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Table of Contents

The Trinity in the Bible	195
Robert W. Jenson	
Should a Layman Discharge the Duties of the Holy Ministry?	207
William C. Weinrich	
Center and Periphery in Lutheran Ecclesiology	231
Charles J. Evanson	
Martin Chemitz's Use of the Church Fathers in His Locus on Justification	271
Carl C. Beckwith	
Syncretism in the Theology of Georg Calixt, Abraham Calov and Johannes Musäus	291
Benjamin T. G. Mayes	
Johann Sebastian Bach as Lutheran Theologian	319
David P. Scaer	
Theological Observer	341
Toward a More Accessible <i>CTQ</i>	
Delay of Infant Baptism in the Roman Catholic Church	

Book Reviews	347
<i>Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: an Historical and Practical Theology.</i>	
By John W. Riggs	David P. Scaer
<i>The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a</i>	
<i>Multicultural Witness.</i> Edited by Albert L. Garcia and A.R.	
Victor Raj.....	John T. Pless
<i>The Arts and Cultural Heritage of Martin Luther.</i> Edited by Nils	
Holger Peterson et al.	John T. Pless
<i>Fundamental Biblical Hebrew and Fundamental Biblical Aramaic.</i> By	
Andrew H. Bartelt and Andrew E. Steinmann.....	Chad L. Bird
<i>Intermediate Hebrew Grammar.</i> By Andrew Steinmann..	
Chad L. Bird	Counted Righteous in Christ. By John Piper
Peter C. Cage	<i>The Contemporary Quest for Jesus.</i> By N. T. Wright, Charles R. Schulz
<i>The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and</i>	
<i>Theological Divide.</i> Edited by D. H. Williams	
Paul G. Alms	<i>Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition.</i> By Andrew Purves
.....	James Busher
<i>Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin.</i> By Kirby	
L. Koriath	D. Richard Stuckwisch
<i>Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization.</i>	
By Alvin J. Schmidt.....	James Busher
<i>Participating in God: Creation and Trinity.</i> By Samuel Powell	
.....	Timothy Maschke
<i>Doing Right and Being Good: Catholic and Protestant Readings in</i>	
<i>Christian Ethics.</i> Edited by David Oki Ahearn and Peter Gathje	
.....	John T. Pless
<i>The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes.</i>	
By Joe M. Kapolyo	Saneta Maiko
<i>Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism.</i>	
By Philip Benedict.....	Cameron MacKenzie
<i>The New Faithful: Why Young Christians Are Embracing Christian</i>	
<i>Orthodoxy.</i> By Colleen Carroll	
Armand J. Boehme	
 Indices for Volume 68	 381

Theological Observer

Toward a More Accessible CTQ

Information technology and the internet have made information more readily available than any time in history. Such technology can be a blessing and a curse (see James G. Neal, "Information Anarchy or Information Utopia?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* [December 9, 2005]). In order to serve the church, Concordia Theological Seminary, particularly the editorial staff of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* and the staff of Walther Library, have scanned the entire run of CTQ (1977-2004).

Articles, Theological Observers, and Book Reviews are available at <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/probono.php>. In the future, materials from CTQ's predecessor, *Springfielder*, will also be available. It is our hope that such will truly be *pro bono ecclesiae*.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Delay of Infant Baptism in the Roman Catholic Church

Among Roman Catholics the movement to delay or even deny baptism to infants has been organized around the commission assigned by the Vatican with providing baptismal ritual for adult converts, *Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RICA)*.¹ Impetus for this reconfiguration of baptism originated in with the Second Vatican Council.² In response the Sacred

¹For an overview of this controversy see Kurt Stasiak, *Return to Grace: A Theology for Infant Baptism* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996). Numbers in the text are to this book.

²*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (December 4, 1963) called for commissions to prepare new liturgical rites. Provisions were made for an adult catechumenate, revised adult baptismal rites (*Constitution*, III, 65-66) and rites for infant baptism with specified roles for parents and godparents (67). Local bishops were allowed to dictate the form and the age for administering confirmation (68, 69, 71).

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued *Pastoralis Actio* in 1983, which affirmed traditional teaching that John 3:5 required baptizing infants. Reasons for delaying baptism among Roman Catholic scholars were not all of one kind. One group, the Mature Adulthood School, preferred to move in the direction of traditional Baptist practice of administering the sacrament first at maturity. Another group, the Environmentalist School, took moderating view in favoring of baptizing infants whose parents show a sincere Christian commitment. This resembled Calvin's idea that children born to Christian parents were included by their birth in the covenant, but was more subjective requiring the priest to test their faith.³ In some cases baptism is best not administered to infants.⁴ Though this movement among Roman Catholics has not yet made serious inroads among Lutherans, to preserve the integrity of baptism some pastors have hesitated to baptize children where the assurance of their being given a Christians upbringing cannot be assured

In addition to *RICA* the Catholic Church established commissions for the Rite of Baptism for Children (*RBA*), Rite of Confirmation (*RC*), and Rite of Initiation for Children of Catechetical Age (*RCIC*) (11). Though the *RICA* proposals of 1972 were for the most part rejected by the *Pastoral Actis* of 1983, their arguments, especially the one that the early church did not know of infant baptism, continue to influence even those outside the Catholic Church. In making adult baptism the norm Aidan Kavanaugh, *RCIA*'s most prominent exponent, went so far as calling infant baptism "a benign abnormality." *RICA*'s proposals were hardly original. Rationalists in eighteenth century, Schleiermacher in the nineteenth, and Karl Barth in the twentieth also doubted the biblical support for infant baptism and like the *RICA* did not call for its outright abolition. New in the *RICA*'s proposal was its introduction of the argument that baptism, confirmation and eucharist were

³ See David P. Scaer, *Baptism, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 10 (Saint Louis: Luther Academy, 1999), 159-60.

⁴ Stasiak provides a detailed discussion of these positions (11-52).

initiatory sacraments were according to New Testament usage. Orthodox communions also administer these rites together, but administer them to children. The *RICA* proposal saw adults as the proper recipients of these rites.

The Mature Adulthood School adherents of *RICA* proposal have five principles at the core of their program. First, an indiscriminate baptism is unacceptable and best resolved by abandoning it (Stasiak, *Return to Grace*, 17-19; 51). Second, adult baptism is the norm and infant baptism is a benign abnormality. It has been administered because of "pastoral malfeasance, theological obsession, or the decline of faith among Christians into some degree of merely social conformity" (Stasiak, 21). Third, catechesis is "conversion therapy" and is necessarily prior to baptism. Fourth, baptism, confirmation, and the eucharist are initiatory rites and necessarily belong together (Stasiak, 23-26). Fifth, children are better enrolled in the catechumenate instead of being baptized (26-30).

Lutherans can find a common ground to Stasiak's objections to the *RICA* proposals to delay baptism. Enrolling children in the catechumenate hardly assures them salvation as baptism does—see Luther!⁵ *RICA* proponents argue that including children as catechumens does not violate their will as baptism does. This argument is somewhat specious, since enrollment in the catechumenate is also a violation of the child's will. Rare is that child who of his/her own free will becomes a catechumen or for that matter shows up for confirmation class. The real problem with the *RICA* proposals is the fate of children denied baptism, who then die. Having fallen from grace and gone into its own limbo, *limbus infantium* is for Roman Catholics no longer an operative doctrine. Lutherans have never had this unacceptable option. *RICA* does allow for the emergency baptism for infants in danger of death, a merciful practice not allowed by Calvin.⁶ But knowing which

⁵Among recent studies one of the best, if not the best, is Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁶See Scaer, *Baptism*, 164.

child will be alive tomorrow (how about SIDS?) requires omniscience, a divine attribute not shared with us mortals. Every pastor knows of a critically sick child given an emergency baptism who lives and a presumed healthy unbaptized child who dies. What kind of certainty does a certificate of enrollment in the catechumenate give to grieving parents?

The Rite of Baptism for Children, which provided a core for the Environmentalist School, also opposes indiscriminate baptism, but allows for infants to be baptized where an environment for developing child's faith is in place. Here the motives of the parents must be ascertained before baptizing their children (Stasiak, 34).⁷ Those involved with The Rite of Baptism for Children suggested twelve as an ideal age for baptism.

The Roman Church resolved the issue in favor of infant baptism by issuing the 1980 *Instruction on Infant Baptism* (Stasiak, 53-57). The child no less than the adult is to be deprived of the eternal life promised in this sacrament; however, proposals for denying and delaying infant baptism persist among Roman Catholic liturgical scholars. Stasiak is so opposed to the *RICA* proposals in making adult baptism normative that he parses every argument for denying or delaying baptism to infants. His arguments are worth reading.

Faced with a radical change in church practice, Stasiak is defensive, but he does offer a theology for infant baptism (113-212) from which Lutherans can benefit. He sees infant baptism as the normal means for families to initiate their children into the mysteries of the Christian faith. It expresses our divine adoption. Baptizing children is normative in a sense that the baptism of adults cannot be. "The small helpless child at the font with new life in it, not the successful preacher in the

⁷ Something similar may be afoot in the rite of "Holy Baptism" in *Lutheran Worship* [p. 220] where pledges are required of sponsors and parents. These were not found in Luther's rites, but originated in the Enlightenment.

pulpit, is the typical Christian" (Stasiak, 114). This about says it all—at least for a Lutheran. At baptism we are all infants. At least this is what Jesus wants. "Except you become as little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God."

The chief *RICA* objection to infant baptism is its definition of baptism as the sacrament of faith (Stasiak, 161). On the surface Lutherans seem to agree, but differences arise over how faith is understood. Luther saw baptism as primary, but he also held to the *fides infantium*. For Lutherans baptism creates the faith it requires.⁸ In any event baptism is better understood not as the sacrament of faith, but of grace, since God is at work in it. Defining baptism as the sacrament of faith certainly fits a Zwinglian understanding of it. Stasiak along with traditional Roman Catholicism does not and perhaps cannot come around to Luther's view; however, he moves in this direction in seeing faith is the gift of grace for both infants and adults (162-169). "Baptism is the pledge and promise that infants are delivered from original sin—not by slow trickles of water, but by the flood of grace that rushes forth as one is transformed and brought into the family of God and the Church" (174). Luther's greatest Reformation enemies turned out to be the Anabaptists. At least in the matter of baptism the Roman Catholics were allies in not seeing infant baptism as inferior to adult baptism. Certainly Lutherans and Roman Catholics want to remain allies in understanding that infant baptism is the pristine form of this sacrament.

Sacramental integrity is an issue in our discussions about who may receive the holy communion in our churches, but barriers have less of a place at the font, especially when children are concerned. Regulations for administering baptism to infants have historically have been attached to the Lord's Supper. Ancient catholic practice knows *closed communion*, but not a *closed baptismal font*. We hold that children brought to Jesus become God's children in a way that they were not before. From out of the formless and misinformed crowds that surrounded Jesus came the parents who brought their children

⁸See Karl Brinkel, *Die Lehre Luthers von der fides infantium bei der Kindertaufe* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958).

to him to be blessed. Many of the parents who bring their children to our fonts are often hardly any different. Neither group would have met the criteria set forth by *RICA* in providing a proper Christian environment for their nurture.

Luther in the *Large Catechism* pointed to theologians who as infants became Christians in baptism. "Since God has confirmed baptism through the gift of His Holy Spirit, as we have perceived in some of the fathers, such as St. Bernard, Gerson, John Hus, and others, and since the holy Christian church will abide until the end of the world, our adversaries must acknowledge that infant baptism is pleasing to God. For he can never be in conflict with himself, support lies and wickedness, or give his grace and Spirit for such ends. This is the best and strongest proof for the simple and unlearned." Baptism in medieval Europe was indiscriminate by *RICA* standards, but this was at the heart of Luther's argument.

No one but no one has ever suggested going through hospital nurseries and baptizing all the infants. But more pleasing to God is the nurse who baptizes an infant in peril of death than a clergyman who denies baptism to a child whose parents do not meet *RICA* standards. Anecdotal evident is never by itself convincing, but Luther proceeded precisely in this way. In the old USSR many grandmothers secretly brought their grandchildren to priests for baptism, when such infant baptisms were proscribed. Several infants baptized by my father without the knowledge of one of the parents not only remained Christians but became pastors. Most pastors have similar accounts which they will treasure as long as they live. If a near-perfect environment and commitment were necessary for baptism, then we might never baptize anyone and we ourselves would have been excluded. This is what the Parable of the Sower is all about. Environment does not dictate where the seed is to be planted.

David P. Scaer