sup>32</sup> It is clearly faith which justifies and which then gives birth to obedience. In a sense, then, Menno sees that “God has given His ceremonies and figurative signs as a test of the genuineness of their faith.”<sup>33</sup> Baptism is the opportunity for the believer to confess faithfulness by an act of obedience to God’s commands which is visible to the community.

Thirdly, baptism is the believer’s declaration of the desire to live the new life.<sup>34</sup> Here Menno speaks of the believer burying his sin (an action begun before baptism) as Christ died and was buried; and then arising to new life, the true new birth.<sup>35</sup> Menno is careful not to associate the Pauline burial language with imagery of cleans-

26. All of these are available in English except for the 23 sermons.

27. Simons, p. 237.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 238, 264, 266, 283.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 238: “Faith precedes baptism. For faith is the beginning of all righteousness which avails before God, from which faith baptism issues as a sign and token of obedience.”

30. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 125.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 125.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 122: “. . . it will not avail us anything to bury our sins in baptism if we do not arise with Christ Jesus from the power of sin unto a new life to the praise of the Lord.”



ing. Baptism is not a cleansing of original sin, nor a remission of sins: these ideas compared with Scripture do “violence to the blood of Christ” which *alone can* forgive sin.<sup>36</sup>

This is closely related to the fourth point about baptism, that it is merely an external sign of the inward regeneration which is taking place and is moving the believer to act obediently, showing the fruits of righteousness. This is based on I Peter 3:21. “. . . outward baptism avails nothing so long as we are not inwardly renewed, regenerated, and baptized with the heavenly fire and the Holy Chost of God . . . In the spiritual strength which we have received, we henceforth bind ourselves by the outward sign of the covenant in water which is enjoined on all believers by Christ, even as the Lord has bound Himself with us in His grace, through His Word, namely that we will no longer live according to the evil, unclean lusts of the flesh, but walk according to the witness of a good conscience before Him.”<sup>37</sup> Baptism exists, then, as a visible sign of conversion alongside other outward acts of discipleship.

Finally, the power which is in baptism comes totally from the divine Word, the promise of God which is received by obedience through faith.<sup>38</sup> God’s holy Word begets faith in believers; in this way the Word of the Lord cleanses and purifies, not baptism; but the express commandment and Word of God attach the promise to baptism for obedient believers.<sup>39</sup> By this divine promise, then, “there is ascribed to Scriptural baptism the forgiveness of sins, the putting on of Christ, and the immersion into His church,” all by the power of God’s Word.<sup>40</sup>

According to Harding, Menno was witnessing to the logical conclusion of the Anabaptist position: “baptism ‘brings’ nothing to the believer except an opportunity for him to act, for him to testify, for him to show his obedience to God.”<sup>41</sup> This seems evident in the essential beliefs isolated from Menno’s writings. God acts to inwardly convert the believer and the believer acts in obedience to God’s command, taking on the external sign of baptism, professing faith, declaring the desire to live a new life, and acknowledging the power for this to be God’s divine promise.

## The Nature of Baptism: Martin Luther

In the *Large Catechism*, addressed to pastors and preachers for teaching laypeople, Luther systematically outlines “that which is necessary for us to know” concerning baptism. Here also five essential beliefs can be identified.

First, Luther begins with the observation based on Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16

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36. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 669. Harding, p. 332. Menno summarizes on p. 245: “We are not cleansed in baptism of our inherited sinful nature which is in our flesh, so that it is entirely destroyed in us, for it remains with us after baptism. But since the merciful Father, from whom descend all good and perfect gifts has graciously given us the most holy faith, through his holy Word; therefore we declare in the baptism we receive that we desire to die unto the inherent, sinful nature, and destroy it, so that it will no longer be master in our mortal bodies (Rom. 6:12), even though such true believers are often overcome by sin.”

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 247.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

41. Harding, p. 333.



that baptism is “instituted by God Himself.” It is God’s command, revealed and given by God to humans. Baptism may be an external sign with no appearance to the world of usefulness, but what God instituted cannot be useless.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, baptism done in obedience to this command gives assurance that it has worth.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, building on the command of God, Luther says, “to be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by men but by God Himself. Although it is performed by men’s hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own act.”<sup>44</sup> By this understanding, combined with the first, baptism is measured on a scale of values outside of the human world. Worth is established in the reliability of God, conveying assurance to the participant.

Thirdly, baptism is simple, common water “comprehended” in God’s Word and commandment. Following Augustine, Luther taught that when the Word is added to the water it becomes a sacrament. “God himself stakes his honor, his power, and might on [baptism] . . . for it contains and conveys all the fullness of God.”<sup>45</sup> This Word is not only the ordinance of God, but also God’s promise: “victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His Gifts.”<sup>46</sup> By virtue of this promise of God, baptism has the power to save, the power to be the washing of regeneration referred to in Titus 3:5. Paul Althaus explains, “His doctrine of baptism is basically nothing else than his doctrine of justification in concrete form.”<sup>47</sup>

Fourthly, “without faith Baptism is of no use, although in itself it is an infinite, divine treasure.”<sup>48</sup> It is important that the worth and validity of the baptism become personally meaningful, and this can only happen in faith. “Actually, we insist on faith alone as so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed.”<sup>49</sup> Belief is in God and God’s Word, but it clings to the external object of baptism. He compares this with the external, oral proclamation of the Gospel which is perceived and grasped by the senses and brought into the heart by faith. So, Luther makes an important distinction here between faith and the sacrament: “my faith does not constitute Baptism, but receives it.”<sup>50</sup> When faith receives baptism, i.e., accepts it as God’s command and action, the believer receives the promised salvation and all its benefits.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Luther writes: “Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily

42. *The Book of Concord*, p. 437.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

44. *The Book of Concord*, p. 437. Dillenberger, pp. 296-297: “Be careful, therefore, in regard to baptism, to ascribe only the external rite to man, but the inner operation to God. You may rightly ascribe both to God, and regard the officiating person as the instrument acting for God, and through whom the Lord, sitting in heaven, submerges you in the water with His own hands, and promises you forgiveness of your sins by a human voice speaking to you through the lips of His servant on earth.”

45. *Ibid.*, p. 438.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 441-442.

47. Althaus, p. 356.

48. *The Book of Concord*, p. 440.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 441.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 443.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 441. Dillenberger, p. 300: The sacraments “must be called efficacious, however, in the sense that, when faith is indubitably present, they most assuredly and effectively impart grace.” See also LW 40:252.

garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should be found in faith and amid its fruits, every day he should be suppressing the old man and growing up in the new. If we wish to be Christians we must practice the work that makes us Christians."<sup>52</sup> It is at the point where it is clear that the power of baptism lies in God's actions, that Luther talks of human works in the language of Romans 6 (dying and rising to new life). This is what baptism "signifies." Luther acknowledges that although believers are cleansed in baptism, the sinful nature continues. Believers must daily be using baptism to suppress the sinful nature and renew actions. This is "daily Baptism" or "walking in Baptism." Baptism, in this sense, remains forever, and merges with repentance. "Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and reproach to Baptism, to resume and practice what had earlier been begun but abandoned."<sup>53</sup> Althaus summarizes, "Thus baptism is a unique act, but at the same time it is a constantly present and meaningful reality in the Christian life."<sup>54</sup>

Luther's understanding of the nature of baptism, then, concerns the following "necessary" beliefs: God's command instituted baptism and God is directly acting in the action of baptism; baptism has the power to save because it is connected with God's Word of promise, yet that power is only of use as it is grasped by faith; and the evidence that baptism is being used and not resisted is the daily amendment of life. Luther saw this as a great "treasure for the comfort and strengthening of believers."

## Comparisons

On the basis of these descriptions of the essential beliefs of Menno and Luther concerning the nature of baptism, five particular comparisons can be chosen which, in turn, highlight the cause of the controversy over infant baptism.

First, both Menno and Luther assume that baptism is the rite of initiation into the Christian church. Yet, implicit in their writings on baptism are different understandings of the nature of the church. For Menno, "the church of Christ is a holy, pure, and unblamable church."<sup>55</sup> Those who become members must be able to clearly and rationally commit their lives to the difficult lifestyle of discipleship. Infants are therefore excluded because they cannot make this commitment (although they have the promise of everlasting life by God's grace). Menno deplors the fact that many are baptized according to tradition, and considered proper members of the church, regardless of their lifestyle.<sup>56</sup> Luther allowed that baptism may have been abused and wrongly received, yet baptism has value and some may come to faith later. But infant baptism also must be valid because God has allowed it to continue since the apostles. "For without baptism there is no church. This necessary conclusion, however, is an irreconcilable contradiction of the article of the creed, 'I believe . . . one holy Christian church'."<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, both men accept baptism as a command of God on the basis of Matthew

52. *The Book of Concord*, p. 446.

53. *Ibid.* Also *LW* 35:32-34.

54. Althaus, p. 354.

55. Simons, p. 256.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

57. Althaus, p. 360. Myron Augsburg, "Conversion in Anabaptist Thought" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36(1962): 246: "The real concern of the Anabaptists was that the Christian Church

28:19 and Mark 16:16. Yet their different interpretations of the Scriptures lead to different teachings on the obedience required by the command. Menno sees a clear order of action in these verses: preach the Gospel, hear it, believe it, and be baptized. Obedience is to submit to baptism on the basis of faith.<sup>58</sup> Luther discounts this argument with a question: "Have they now become gods so that they can discern the hearts of men and know whether or not they believe?" No one can have or discern a certain faith. Therefore, Luther interprets the obedience more simply as to be baptized, realizing that "it is 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."<sup>59</sup>

Thirdly, Menno concentrates his understanding of baptism on the actions and will of the human believer, which are directed to God, but not by God.<sup>60</sup> Luther, on the other hand, concentrates on baptism as an act and work of God in the believer. This reveals a deeper contradiction in the two men's understandings of human nature and will. In this light, the passivity of infants was a perfect illustration for Luther that baptism is a means of receiving the grace of God,<sup>61</sup> something which our sinful human nature could not desire. However, such passivity was exactly what Menno critiqued. Infants being "irrational", "unconscious", and "immature" are unable to have a knowledge of good and evil or to evidence the fruits of faith, all which require reason and commitment to discern.<sup>62</sup> Robert Friedmann summarizes: "The Anabaptists believed in the freedom of the will, though to be sure not of the Pelagian type but rather in the sense that with the help of divine grace man may overcome evil tendencies in his character and obey the divine commandments. Without this freedom of the will, discipleship, the heart of Anabaptism, loses its meaning."<sup>63</sup>

Fourthly, both agree that without faith baptism has no power or meaning in a person's life. Yet, they differ in the role they ascribe to faith and in describing the relationship between faith and the life which follows. For Menno, baptism is a moment of professing the faith which God has worked in one's heart. The works (obedience and love) which are the fruit of faith validate the baptism and the faith. Myron Augsburg writes: "Menno does not write of good works in the same way Luther does, for in Anabaptist thought the new life is a fruit of the Spirit rather than an addition of good works to express faith. The entire life of the believer is a work of grace, and is the demonstration of an inner regeneration."<sup>64</sup> Luther, on the other hand, sees that

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should be a believers' church rather than a state church in which both regenerate and unregenerate were counted members, for in the latter situation the Anabaptists felt many persons were given a false hope. Back of the difference over infant baptism was the issue of the nature of the Church and the question of conversion . . ."

58. Simons, p. 237.

59. LW 40:239-240.

60. Harding, p. 331.

61. Loewen, p. 82.

62. Simons, pp. 238, 239, 261.

63. Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of Sin as Held by the Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 33(1959): 207: "Thus the controversy over original sin developed between the Augustinian position on one hand and the evangelical on the other: the awareness of one's basic corruption versus the divine call to discipleship."

64. Augsburg, p. 245.



faith can be separate from the moment of baptism. "Therefore, I say, if you did not believe before, then believe afterward and confess, 'The Baptism indeed was right, but unfortunately I did not receive it rightly'."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, it also is not important whether or not the infants are capable of mature faith, for baptism is dependent on God, who gives the grace to produce faith. Baptism is meant to be used by the believer throughout his or her life for the forgiveness which is needed not once, but daily when sin destroys good works.

Finally, Luther maintained an understanding of baptism as a sacrament, a means of conveying grace to believers, whereas Menno saw baptism as a sign of obedience, the human response to the regeneration which God has already been working by grace in the heart of the believer. Loewen observes, "In Luther's arguments against what he considered to be errors in Anabaptist thinking with regard to baptism, the sacramental nature of baptism was more important to him than the question of whether one should baptize infants or adults." By "demoting" baptism to a sign or symbol, Luther felt there would be nothing concrete or objective left to which faith could be anchored.<sup>66</sup> But because this sacramental understanding traditionally allowed and demanded infant baptism, Menno rejected it as "idolatrous, useless, and vain" because it is clearly contrary to the command and Word of God that those who believe should be baptized.<sup>67</sup> To Menno, the whole church since the apostles "gradually degenerated from the truth in Christ Jesus to the trust in outward ceremonies, as may plainly be seen."<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These five comparisons begin to reveal both some of the grounds for the controversy over infant baptism and the reasons it was an inevitable result of the circumstances: different understandings of the nature of the church, different interpretations of Scriptures, contrary understanding of human will and nature, disagreement as to the role of faith in baptism and works, and different understandings of the importance of baptism as a sacrament. There is agreement that baptism is a command of God which requires obedience; that one enters the Christian church by baptism; that faith is a gift of the grace of God which changes the heart of a believer; and that faith gives birth to renewed actions, the new life full of the fruits of the Spirit. These points exhaust neither the understandings of the nature of baptism in these writings, nor the arguments defending or condemning infant baptism.

Yet, it was the legal context which probably made the controversy over infant baptism irresolvable in that century. Infant baptism was required by law, a means of maintaining the state church. "Adult baptism, as the Anabaptists practiced it, was viewed as an act of schism and even sedition. The old imperial Roman law providing death penalty for rebaptism was invoked against them, and became the legal basis for

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65. *The Book of Concord*, p. 443.

66. Loewen, pp. 85, 81.

67. Simons, pp. 243-246; 263: "If it is not commanded of God, then it is not His ordinance and therefore it has no promise; and if it has no promise, then it is doubtlessly useless and vain."

68. *Ibid.*, p. 259.



prosecuting them.”<sup>69</sup> With that pressure there was little room left for “ecumenical dialogue.” Today the situation is quite different.

It is important to note that there have been changes since Menno and Luther which have shaped current teaching and practice. Lutheranism in North America is not an established state church with political protection and power. The Mennonite church is not an underground, persecuted people living a missionary lifestyle. The social similarities of the churches lend an opportunity to talk about baptism in new ways.

It is also important to contemplate what it was in the question of baptism which demanded such intensity and commitment from Menno and Luther — not to recreate the hard lines which separated churches and believers, but to recapture the love of God’s truth and the comfort which these men knew in baptism. “Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory.”<sup>70</sup> “We seek to walk humbly and uprightly in Christ Jesus, in the covenant of His grace, in His eternal peace, and to have a pious and peaceful conscience before the Lord . . .”<sup>71</sup>

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69. *Anabaptism in Outline*, edited by Walter Klassen (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), p. 163.

70. *The Book of Concord*, p. 446.

71. Simons, p. 129-130.