

# For the Life of the World

## Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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### **The Baptismal Life**

By Arthur A. Just Jr.

### **Baptism Is Not Simple Water Only**

By David P. Scaer

### **Dr. Luther on the Pattern of Holy Baptism: Like Children Dying and Rising in Christ**

By Travis J. Loeslie

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**PUBLISHER**  
Dr. Lawrence R. Rast Jr.  
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Jayne E. Sheaffer

**PRODUCTION COORDINATOR**  
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# Dr. Luther on the Pattern of Holy Baptism: Like Children Dying and Rising in Christ

By Travis J. Loeslie



*Finley Miller is wearing a Baptism gown made in 1911 for his great-great-uncle's Baptism.*

## Jesus instituted Baptism for His Church:

“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” (Matt. 28:18). He gave this glorious gift starting from the littlest ones among us—the babies. Jesus’ words remind us, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them” (Matt. 19:14). The smallest babies set the norm for who is baptized in the church. Dr. Luther taught that the norm for Baptism is the infant simply receiving from God’s mercy. We will consider how Luther defended infant baptism and infant faith and what light this sheds on the daily pattern of our lives before God.

### I. Luther Defended Infant Baptism Against the Anabaptists.

Luther struggled to maintain the biblical doctrine that babies are to be baptized and that they are Jesus’ greatest examples of faith as pure passivity and receptivity before God. Some of Luther’s greatest opponents were called Anabaptists (Greek for re-baptizers). They thought that the Baptism of an infant could never be enough to save. On some doctrinal points, when they heard Luther preach, they tried to align themselves with Luther. Luther could preach the Gospel so sweetly and pointed out papal error so clearly, how could anyone object? But other times, these Anabaptist leaders went back to their posts and tried to echo Luther’s call for reform in the church. Instead of upholding the biblical doctrine at all costs, the Anabaptists (or Luther’s favorite name for them: enthusiasts) attacked Infant Baptism. They said only those who could make a decision to be re-baptized and live lives of utter obedience to Christ were truly Christian. They attacked Jesus’ institution and turned the Gospel promise of Baptism into a law. These Anabaptists gave

Luther the grounds to confess the Gospel and sacraments more clearly after 1525 and into Luther’s mature years.

In a treatise of 1528, *Concerning Rebaptism*, Luther humorously compares the Anabaptists to Thuringian bears. He says:

In fact they remind us of what one brother in the forest of Thuringia did to the other. They were going through the woods with each other when they were set upon by a bear who threw one of them beneath him. The other brother sought to help and

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**The Bible speaks of infants believing, even though they may not speak or give immediate evidence of understanding. Luther points to Jesus’ own words, “The kingdom of heaven belongs to children” (Matt. 19:14). His invincible example is John the Baptist, who leaped in Elizabeth’s womb at the presence of Jesus (Luke 1:41). So, infants can have faith!**

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**Luther diagnosed a faulty view of faith in the Anabaptists. They were making faith into a human work which only grown-ups and older children could do. Faith became a performance of the will. The Anabaptists looked at the infants and decided that they could not believe. To this, Luther said, “Nein!”**

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struck at the bear, but missed him and grievously wounded the brother under the bear. So these enthusiasts....They take a severe stand against the pope, but they miss their mark and murder more terribly the Christendom under the pope. For if they would permit baptism and the sacrament of the altar to stand as they are, Christians under the pope might yet escape with their souls and be saved....But now, when the sacraments are taken from them, they will most likely be lost, since even Christ himself is thereby taken away. (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition [AE], Vol. 40, p. 233)

Luther learned to be nervous about the Anabaptist bears knocking on papal heads. They did not have the same concern for Christ’s words and the sacraments that He had given. They were not convinced as surely as Luther was that Christ Himself had instituted Baptism to be received not just by capable adults, but by everyone in need of God’s salvation.

Luther diagnosed a faulty view of faith in the Anabaptists. They were making faith into a human work which only grown-ups and older children could do. Faith became a performance of the will. The Anabaptists looked at the infants and decided that they could not believe. To this, Luther said, “Nein!” The Bible speaks of infants believing, even though they may not speak or give immediate evidence of understanding. Luther points to Jesus’ own words, “The kingdom of heaven belongs to children” (Matt. 19:14). His invincible example is John the Baptist, who leaped in Elizabeth’s womb at the presence of Jesus (Luke 1:41). So, infants can have faith!

## II. The Word Does It!

For Luther, the point is not that infants have faith. God creates faith where and when He pleases. The Church has never baptized on the basis of faith. We baptize because Jesus said so. Luther’s Anabaptist opponents cannot prove that infants *do not* have faith. Infant faith is a great and precious mystery of God’s handiwork. It is not on display for man to judge if it is there or not. Of course,



*The Rev. Kyle Krueger (CTS 2010), Emmanuel (Soest), Fort Wayne, Ind., baptized Chandler Knutson in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Lutheran Hospital. Chandler is the son of CTS student Peter Knutson (CTS 2015) and his wife, Nicole.*

infants may believe! When God speaks, it is so, whether He is speaking creation into existence, raising Jesus from His Easter tomb or giving faith to an infant in Baptism. The Bible never calls infant faith impossible, for the Word of God is always powerful (Is. 55:11).

Luther could go so far to contend that “...the most certain form of baptism is

child baptism” (AE 40:244). Adults may deceive, like Judas deceived our Lord:

But a child cannot deceive. He comes to Christ in baptism, as John came to him, and as the children were brought to him, that his word and work might be effective in them, move them, and make them holy, because his Word and work cannot be without fruit. (AE 40:244)

## III. Baptism Indicates a Life of Daily Dying and Rising.

Luther’s defense of infant faith and Infant Baptism sheds light on what Baptism indicates for the pattern of our lives. We have many modern day Anabaptists who would steal the comfort of Baptism from our children, or cause doubt to Baptism’s daily significance for us in Christ’s Church. God wants to render us, even the busiest and most capable adults, into little children who can only receive the righteousness of Christ from God Himself. In the midst of our ordinary routine of cooking meals, cleaning, caring for kids and life with family, God has a pattern for the life of the baptized. In the Small Catechism, the fourth part on Baptism says that Baptism indicates a daily death and resurrection. Daily the old man is sentenced to a death by drowning. He is to be killed with all of our sins and evil desires. A new man rises from the watery grave to live in righteousness and purity before God. Our lives start resembling the pattern of Jesus’ life. This is good! Death and resurrection—this is the pattern of our new life (Rom. 6:4). This is what Baptism indicates for us every new day and moment that we are given in Jesus Christ. God keep us now in the eternal promises of His Word. Amen. 🏰

*Travis J. Loeslie (Travis.Loeslie@ctsfw.edu) received his M.Div. degree from Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., in 2012 and currently serves as the graduate assistant for the Exegetical Theology Department at CTS. In April, he received his call to serve as pastor of St. Peter Lutheran Church, Lester Prairie, Minn.*

