

Why Do Many Evangelicals Find It So Difficult To Accept Infant Baptism

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During my past 9 years of pastoral ministry the discussion with Evangelicals that has resulted in the most confusion, tension, and conflict is most definitely the dialog over infant baptism. Otherwise stated, in my humble opinion there is nothing more offensive to our Evangelical brothers and sisters (those who believe that it is only proper to baptize those who are able to make a profession of faith) than the Lutheran view of infant baptism.

Now, for you lifelong Lutherans you may find this hard to believe, how a precious gift from God can cause such strain, but it is true that it does. My wife and I have unfortunately lost friendships over 'the infant baptism' talk. Furthermore, at one point in time I too was very indifferent towards the sacraments and rather antagonistic towards those that boldly cherished them. But you may ask, "Why the offense? What could possibly be so threatening about sprinkling water on a cute and helpless baby?"

In a previous article on Steadfast Lutherans titled, *There Are Two Perspectives On Delayed And Legalistic Baptisms*, I covered the basic confusion over the sacraments between many Lutherans and what I will call 'Credobaptist' Evangelicals. I stated,

"Which way is the arrow aimed when it comes to the sacraments? What? In other words, are the sacraments something that we do toward God as a way of showing our obedience OR are the sacraments the way that God shows His commitment to us and gives grace to us? Are the sacraments things that we observe in response to hearing the Gospel (i.e. fruits of faith) OR are the sacraments ways that God responds to our sinfulness with the Gospel; are they a result of His compassion and pursuit of sinners? Do the sacraments belong in our discussions on man's obedience OR do the sacraments belong in the discussion of God's justifying grace? Who does the verb in the sacraments?"

While these confusions are very prevalent in conversations with Credobaptist Evangelicals and may cause conversational tension, there is something that is not mentioned in the previous paragraph, something that is much more offensive and something that repeatedly upsets the theology of Credobaptist Evangelicals. That something is infant baptism itself; it is the 'infant' part that causes tension. I believe that the reason for strain is due to infant baptism being the quintessential picture of divine monergism. Monergism, as you know, is completely contrary to any and all free will theologies, thus the reason why infant baptism is so difficult for many Credobaptist Evangelicals to accept.

The most common criticism that I have heard against infant baptism is that it doesn't allow for the baby to make a 'decision' for Christ or a 'profession of faith.' (At this point we could devote our time to show how the tenets of the Enlightenment have tainted this view of faith, but that can be saved for another time.) Many will protest that it is unjust to baptize a baby

before the child can profess faith in Jesus and/or make a decision, therefore, one must wait until the baby reaches an older age.

So, why would it be unjust to baptize a baby before they are able to make their decision? Generally speaking, it is unjust in credobaptist theology because infant baptism infringes upon, violates, and overthrows the doctrine of free will; it takes the child's 'choice' in salvation away. To say that an baby is saved in infant baptism when no choice/decision/profession has been made comes across as extremely scandalous for theologies that embrace the doctrine of free will and it is very offensive towards the old Adam. The old Adam in all of us can't stand monergism and he especially can't stand the sacrament of infant baptism. The reason why, in infant baptism the old Adam has no room to play and exercise his supposed free will, but can only drown.

Advertently or inadvertently to guard the doctrine of free will, many Evangelical denominations and many Evangelical movements will postpone baptism until the child is able to make a choice. However, this rationale creates additional problems. How should one handle original sin and consider children when they sin between conception and their decision of faith? To counteract children's sinful nature from conception until the time they make a decision of faith, an age of accountability status is developed, thus granting the child a period of grace. The age of accountability status embraces that children below a specific age who perish are not held responsible for their sins because they were incapable of understanding wrong from right and were unable to comprehend Jesus' death on the cross. Furthermore, some Revivalistic and Pietistic traditions can also fall prey to this ideology. They will rightly baptize the child in the name of our Triune God, gifting the child faith and grace, but the baptism is only viewed as a grace that extends until the child can make a decision for Christ at a later point. At that point of decision, the decision then takes the place of the child's baptism as the location of assurance. Both the Pietist's view and the Evangelical's view are ways that attempt to: protect free will theology and avoid the divine monergistic qualities of baptismal regeneration.

So is infant baptism really that radical? One needs to keep in mind that infant baptism is not some rogue theology that is inconsistent with the rest of the scriptures. Take for example the miracles of Jesus. Individuals were not 'mostly' blind, but powerlessly blind from birth (e.g., Matthew 9). Individuals were not 'kind of' paralytic, but hopelessly and entirely paralyzed (e.g., Matthew 9). Individuals were not 'partly' leprous, but helplessly full of leprosy (e.g., Matthew 8). Individuals were not 'almost' dead, but dead-dead (e.g., John 11). These individuals are just like an infant, helpless. Yet in these miracles we see the power of the Word, a performative speech from Jesus, that speaks these miracles into existence. Jesus proclaims, "Let it be done to you! Stand up and walk! Be Cleansed! Come out!" The individuals, like an infant, contributed nothing to their healing. Just as the world was spoke into existence in Genesis, Christ spoke these healing miracles into existence. Furthermore, God's word still speaks faith into existence today (e.g., Romans 10:17). The Word is performative; the Word works faith and this is even true with infants.

As Lutherans we believe, teach, and confess that infant baptism does not work regeneration apart from faith (e.g., Mark 16:15-16, Romans 4:20-25). With that said, we also believe, teach, and confess that faith is not a product of the man's intellect, or a result of mankind's will, or conjured up by a person's arousing feelings. Faith is a gift, a gift worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word (e.g., Romans 10:17, Ephesians 2:8). Thus, Luther rightly taught that the

Word is in and with the water making baptism's efficacy entirely dependent on the Gospel promises, promises that are connected with the water (e.g. 1 Peter 3:21, Acts 2:38). Otherwise stated, because the Gospel is attached to baptism, baptism is an effective means through which the Holy Spirit works faith and gives grace to infants, apart from any works of righteousness that they do or may do (e.g., Titus 3:5).

As we converse with our dear Evangelical brothers and sisters on this subject, may we not forget that there is a silver lining. As we discuss infant baptism and its ramifications on free will theology may we boldly confess,

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want 'free-will' to be given to me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my 'free-will'; because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether He required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt. But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him." (Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will)

So why do many Evangelicals find it difficult to accept infant baptism? It is difficult for many to accept because it is bad news for the old Adam and presents a difficulty for decision/free will theology. In infant baptism faith cannot be misconstrued into an act of the free will—faith does not make baptism but receives its. With infant baptism salvation is most clearly seen as a gift of God descending to a helpless baby, rather than the old Adam using baptism as a token of his obedience. Alas, it is now very understandable why conversations on this subject will result in confusion, tension, and unfortunate conflict.

Regardless of the possible blowback due to our Lutheran baptismal theology, may we graciously esteem our most excellent Baptism as our daily attire in which we walk constantly, that we may always be found in the faith, for infant baptism is not only the quintessential picture of divine monergism, but is divine monergism—rich life-giving water with the Word that works faith, delivers forgiveness of sins, rescues us from the jaws of death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation making us God's own apart from any and all man-made contributions. In a very literally sense, via infant baptism, we do not wash ourselves but are washed by God. Praise be to God! May we and our Evangelical friends grow ever more appreciative of this great gift.

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