

On Believer's Baptism: Martin Luther and Menno Simons

Charles St-Onge, May 18, 2003

“But we’re all one in Christ Jesus, right? You baptize your way, we baptize His way...”

- Baptist Preacher Tony Campolo to a United Methodist Assembly

Introduction

The early 16th century saw the start of one of the greatest reformations of the western Christian church. In those turbulent times many Roman Catholic clerics found themselves at odds with their church, and at the center of attempts at reform. One of these clerics was Martin Luther, a German theology professor at the University of Wittenberg. Another was a Dutch priest by the name of Menno Simons. The former, Luther, was primarily concerned with removing the accretions under which the church of the day had buried the pure Gospel, that “the just shall live by faith”. Scripture, Luther believed, was the key to rooting out the doctrinal errors of the church, including the cult of the saints, indulgences, purgatory, and the sacrifice of the Mass. In short, Luther wanted to reemphasize the good news of our salvation by God through Christ. Menno Simons and many other radical reformers, in contrast, wanted a more anthropocentric reformation. Rather than correct the church using Scripture as a light to point out abuses, they wanted to use Scripture to reform the lives of Christians. The Roman church, reformers such as Simons taught, was corrupt in almost all respects. The Scriptures would enable the true Christian church to once more appear: a body of believers who were obedient in all respects to Jesus’ teachings. Central for Simons was the desire to see Christians live as Christ commanded them to live. Luther emphasized right belief; Simons centered on right practice.

One topic where the differences between magisterial reformers, such as Luther, and radical reformers, such as Simons, was most apparent was baptism. Luther centered his baptismal theology on the salvific promises of God. He stressed the forgiveness of sins received by baptism when the believer puts his or her trust in that promise. Simons, on the other hand, wanted to emphasize the obedience of the Christian in baptism. The Christian, Simons believed, shows the world their faithful obedience to God by being baptized. For Luther, infant baptism was a beautiful way of showing that our righteousness comes from God, and not from us. For Simons, infant baptism is out of the question. An infant is quite unable to demonstrate faithful obedience either by confessing their faith or by acting it out, and so it would clearly be a travesty to baptize them.

This paper compares a treatise on baptism written by each of these important 16th century church reformers. Luther wrote “On Rebaptism”¹ in response to two Roman Catholic priests who requested help dealing with the growth of re-baptizers, or “Anabaptists”, in their diocese. Luther wrote it in 1528. Simons wrote “Christian Baptism”² for a more general audience in 1539. He prefaced it with a letter to his “Latin readers”, possibly academics, and it seems to address officials of the government several times as well. Simons is primarily arguing against Roman Catholic theology, although Luther himself is mentioned once explicitly. A comparison of these two treatises will not only show how the baptismal theologies of these two reformers differed, but will also illustrate their different approaches to the Christian faith itself. First, the perspective of each reformer with regards to the Church of Rome will be presented. Second, their understandings of the role of Scripture in reformation will be considered. This will set the stage for a discussion of each reformer’s baptismal theology. Special attention will be paid to the reformers’ support or disapproval of infant baptism.

Their View of the Papacy and the Church of Rome

Martin Luther is well known for his vitriolic attacks on the papacy and papist theology in general. “Concerning Rebaptism” shows a decidedly different side of Luther; one where he comes to Rome’s, if not the pope’s, defense. Luther does reiterate his view that the Pope is the Antichrist. However, he uses this point to prove that the Church of Rome remains a part of Christendom. “We on our part confess that there is much that is Christian and good under the papacy;” writes Luther, “indeed everything that is Christian and good is to be found there and has come to us from this source.”³ Luther argues this using 2 Thessalonians 2:4, which says that the antichrist will be seated in the temple of God⁴. If the pope is indeed the antichrist, must not then the Church of Rome be the temple of God? Luther also points out that the evangelical churches have received from Rome both the Scriptures and the Office of the Ministry. This support of Rome comes early in Luther’s treatise for two reasons. First, Luther uses it to argue that the Anabaptists, of whom Simons is one, need not reject everything “Romish” simply because it is Roman. Second, Luther later on will appeal to the continued baptism of infants by Rome up to the 16th century as a support for the practice.

Simons, in contrast, has nothing good to say about Rome. He suggests that all the teachings of the Roman church have strayed from Scripture. Here it becomes clear that Simons’ approach to Christian reform is significantly different than Luther’s. Simons does not point to false doctrine as an indicator of how far Rome has strayed, but rather to the behavior of its adherents. He stresses that the church is “no assembly of unbelievers, carnal, or brazen sinners”⁵. He provides a string of scriptural passages – Gal 5:24, Col. 3:10, Phil. 2:4 to name a few – as proof of this. “Would that in very truth they were Christian,” Simons writes, “who assure themselves that they are Christian”⁶. By this he means *act* like a Christian, a theme that is repeated several times in his treatise. This sets up the underlying reason for Simons’ reforms: the church is no longer made up of those who keep Christ’s commands (John 13) and so must be completely changed. In contrast to Luther, Simons believes that the church hasn’t practiced true baptism for centuries⁷. One of the first things that must go, then, is infant baptism: the scriptural practice of believer’s baptism must be reinstated.

The Role of Scripture in Reformation

These two different understandings of the state of the Church of Rome lead Simons and Luther to different uses of Scripture in their reformation efforts. Luther stresses in his treatise that anything that is not explicitly forbidden by Scripture must be the work of God⁸. Furthermore, it takes clear admonitions from Scripture to overturn long-standing church traditions. Luther, then, views Scripture as a final arbiter, a *norma normans*, by which abuses within the church can be corrected. Traditions, such as liturgy, musical instruments, and infant baptism, are to be preserved unless Scripture says otherwise. The reformation is not about starting from scratch; it is more like a thorough house cleaning, with strict attention paid to preserving valid traditions handed on through the centuries.

Simons is interested in far more serious renovations: he wants a whole new building. Although he never states this explicitly, his rejection of the common interpretation (up to that point) of so many biblical passages seems to support this conclusion. Simons even writes that true baptism was lost shortly after the passing of the apostles, since the early church fathers’ views on baptism are at odds with his own⁹. The teaching of Scripture is the only teaching of the holy Christian church, and its only “doctors” are the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles. On this he disputes explicitly Martin Luther’s reliance on the writings of the church fathers on the subject of baptism¹⁰.

In summary, both Simons and Luther used Scripture to correct errors within the church. For Luther, errors are those things clearly contradicted by clear Scripture. For Simons, however, anything that is not

taught explicitly in Scripture can be considered error. Organs are not spoken of in Scripture for example, so for Luther they are permitted in worship, while for Simons they are to be excluded. This prolegomena provides background for the significant disagreement between Luther and Simons on the subject of baptism, and specifically infant baptism.

God's Baptism vs. Believer's Baptism

Luther's emphasis on the saving work of Christ Jesus, and his belief that the Church of Rome still had some things right, led him to accept the baptism of infants. Luther saw baptism as a sign of the covenant God had made with us at Calvary. Baptism was God's end of the new covenant, with faith and trust being the Christian's response – which is also a gift of God's grace, but that is another point of contention between Simons and Luther, the exploration of which time and space does not permit. To make a confession of faith a precondition of baptism would be to make it a work not unlike the penitential practices Luther was fighting against. This in turn would return the believer to the same torment Luther suffered as an Augustinian monk. Luther writes: "So I need to be baptized a third time, the second baptism being of no avail (because my faith was weak). You think the devil can't do such things? You had better get to know him better. He can do worse than that, dear friend... What is the end result? Baptizing without end would result."¹¹

Simons' belief that the following of Christ's ethical teachings was central to the faith led him to reject infant baptism. Simons saw baptism as being the Christian's end of the covenant made by God on Calvary. Baptism was part and parcel of the obedience God expected from his followers. If baptism offered men the forgiveness of sins, then what was the point of following Christ's teachings? Indeed, it was this sort of teaching, thought Simons, that encouraged degenerate, morally loose Christians. "They may not inherit nor obtain the promise," Simons also writes, "so long as they do not believe the Word of God *and obediently fulfill it in all respects*" (italics author's).¹²

What interpretation did Luther and Simons place on the passages dealing with baptism that led them to these conclusions? After all, except for Luther's use of tradition and the church doctors, both were using the exact same books of Holy Scripture. Both Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..." and Mark 16:16 "He that believes and is baptized will be saved" are key passages for Luther and Simons. And each uses these passages to defend, or attack, the practice of infant baptism.

First, Simons actually uses both the Matthew and Mark passages as the foundations for his argument in favor of believer's baptism. He quotes Matthew 28:19 as reading "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name..." (emphasis author's). Using this translation and Mark 16:16 as further support, Simons argues that there is a divine order to the process of conversion¹³. Teaching comes first, which then leads to belief, and only then follows baptism out of obedience to Christ's command. Romans 10:17 is also used to support this divine ordo, showing that faith follows hearing, which follow proclamation of the Word. The suggestion that baptism is in any way an "act" of God is dismissed several times. Baptism is "an outward ceremony God has commanded us to do", not "something which God himself will accomplish in us by His almighty power (ex: resurrection)."¹⁴ "If we ascribe the remission of sins to baptism," Simons also writes, "and not to the blood of Christ, then we mold a golden calf and place it in the stead of Christ."¹⁵

Luther's argument, on the other hand, hinges first of all on the need to defend the certainty of God's promises. Luther writes that someone who intends to be baptized is rightly asked if he has faith. But his or her answer is not "Yes, I intend to move mountains by my faith", but rather "Yes, Sir, I do believe, but I do not build on this my faith... I want to be baptized because it is God's command that I should be, and on the strength of this command I dare to be baptized."¹⁶ The second point of Luther's argument is that

there is a difference between right baptism and right reception of baptism. Baptism is always done rightly when the Word and water are administered as Christ instituted. But if one does not have faith in baptism, one does not receive its benefits. Luther gives several analogies to illustrate this point. If a girl marries a man she does not love, for example, and then later falls in love with him, must they remarry?¹⁷ Did God have to descend again on Mt. Sinai and redeliver the Law every time Israel forsook the covenant?¹⁸ If the Gospel is preached and not believed does that make it a false Gospel?¹⁹ This line of argument clearly separates baptism from the reception of baptism. Luther himself points out that "it is not the fault of baptism if people abuse it."²⁰ What the Anabaptists should be promoting, in Luther's opinion, is right reception of baptism, not rebaptism.

Analysis of the Arguments

Overall, it seems from a reading of these two treatises that Simons is arguing more against the Roman Catholic teaching of baptism than against Luther's theology. The motive for Simons' arguments is the renewal of the Christian life, and the fact that baptism seems to do away with the need for the Christian life by forgiving sins outright is in direct conflict with this goal. Luther seems to understand this motive, since he points out that baptism is not really what is in question, but the reception of that baptism. Luther, on the other hand, seems to understand the Anabaptist position fairly well. He does not argue that baptism is needed for the cleansing from original sin in his treatise, perhaps demonstrating that he understands the Anabaptist position on that doctrine.

Simons' logic and use of Scripture are, sadly, very deficient. His whole argument rests on a misquoted verse of Scripture, namely Matthew 28:19. Since he refers to this mistranslation often, the logic of many of his points is severely undercut. The verse actually reads "...making disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them..." This would seem not to support believer's baptism, if Simons' logic is to be reapplied, since the order is clearly baptism, then teaching. Simons also argues that the Word must first be preached, then believed, before baptism can be administered. Since Luther argues that baptism is itself a proclamation of the Word, the first part of this argument does not stand against Lutheran teaching. Baptism is a visible sign of the Word, and thus a Gospel proclamation. The second part of the argument requires that both the baptizer and the baptized know that the baptized truly has faith. On the part of the baptizer, how can they ever truly know whether the baptized has faith? Luther points out that "Even if you baptized a person a hundred times a day you would not at all know if he believes."²¹ On the part of the baptized, what happens when they doubt their own faith? Then their baptism must also be called into question.

With respect to infant baptism, Simons creates a new doctrine, that of "pure grace"²². Although he believes that "an infant so long as it is in infancy will remain ignorant, simple, childish, and disposed to evil,"²³ he also believes that "they have the promise of everlasting life, out of pure grace."²⁴ This doctrine he bases on Luke 18:16. Simons must argue this way because of his argument that children cannot hear, and thus cannot believe, and yet Jesus says that the kingdom of God belong to them! Luther dismisses this argument with examples from Scripture, notably John the Baptist, of children who believed even before being born. Luther points out that all he has to do is show one exception that disproves the rule to destroy the Anabaptist argument that children cannot have faith. Simons is intent on taking the *via positiva*: infant baptism is not found explicitly in Scripture, so therefore it must be wrong.

Luther's argument is based largely on the certainty of God's promise that in baptism, sins are forgiven. The benefits of baptism are received by faith. If there is no faith, there are no benefits, but that does not negate the real effectiveness of baptism. Christ has instituted baptism as the means by which the grace of God is applied to Christians. Throughout their life, Christians can return to the baptismal promises made to them by God. Baptism does not depend on faith, but rather faith returns again and again to baptism. Since an infant can, indeed, put faith in the promise of baptism, they are rightly baptized. Even if they

should later abandon faith in their baptism, that no more negates the baptism than it negates the promises of the Gospel. By differentiating between reception of baptism and baptism itself, Luther in effect opens a door for Simons. Luther points out that Christ has commanded all nations to be baptized, and that includes infants. Luther emphasizes the *via negativa* of his reform efforts: if Scripture does not oppose it, the Christian can accept it as a gift of God.

One line of argumentation that Luther uses that is the least persuasive is the argument from tradition. He suggests that if infant baptism were truly wrong, it would not have survived for so long. He quotes Paul in 2 Timothy 3:8, in saying that any heresy will not long survive but will be routed out²⁵. If this is the case, why did the abuse of the mass last so long? Could not the Anabaptists be the ones called to reform the practice of infant baptism? Furthermore, Luther does not touch on another Scriptural weakness of the "pedobaptist" position, that in every case in Scripture baptism follows the coming to faith of the baptized. He does mention the households baptized in Acts, but Simons points out that those passages do not prove that infant members of the household were also baptized. Luther instead relies on the theological statements of Paul with regards to baptism. The imagery of dying and rising again with Christ in baptism, of putting on Christ in baptism, suggest that more than a "token of a good conscience toward God"²⁶ is occurring in the sacrament.

It is near the end of Luther's argument that one sees the wisdom of his treatise's starting point, that indiscriminate rejection of Roman doctrine is of little benefit. Given Luther's arguments, one can only conclude that Simons is seeking reform for the sake of reform. By opposing wrong reception of baptism, rather than the sacrament of baptism itself, Simons could have perhaps accomplished his aims with much less fuss than he encountered as an Anabaptist. Perhaps this is why Luther writes: "the error of the Anabaptists is more tolerable than that of the sacramentarians. For the sacramentarians altogether destroy baptism, while the Anabaptists give it another character. Still there is reason to hope that they will right themselves."²⁷

Conclusions

Luther and Simons were not casual Christians. Both were firmly committed to their beliefs and willing to die for them. Both looked to Holy Scripture as the very Word of God, profitable for the instruction of the Christian. And both were keenly interested in the renewal of the church. Luther was driven to defend the Christian's assurance of salvation, while Simons was more concerned with renewing the lifestyle of the Christian. Luther placed all his trust on the promises of God in Scripture, while Simons emphasized the commands of Christ. This led Luther to defend the practice of infant baptism as a sign of the forgiveness of sins that is available apart from any of our works. Simons, in contrast, rejected infant baptism out of concern that the Christian would lose all motivation to follow Christ if their baptism was all that was required for salvation. For Simons, the Gospel was a new law, while for Luther it was freedom from the condemnation of the law. The fact that Luther distinguishes between baptism and its reception shows that he does not deny the place of a Christian's living faith. Luther did not reject sanctified living; he was certainly not an antinomian. What he did reject was Simons' theology, which would eventually cause Christians to despair of whether their works and faith were sufficient for salvation. One is left wondering whether Simons would have accepted the Lutheran position had he truly understood the theology lying behind it.

¹ Luther, Martin. "Concerning Rebaptism" in Luther's Works Vol. 40 p.229-262. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1958)

² Simons, Menno. "Christian Baptism". The Complete Writings of Menno Simons. Leonard Verduin (trans.), J.C. Wenger (ed.). (Herald Press, Kitchener, Canada, 1956)

- ³ Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism", p.231
- ⁴ Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism", p.233
- ⁵ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.234
- ⁶ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.230
- ⁷ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.235
- ⁸ Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism", p.241
- ⁹ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.248
- ¹⁰ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.242
- ¹¹ Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism", p.240
- ¹² Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.235
- ¹³ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.265
- ¹⁴ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.239
- ¹⁵ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.244
- ¹⁶ Luther, "Concerning Baptism", p.253
- ¹⁷ Luther, "Concerning Baptism", p.246
- ¹⁸ Luther, "Concerning Baptism", p.247
- ¹⁹ Luther, "Concerning Baptism", p.253
- ²⁰ Luther, "Concerning Baptism", p.259
- ²¹ Luther, "Concerning Baptism", p.240
- ²² Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.240
- ²³ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.272
- ²⁴ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.240
- ²⁵ Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism", p.255
- ²⁶ Simons, "Christian Baptism", p.246
- ²⁷ Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism", p.262

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