

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE IN THE WOMB, BAPTISM, AND INFANT FAITH

English District Lifeline Team

“We don’t baptize babies. We do believers’ baptisms only.”

If you’re friends of one or more Baptists, you may have heard something along these lines. You might not have known how to respond. Why *do* we baptize babies in the Lutheran Church? Do babies believe? How can babies believe? If they can’t believe, how could they belong to the kingdom of God in any way?

Luther addresses this issue in a sermon on Matthew 8:1-13, the healing of the centurion’s servant. At that time, certain Christians who practiced infant baptism believed that young children saved in Baptism were saved not through their own but through another person’s faith. Luther cautions that some who believe this point to the fact that the servant is healed through the faith of his master rather than his own.

As we might expect, Luther points us to the Scriptures that teach the necessity of personal faith for salvation. The Scriptures teach: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). “The righteous shall live by his faith” (Romans 1:17). “Whoever believes in [Christ] will not perish but has eternal life” (John 3:16). “Whoever believes in [Christ] will not be judged, but whoever does not believe is judged already” (John 3:18). According to Luther, these passages make it clear that “each must believe for himself, and he cannot be helped by another person’s faith without his own faith.”

With clear passages of Scripture, what do we say concerning children who haven’t developed reasoning abilities and cannot believe for themselves? After all, the Scriptures also say, “Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the preaching of God’s Word” (Romans 10:17).

We must give a better answer to this question and prove that infants themselves believe and have their own faith. If we can’t do this, says Luther, “then...we [must] immediately desist—the sooner the better—and never baptize a child, so that we do not mock and slander the blessed majesty of God with such tomfoolery and trickery which has nothing behind it.”

Our answer, from the Scriptures, must be that infants can be given the gift of faith and are baptized and saved through their personal faith in Jesus Christ. This takes place through the working of the Holy Spirit in the Word preached before and at Baptism, that same Word connected and combined with the waters of Baptism. Additionally, like the centurion, it is the faith of others through which God works to give faith to our children. Sponsors at Baptism bring the child to Baptism, intercede for them, instruct them throughout their life, etc. Through their faith lived out, Christians bring others to faith. It isn’t this faith that ultimately saves the child, only their personal and explicit faith can do that. But it is true that the faith of others brings us into a relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We cannot lean on our own understanding or experience in a matter of such importance. Faith is not something you gain the ability to conjure up in yourself as you progress through the stages of human development. Faith is a gift of God, not a result of works (Ephesians 2). Unless you have this faith, being born from above, you cannot see or enter the kingdom of God (John 3). And yet, Christ says of infants (the Gk. term can refer to a fetus, child, baby, or infant), "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:16). How can a person possess the kingdom of God without faith? Answer: They can't! This means that those little infants that were being brought to Jesus are just the kind of people in whose hearts He desires to create and sustain faith.

Lutherans practice believers' baptism. We trust our Lord when he says that the kingdom of God belongs to even infants believing in him. We trust the Holy Spirit when He causes David to write, "You are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God" (Psalm 22:9-10).

On that first Palm Sunday, there were children crying out to Christ in the temple saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David." They said this of their Messiah. Children confessed the truth, and the chief priests and scribes were indignant. The men who made a living studying the Torah didn't get it, but the children did. And when the Scribes asked Jesus if he heard what these children were saying, Jesus replied, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?"

We not only oppose abortion because it is murder, the taking of an innocent human life, but because it is the stamping out of a human being yet to be baptized. Abortion is the destruction of a child that may not have had the chance to hear the Word through which saving faith comes. That child may not have heard the Word, the faithful hymns and preaching, the household prayers and reading of Scripture of their parents while in their mother's womb. These are the gifts God has given His Church on earth through which the Holy Spirit works faith where and when He pleases. When Christians hinder children from receiving these gifts because they deny that children can have faith, that is a terrible tragedy. When we rob children of these gifts by taking them from their mother's womb through abortion and methods of contraception that create an environment in the womb that prevents children from surviving, it is an even greater tragedy.

And so we pray. We pray for the expectant mothers, their children, and our world that allows for the destruction of children. We make intercessions each time a child is brought to Holy Baptism. We pray that the child be given saving faith through the powerful working of God. We pray that the parents, sponsors, and people of the congregation would walk alongside the child being baptized and instruct them in the faith through their doctrine and life. And we trust that our Lord hears the prayers of those declared righteous through faith. We trust that God makes people trust in Him, even from their mother's breast. We trust that God works through His Word and Sacraments to keep us firm in His Word and faith until we die, regardless of our level of human development or cognitive abilities.