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N O V E M B E R ♦ 1 9 5 0

A GERMAN LUTHERAN DECLARATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF HOLY BAPTISM

The validity of Infant Baptism has been a topic of serious discussion among German theologians for the past two decades. Three reasons have been advanced against the practice of Infant Baptism: (1) The New Testament texts do not suffice to prove the validity of Infant Baptism; (2) The Confessional writings of the Reformation period failed to advance convincing arguments for Infant Baptism; (3) Infants lack the ability to comprehend the blessings of Baptism (*dem Täufling fehlt die Glaubensreife*). Lutherans have vehemently denounced these views and with renewed vigor have maintained the Scriptural and Confessional teaching on Infant Baptism. It seems to us that in this controversy the difference between the Reformed and the Lutheran *Schriftprinzip* comes to the surface in unmistakable terms. The Reformed principle is negative; in other words, Reformed theology says that since Infant Baptism is *not commanded* in express words, it is not to be practiced. Lutheran theology's *Schriftprinzip* is positive; that is to say, the entire scope and content of the Scriptures must be taken into account. Lutheran theology therefore asks whether or not it is contrary to Scriptures that the Christian Church has practiced Infant Baptism since Apostolic times.¹ And Lutheran theology answers that the Scriptural doctrines of original sin, the efficacy of Baptism, the nature of faith, compel us to include infants in the Savior's injunction to baptize all nations.

In 1943 the German Evangelical Church was greatly disturbed by Karl Barth's *Die Christliche Lehre von der Taufe*, in which he attacked the efficacy of Baptism in general and of Infant Baptism in particular.² He maintains that Baptism is a sign, or symbol, of our willingness to assume the responsibilities which God imposes upon us in Baptism. As an existential theologian he claims further that we must deduce the impotence of Infant Baptism from the fact that in the large *Volks-*

¹ J. Jeremias, *Hat die Urkirche die Kindertaufe geuebt?* Goettingen, 1938 and 1949, and Oscar Cullmann, *Die Tauflehre des Neuen Testaments*, Zurich, 1948.

² For a synopsis and critique of this tract see John C. Mattes, "A Reply to Karl Barth on Baptism," *Lutheran Church Quarterly*, 1947, pp. 173—186.

kirchen the majority give no evidence that "an event occurred" at their Baptism in infancy. He holds that such "an event" could not take place in Infant Baptism, because the children are unable to answer the questions addressed to them and therefore unable to express their willingness and readiness to assume the obligations imposed in Baptism.

The majority of Lutheran pastors who deeply appreciated Barth's contribution to their own spiritual reorientation were greatly disturbed by Barth's categorical denial of Infant Baptism. A number of Lutheran pastors, however, followed Barth consistently and denied Infant Baptism in theory and in practice. One bishop told us that a pastor in his diocese flagrantly ignored the paragraph in ecclesiastical law which expressly prescribes that a pastor must baptize his children. It seems almost impossible that a Lutheran pastor who refuses to baptize his own children presumes to serve a Lutheran congregation.

This is the historical background for the "Declaration Concerning the Doctrine of Holy Baptism" adopted by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) at its convention in Ansbach, June, 1950. The declaration was prepared by leading theologians and is published in *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* (Muenchen), July 31, 1950. The theses and antitheses must be read in the light of the current discussion concerning Baptism as outlined above. Other errors occasioned by a new form of Higher Criticism and by Anthroposophy, possibly other new errors of which we are not conscious, are also rejected. We consider this statement so significant that we present it *in toto*. The several footnotes are provided by the translator.

We note with deep sorrow and grief that in some sections of the churches of our [Lutheran] Confession the correct Apostolic doctrine of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is no longer preached in its purity and completeness. This has caused much confusion and disorder in the congregations. We therefore plead with all Christians, especially those who must preach in the congregation, to consider in all seriousness the Biblical doctrine of Baptism as it is proclaimed in the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and to renounce every doctrine which is contrary to the Holy Scriptures and our Confessions. We call attention to a number of points which in our opinion are particularly important, and plead with all provincial Churches and individual congregations of the Augsburg Confession to unite with us in the following testimony:

I

Matt. 28:18-20

1. In the same words in which the resurrected Lord commissioned His disciples to preach the Gospel, He has instituted Baptism. Thereby Christ designated Baptism, together with His Word and His Supper,

the means of His grace, through which He rescues man out of his perdition and bestows upon him participation in His redemption. Bound to His will, we trust in full assurance that as long as the earth remains, He will not withdraw His saving power from His own institution of Baptism.

We reject the false view that Christian Baptism is a figment of the human mind and was practiced in the Early Church without the command of the resurrected Lord.³

We reject the false view that true faith in the proclaimed Gospel can exist without the desire for Baptism and that we may seek a way into the Kingdom of Christ which excludes Holy Baptism.

2. Baptism is valid when the candidate for Baptism is brought into contact with water by immersion or aspersion and when the name of the Triune God is invoked in the words: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." We admonish all Christians not to deviate from this form.

We therefore reject the false view that a valid Baptism may be performed without the use of water and the name of the Triune God.⁴

3. We glorify the Lord of the Church that He uses Baptism, rightly administered, as a means of grace, not only in the churches of our Confession, but also in those churches where false teaching prevails.

We recognize as valid the Baptism of other Christian denominations if Baptism has been performed with water and in the name of the Triune God. We therefore reject the false opinion that a valid Baptism must be repeated because it had been performed by one who belonged to a heterodox church body.

II

Eph. 5:26

1. Christ Himself is present in Baptism and acts through the ministry performed by man. The power of Baptism issues from Christ's saving work and comes to the water through the power of His Word.

We reject the false opinion that Baptism is a mere empty sign or the view which ascribes to the baptismal water or water in itself a magically effective power.

2. Christ builds His Church and leads it to its final consummation by adding new members to His body through Holy Baptism.

We reject the false opinion that the basis of the Church is the [voluntary] union of believers and not the activity of the Lord in Word and Sacraments.⁵

³ This seems to be directed against the theory that the New Testament must be freed from all "accretions" — *Entmythologisierung*.

⁴ We suspect that this is directed against Anthroposophy.

⁵ This is directed against dialectical existentialism.

III

Rom. 6:3-4

By His crucifixion and resurrection Christ has loosed the bonds of the power of sin, death, and the devil and has brought eternal life and immortality to light. Nevertheless by his birth every human being is under the power of sin, death, and the devil, for "that which is born of flesh is flesh," John 3:6. The sinner is just and lives before God only when he partakes of the redemption which Christ has won.

Christ the Lord has instituted Holy Baptism as the means whereby we participate in His redemption. In Baptism we are crucified with Christ and die with Him. Christ, however, is risen from the dead, and in Holy Baptism we are quickened with Christ unto life. Thus Holy Baptism effects what Christ's death and resurrection has effected: it redeems from the power of sin, death, and the devil, gives forgiveness, justifies before God, works regeneration, renews man in the new creation, and inaugurates the life of the new man, who after God is created in righteousness and true holiness, incorporates us into the body of the ascended Lord, and saves us eternally.

Baptism is performed once, but its efficacy extends over the entire life of the baptized. It daily causes the dying of the old Adam until the hour of death. Daily it bestows anew the life of the resurrected Lord and completes its work in the resurrection of the dead.

We reject the false view that Baptism is merely a symbol whereby we can learn how salvation has been won. We testify with the Confessions of our Church that Baptism according to the Scriptures not only signifies, proclaims, and offers grace, but that it also gives and conveys God's grace.

We reject the false view that our faith makes Baptism the rich treasure of God's grace. On the contrary, we hold and teach that Baptism is this glorious treasure solely through the work and Word of Christ. Therefore we declare with Dr. Martin Luther: "We are not concerned to know whether the person baptized believes or not, for on that account Baptism does not become invalid, but everything depends upon the Word and command of God. . . . My faith does not make Baptism, but receives Baptism."

IV

Mark 16:16

Wherever Christian Baptism is performed, Christ places the rich treasure of His redemption into our hands. Only he receives this treasure for salvation who by faith accepts this offer in Baptism. Man can only spurn this gift and by his unbelief bring to nought the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Though he has been baptized and retains the sign of Baptism all his life, he is nevertheless lost.⁶ There-

⁶ In the *Volkskirchen* all baptized members are entitled to the rights and privileges of membership, though they have shown no interest in the Church for years and decades. At present this problem is causing much spiritual distress to pastors of the *Volkskirchen*.

fore we must constantly sound the call of repentance, by which we return to our Baptism. He who repents in contrition and faith will find that the efficacious gift received in his Baptism is again in effect.

We reject the false view that Baptism will work salvation by its mere performance without faith.

We reject the false view that a baptized person, when he repents, is to be rebaptized.

V

John 3:5-6; Mark 10:14

Our children, born of flesh, are by their birth under the power of sin, death, and the devil and therefore are in need of the redemption won by Christ and of the new birth of the water and the Spirit.

Christ died and arose again also for the children; they, too, are to be members of His people; also for them the command and promise of Baptism is intended. [As in Adult Baptism, so] in Infant Baptism it is not faith which effects Baptism. In Baptism the rich treasure of grace is placed into the hands of infants; they, too, are incorporated into the body of Christ by Holy Baptism, become members of His Church, and receive the blessings of the Holy Spirit's efficacious work.

In Infant Baptism [as in the Baptism of adults] the gift of Baptism is received unto salvation only when it is not rejected or brought to nought by unbelief. Although we cannot ascertain absolutely that at Baptism infants receive Baptism in faith, we nevertheless trust the word and command of Christ which has given Baptism its power, rely upon the intercession of the Christian Church, and trust that the children whom we baptize will believe.⁷ Believing this, we confess the faith in their stead. Therefore a child should receive Holy Baptism if the parents and the sponsors confess the Christian faith in the child's stead and assume the responsibility to instruct the child in the Word of God and bring it up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

We reject the false opinion that in order to maintain the *Volkskirche* Infant Baptism must be administered without church discipline and instruction.

We also reject the false view that parents may withhold Baptism from a child which God has entrusted to them.

We reject the false view that the administration of Holy Baptism may ever be divorced from the proclamation of the Gospel and the instruction in God's Word. The Church can never be released from her responsibility for the spiritual training of the children baptized by

⁷ The original has "*glauben werden.*" In view of what has been said previously about the efficacy of Baptism, we cannot understand why the future tense is here used. It is possible that the phrase merely wishes to state that children will believe until such a time as they shall be able to evidence their faith by their confession. But, as it reads, this paragraph is subject to an interpretation which is contrary to the Lutheran Confessions (Large Catechism, Infant Baptism, par. 57).

her, be that through a decision of the baptized or by extraecclesiastical measures.

We admonish our congregations to remain faithful in the confession of their faith so that parents and sponsors may in the children's stead joyfully assume the confession of faith and, trusting in the promise of Christ and the power of prayer, bring their children to Baptism.

We admonish parents, sponsors, and the entire congregation to take the sponsorships and responsibility for the baptized children in all earnestness.

We admonish the servants of the Word to proclaim in full the treasure as well as the obligation of Baptism to all baptized members. The pastors are urged in particular to testify in all earnestness to those who are indifferent or are in danger of lapsing that they are still under the promise and the obligation of their Baptism and that those who are not found as living members in Christ are hastening to an eternal death.

We plead with all in the words of Luther in the Preface to his booklet on Baptism: "O my dear Christians, let us not become so indifferent toward such unspeakably great gifts. For Baptism is our only comfort and the only entrance to all the divine treasures and communion of saints. God help us! Amen." F. E. M.