

▸ Martin Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism: A Letter to Two Pastors* (1528)

Outline by Jill Ellis (Concordia Univ. Irvine, Spring 1997)

- I. ▸ **Balthasar Hubmaier has included my name among others in his blasphemous booklet on rebaptism, as if I shared his perverted views.**
 - A. ▸ But I have comforted myself with the thought that no one, either friend or foe, would believe such a transparent lie as his.
 - B. ▸ My reputation is sufficiently safeguarded by the number of my sermons wherein I have made known abundantly my faith concerning infant baptism.

- II. ▸ **Since there has not been much occasion here for it, I have not, for my part, given much thought to these baptizers.**
 - A. ▸ But it serves you right as papists.
 - B. ▸ You will not suffer the Gospel, so you will have to endure these devil's rebels.
 - C. ▸ Still it is not right that these miserable folk should be so lamentably murdered, burned, and tormented to death.
 1. ▸ We should allow everyone to believe what he wills.
 2. ▸ If his faith be false, he will be sufficiently punished in eternal hell-fire.
 3. ▸ Why then should we martyr these people also in this world, if their error be in faith alone and they are not guilty of rebellion or opposition to the government?
 - D. ▸ In a sense you are yourselves Anabaptists!! (Many among you rebaptize in Latin someone who has previously been baptized in German!)
 1. ▸ For we know well enough that the pope recognizes it as a baptism when midwives administer emergency baptism, even though it be in German.
 2. ▸ The pope has never commanded that baptism should be only in Latin and not in another language.
 - E. ▸ You favor rebaptism, so you get plenty of Anabaptists (though you will not tolerate them). And yet you want to be rebaptizers in opposition to your own teacher and master, the pope.
 - F. ▸ I will not speak further of this, but rather help you by appearing to be a papist again and flattering the pope.

- III. ▸ **In the first place I hear and see that such rebaptism is undertaken by some in order to spite the pope and to be free of any taint of the Antichrist.**
 - A. ▸ In the same way, foes of the Sacrament believe only in bread and wine, in opposition to the pope, thinking thereby really to overthrow the papacy.
 1. ▸ On that basis we would have to disown the whole of Scripture and the office of the ministry, which, of course, we have received from the papacy.
 2. ▸ We would also have to make a new Bible.

3. ▶ Then, also, we would have to disavow the Old Testament, so that we would be under no obligation to the unbelieving Jews.
- B. ▶ Christ Himself came upon the errors of Scribes and Pharisees among the Jewish people, but He did *not* on that account reject everything they had and thought (Matt. 23:3).
 1. ▶ There is much that is Christian and good under the papacy; indeed everything that is Christian and good is to be found there and has come to us from this source.
 - a. ▶ For instance, we confess that in the papal church there are the true Holy Scriptures, true Baptism, the true Sacrament of the Altar, the true Keys to the forgiveness of sins, the true office of the ministry, the true Catechism in the form of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the articles of the Creed.
 - b. ▶ Similarly, the pope admits that we too, though called heretics, have the Holy Scriptures, Baptism, etc.
 - C. ▶ As a veritable Antichrist must conduct himself against Christendom, so the pope acts toward us: he persecutes us, curses us, bans us, pursues us, burns us, puts us to death.
 1. ▶ Christians need indeed to be truly baptized and right members of Christ if they are to win the victory in death over against the Antichrist.
 2. ▶ We do not rave as do the "rebellious spirits," so as to reject *everything* that is found in the papal church.
 - a. ▶ For then we would cast out even Christendom from the temple of God, and all that it contained of Christ.
 - b. ▶ But when we oppose and reject the pope, it is because he does not keep to these treasures of Christendom which he has inherited from the Apostles.
 - c. ▶ Instead, he makes additions of the devil and does not use these treasures for the improvement of the temple.
 - D. ▶ So it is of no consequence when these Anabaptists say, "Whatever is of the pope is wrong," or, "Whatever is in the papacy we must have and do differently," thinking thereby to prove themselves the foremost enemy of the Antichrist.
 1. ▶ They do not realize that they thus give him most help, that they hurt Christendom most and that they deceive themselves.
 2. ▶ So they attack what no one yet has attacked, in order that they might have the honor of being first.
 3. ▶ But the honor turns to disgrace, for they attack the temple of God and miss the Antichrist who sits therein.
- IV. ▶ **Again, those who depend on such arguments say that they know nothing of their baptism, and exclaim, "How do you know you have been baptized? You believe people who say you have been baptized. But you should believe God himself and not people, and you must be sure of your baptism."**
 - A. ▶ For were I to reject everything which I have not seen or heard, I would indeed not have much left – either of faith or of love, either of spiritual or of temporal things.

1. ▶ I might reply, “My friend, how do you know that this man is your father, this woman is your mother? You cannot trust people, you must be sure of your own birth.”
 - a. ▶ In this manner all children would forthwith be free from obedience to the commandment of God, “Thou shalt honor thy mother and thy father.”
 - b. ▶ “I can’t believe people so I must be born again so I can see for myself, else I will not obey them.”
 - c. ▶ By acting in this way, God’s command would be made null and void.
2. ▶ Then, too, I might refuse to be subject to *any* lord or master, explaining that I am not sure he was born a prince, because I did not see it, but had to accept popular opinion.
 - a. ▶ So I will be a free man, pay no attention to the command of God, and have no authority above me.
3. ▶ Indeed I might then claim that Holy Scripture meant nothing, Christ meant nothing.
 - a. ▶ For I have not seen nor felt these things. I have only heard them from people.
- B. ▶ You reply: “Have you not yourself taught that we should obey God and not man?”
 1. ▶ Are we to obey God when he commands us to honor parents and superiors?
 - a. ▶ If you say “Yes,” I would ask, “How then do you know who they are, since you don’t want to believe men?”
 2. ▶ When we teach that we are not to obey men, we mean, of course, that they are speaking entirely for themselves, and God is not in their minds.
 - a. ▶ Who would call that “a human teaching” which is presented by God through man?
 - b. ▶ When anyone bears witness to the work of God, it does not mean believing men but God.
- C. ▶ If now you ask why I believe this man and this woman to be my parents, I would reply:
 1. ▶ First, I am sure that I am a work of God and am a human being, wherefore I have to have a mother and a father and am not sprung from a rock.
 2. ▶ This is confirmed by the commandment “Thou shalt honor father and mother.”
 3. ▶ Thirdly, it is a work of God that no one other than these two in all the world in his own name have taken me as a natural child.
- D. ▶ The reason that God speaks in Rom. 13:1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” is that I might believe in him who is my prince or lord.
 1. ▶ I conclude from this Word that I must have a superior and I must be a subject.
 2. ▶ Secondly, since all the world testifies and says this is he and everyone recognizes him as such and no one denies that this is an evident work of God, I must believe such testimony.
 3. ▶ Thirdly, it is an evident work of God that no one else considers me as his subject.
- E. ▶ “Wait,” you say, “I will test you. Why do you not now believe in the pope as your lord? Instead you make him the Antichrist though all the world testifies he is the head of Christendom, and that he has rule.”
 1. ▶ The Word of God clearly tells me that parents and government exist, and that I should and must have parents and government.
 - a. ▶ There is no Word of God that says there is a pope, and that I must have a pope and be subject to him.

- b. ▶ There is no papacy which can be considered the work of God.
 - 2. ▶ Though many bear witness to him, it is not unanimous and complete.
 - a. ▶ The Eastern church bore testimony against the papacy, opposed it.
 - b. ▶ Many subjects of the pope himself have been burned at the stake for their opposition.
 - c. ▶ His rule has never been accepted unopposed.
 - 3. ▶ The papacy is not a work of God.
 - a. ▶ He persecutes the Gospel and Christians.
 - b. ▶ He makes a sacrifice out of the Sacrament, faith out of works and works out of faith.
 - 4. ▶ Since on all three accounts the papacy is deficient, we must judge it as a pure human invention, which is not worthy of belief and is in no way comparable to the institutions of parenthood and government.
 - F. ▶ Baptism is a work of God, not invented by man but commanded by God and witnessed to by the Gospel.
 - 1. ▶ There are people who can witness to the fact that you have been baptized.
 - 2. ▶ You are reckoned among Christians, admitted to the Sacrament, and to the use of all Christian privileges.
 - 3. ▶ This would not be the case if you had not been baptized and all were not sure of it.
 - 4. ▶ Herewith I have sufficiently proved that no one ought to have doubts of his Baptism.
- V. ▶ **I have read that they base their faith on this verse, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16]. This they interpret to mean that no man should be baptized before he believes.**
- A. ▶ If they cannot venture to baptize before they are certain that the one to be baptized believes, how can they ever know for certain?
 - 1. ▶ For whoever bases baptism on faith and baptizes on the chance and not on certainty that faith is present does nothing better than he who baptizes him who has no faith.
 - 2. ▶ Unbelief and uncertain belief are one and the same thing, and both are contrary to the verse.
 - B. ▶ You say, “I know that he confesses, that he believes,” etc.
 - 1. ▶ The text does not say, “He who confesses,” but “He who believes.”
 - 2. ▶ To have his confession is not to know his faith.
 - C. ▶ I say the same thing about the baptized one who receives his Baptism on his faith. For he is not sure of his own faith.
 - 1. ▶ Baptizing without end would result.
 - D. ▶ Neither the baptizer nor the baptized can maintain this position, for both are uncertain of their faith.
- VI. ▶ **When they say, “Children cannot believe,” how can they be sure of that?**
- A. ▶ There are Scripture passages that tell us that children may and can believe, though they do not speak or understand.
 - 1. ▶ Ps. 72 describes how the Jews offered their sons and daughters to idols, shedding innocent blood.

- a. ▶ If it was innocent blood, then the children have to be considered pure and holy.
- b. ▶ They could not have been such without the Spirit, without faith.
- 2. ▶ St. John was a child in his mother's womb [Luke 1:41] but had faith.
- 3. ▶ I am giving proof that your foundation for rebaptism is uncertain and false, inasmuch as you cannot prove that there may not be faith in children.
- 4. ▶ Why then are you so bold as to discard the first baptism, since you do not and cannot know that it is meaningless?
- B. ▶ Christ commands us to bring the children to him. In Matt. 19:14 he embraces them, kisses them, and says that theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 - 1. ▶ The misled spirits like to fend this off by saying, "Christ is not speaking of children, but of the humble."
 - a. ▶ But the text clearly says that they brought to him "children" – not "the humble."
 - b. ▶ Christ does not say to let the humble come to him, but the children.
 - c. ▶ Christ reprimanded the disciples, not because they kept the humble away, but the *children*.
 - 2. ▶ Were not these children holy, he would indeed have given us a poor ideal with which to compare ourselves.
- C. ▶ Some want to take the force out of this text by saying that the Jewish children were circumcised. Therefore they were holy and could be brought to Christ, whereas our children are heathen, etc.
 - 1. ▶ But suppose there were also girls among these children who were brought to Jesus, and who were not circumcised?
 - a. ▶ It does not expressively say that they were boys only, so we cannot exclude girls, but must let it mean children of both sexes.
 - 2. ▶ Everybody knows that boys alone were subjected to circumcision, but that girls participated in its benefits also by virtue of the saying spoken to Abraham "I will be the God of thy descendants, and circumcision shall be a covenant between me and you and your descendants after you."
 - 3. ▶ Surely girls are the descendents of Abraham, and through this promise God is indeed their God, though they are not circumcised as are the boys.
 - 4. ▶ If they now believe that through the covenant of circumcision God accepts both boys and girls and is their God, why should he not also accept our children through the covenant of baptism?
- D. ▶ But, you say, He has not commanded the baptism of children, there is not reference to this in the writings or in the epistles.
 - 1. ▶ Neither has He specifically commanded the baptism of adults – not of men or of women. So we had better not baptize anybody!
 - 2. ▶ He has commanded us to baptize all heathens; children constitute a great part of the heathen.
 - 3. ▶ We read in Acts and the Epistles of St. Paul how whole households were baptized, and children are surely a good part of "the household."

VII. ▶ **Even if they could establish that children are without faith when they are baptized, I would want to know their reason for rebaptizing when later on, faith or the confession of faith is supposed to be present.**

- A. ▶ You say it is not a proper baptism. What does it matter if it is still a baptism?
 - 1. ▶ It was a correct baptism in itself – regardless of whether it was received rightly.
 - 2. ▶ If a thing in itself is correct, you do not have to repeat it – even though it was not correctly received. You correct what was wrong and do not have to do the entire thing over.
 - a. ▶ Abuse does not change the nature of a substance; indeed, it proves the substance.
 - b. ▶ There can be no abuse unless the substance exists.
 - 3. ▶ When, ten years after baptism, faith appears, what then is the need of a second baptism, if baptism was correctly administered in all respects?
 - 4. ▶ When the faith comes, the baptism is complete.
- B. ▶ It is as if a girl married a man reluctantly and altogether without a wife's affection for the man. She is before God hardly to be considered his true wife. But after two years she gains affection for him.
 - 1. ▶ Would a second engagement be required, a second wedding be celebrated, as if she had not previously been a wife, so that the earlier betrothal and wedding were in vain?
 - 2. ▶ You would be considered a fool if you believed that, especially since everything is in order now.
- C. ▶ Likewise, God provides for the preaching of the Ten Commandments.
 - 1. ▶ But since some people only grasp them with their ears, maybe even improperly, they are not Ten Commandments?
 - 2. ▶ God ought hence to issue ten new commandments in place of the former?
 - 3. ▶ It can't be enough that people let themselves be rightly converted and give heed to the original Ten Commandments?

VIII. ▶ **There is, however, a devil who promotes confidence in works among the Anabaptists.**

- A. ▶ The Anabaptists are urging on to a work, so that when the people are baptized they may have confidence that everything is complete and right.
 - 1. ▶ In reality they pay little attention to faith, but seem only to praise it.
 - a. ▶ If they did not rely on works but earnestly sought for faith, they would not dare rebaptize.
 - b. ▶ The never changing Word of God, once spoken in the first baptism, ever remains standing.
 - 2. ▶ It is the devil's masterpiece when he can get someone to compel the Christian to leave the righteousness of faith for a righteousness of works.
 - a. ▶ For whoever permits himself to be rebaptized rejects his former faith and righteousness, and is guilty of sin and condemnation.
 - b. ▶ The Galatians have severed themselves from Christ [Gal. 5:4], even making Christ a servant of sin, when they circumcised themselves.

- B. ▶ We see among the Anabaptists the natural fruit of the devil, namely, that some of them on account of rebaptism desert wife and child, house and land, and will recognize no authority.
 - 1. ▶ St. Paul teaches that whoever does not provide for his own has disowned his faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8).
 - 2. ▶ And in 1 Cor. 7:13 St. Paul expresses his desire that a wife who believes should not divorce an unbelieving husband.
 - 3. ▶ Our spirit not only allows but commands that every estate should remain and be held in honor, and that faith should exercise itself peacefully in love, so that no uprising or complaint could fairly be charged to our teaching.
- C. ▶ This refutes, too, their position that baptism does not avail in case the priest or he who baptizes did not have faith.
 - 1. ▶ Even if St. Peter baptized, no one would know for certain if in that moment he stood in faith or in doubt.
 - 2. ▶ Such arguments led the Donatists to separate themselves and to rebaptize, when they saw how unholy some were who preached and baptized.
 - a. ▶ They began to base baptism on the holiness of men.
 - b. ▶ Christ based it on his Word and commandment.
 - 3. ▶ The Anabaptists are offended that any rogue may bring Christ into the bread of the Sacrament, as if all the world were sure that they themselves have faith and are completely holy.
 - a. ▶ We recall that St. John was not averse to hearing the Word of God from Caiaphas and pays attention to his prophecy.
 - b. ▶ Moses and the people of Israel received the prophecy of the godless Balaam as a Word from God [Num. 24:17].
 - c. ▶ So also St. Paul recognized the heathen poets Aratus and Epimenides and honored their saying (as a Word of God).
 - d. ▶ And Christ bids us hear the godless Pharisees in the seat of Moses, though they are godless teachers.
- D. ▶ Still we must admit that the enthusiasts have the Scriptures and the Word of God in other doctrines.
 - 1. ▶ Whoever hears it from them and believes will be saved.
 - 2. ▶ (even though Anabaptist teachers are unholy and blasphemers of Christ)

IX. ▶ We are however persuaded by many good reasons to hold that child baptism is right and that children do believe.

- A. ▶ First, because child baptism derives from the Apostles and has been practiced since the days of the Apostles.
 - 1. ▶ We cannot oppose it, but must let it continue, since no one has yet been able to prove that in child baptism children do not believe or that such baptism is wrong.
 - 2. ▶ For even if I were not sure that they believed, yet for my conscience's sake I would have to let them be baptized.

- a. ▶ For if baptism is right and useful and brings the children to salvation, and then I did away with it, then I would be responsible for all the children who were lost because they were unbaptized.
 - b. ▶ If baptism is not right, without value or help to the children, then I would be guilty of no greater sin than the Word of God had been spoken in and his sign given in vain.
 - c. ▶ God would forgive me because I had done it out of ignorance and fear.
- B. ▶ No heresy endures to the end, but always, as St. Peter says, soon comes to light and is revealed as disgraceful. So St. Paul mentions Jannes and Jambres and their like [II Tim. 3:8], whose folly is finally plain to all.
- 1. ▶ Were child baptism now wrong, God would certainly not have permitted it to continue so long, nor let it become so universally and thoroughly established in all Christendom, but it would at some time have gone down in disgrace.
 - 2. ▶ The fact that the Anabaptists now dishonor it does not mean anything final or injurious to it.
- C. ▶ It is likewise the work of God that, during all the time children were being baptized, . . .
- 1. ▶ He had given great and holy gifts to them,
 - 2. ▶ He enlightened and strengthened them with the Holy Spirit and understanding of the Scripture, [and]
 - 3. ▶ He accomplished great things in Christendom through these.
- D. ▶ If the first, or child, baptism were not right, it would follow that for more than a thousand years there was no baptism or any Christendom – which is impossible.
- 1. ▶ For over a thousand years, there were hardly any other but child baptisms.
 - 2. ▶ If this baptism is wrong, then for that long period Christendom would have been without baptism. And if it were without baptism it would not be Christendom.
- E. ▶ The words of St. Paul in 2 Thess. 2:4 concerning the Antichrist (that he shall sit in the temple of God) is in accord with our position.
- 1. ▶ If it is the temple of God, it is not a haunt of heretics but true Christendom which must truly have a baptism which is right beyond any doubt.
 - 2. ▶ We see and hear of no other than child baptism – whether under the pope, among the Turks, or in all the world.
- F. ▶ Since God has made a covenant with all heathen through the Gospel and ordained baptism as a sign thereof, who can exclude the children?
- 1. ▶ The old covenant and the sign of circumcision made the children of Abraham believe that they were, and were called the people of God according to his promise, “I will be the God of thy descendants” [Gen. 17:7].
 - 2. ▶ This new covenant and the sign must be much more effectual and make those a people of God who receive it.
- X. ▶ **In sum, the Anabaptists are too frivolous and insolent.**
- A. ▶ For they consider baptism not as a God-given ordinance or command, but as a human trifle (like many other customs under the papacy).

- B. ▶ If the Anabaptists at first had presented their idea with good arguments, they would not have misled or won many persons.
 - 1. ▶ But they have no substantial or certain arguments.
 - 2. ▶ They attract a great many people by using great, high sounding words of slander against baptism.
- C. ▶ We who know that baptism is a God-given thing instituted and commanded by God himself look not at its abuse by godless persons, but simply at God's ordinance.
 - 1. ▶ We find baptism in itself to be a holy, blessed, glorious, and heavenly thing.
 - 2. ▶ Baptism is to be held in honor with fear and trembling, just as it is reasonable and right to hold any other ordinance and command of God.
- D. ▶ Finally, I claim that if someone had not been baptized, but did not know it and firmly believed that he had been rightly baptized, that faith would be sufficient for him. For before God, he had what he believes.