

ALL BABIES GO TO HEAVEN

An Examination of Universal Infant Salvation in Comparison to Luther's Doctrine of
Baptismal Regeneration

A Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Luther's Views..... | 4 |
| Views of Proponents of Universal Infant Salvation..... | 10 |
| Historical and Cultural Context..... | 15 |
| The New Covenant..... | 20 |
| Jesus' First Encounter With John the Baptist..... | 29 |
| Jesus' Healings of Children..... | 34 |
| Jesus' Use of Children as a Model for the Kingdom of Heaven..... | 38 |
| Jesus' Welcoming of Children and Statement of the Kingdom of Heaven..... | 44 |
| Conclusion..... | 51 |
| Bibliography..... | 59 |

ABSTRACT

The death of an infant is a devastating event in which many people turn to the church. It is important that Christians understand the truth about infant salvation in order to provide support in this situation, as well as have a better understanding of God. Luther claimed that generally, only baptized children go to heaven, with a special exception for those who have the intention of being baptized, but die before they have a chance. Proponents of another popular theory, universal infant salvation, believe that because of God's mercy and grace, all children go to heaven. Both views recognize that the gospel records of Jesus' interactions with children were in sharp contrast to what the usual treatment of children was at the time. However, they both interpret these interactions to support their own theories of infant salvation. In doing this, Luther incorrectly reached conclusions about baptism from passages that do not mention the sacrament, while universal infant salvation simply examines the character of God that is displayed within the context. Thus, the salvation of all children is a more accurate interpretation of Jesus' relationships with children as seen in the gospels than Luther's belief that only baptized infants enter heaven.

Introduction

Each year, over half a million dreams are shattered. Out of 3.3 million babies born alive, some 30,000 die during the first 28 days. Another 33,000 babies are stillborn. Miscarriage occurs in 15 to 20 percent of pregnancies, while ectopic pregnancy occurs in one percent.¹

Of all the deaths a person might encounter, the death of a child is very traumatic and likely to lead to the most severe consequences.² The question of where little ones go after they die is one of emotional urgency for grieving parents. In an attempt to deal with the huge scope of the problem, the number of therapists and support groups available for counseling of the parents of infants who die has risen in the last few years. However, the numbers of parents who make use of these resources are only 10% and 7% respectively, which is hypothesized to be a result of the lack of substantial spiritual resolutions they can provide.³ Clergy, on the other hand, are sought out for support in 60% of cases,⁴ and therefore must be prepared with clarity in their beliefs on the subject.

Yet, despite the great tragedy of the situation when a baby dies, the Word of God lacks explicit reference to the fate of children dying in infancy. Of the fully one thousand verses in the Bible in which the word child, its formations, cognates, and correlatives occur, not a single text explicitly and dogmatically tells of their destiny.⁵ Some theologians, such as Wayne Grudem, simply accept this as Biblical silence on the issue, and leave the matter “in the hands of God” and trust Him to be both just and merciful.⁶

¹ Jill Sherbrooke, *Pregnancy Loss & Early Infant Death Resources*, <http://www.hannah.org/resources/loss.htm>

² J. C. Vance and others, “Couple Distress After Sudden Infant or Perinatal Death: A 30-Month Follow Up,” *Journal of Paediatrics & Child Health* 38, no. 4 (Aug 2002): 368.

³ Compassionate Friends, Inc., *When a Child Dies*, <http://www.compassionatefriends.org/survey.shtml>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ R. A. Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1907), 11.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 498.

Others agree with the viewpoint of John Bomberger, who believes that the scripture simply assumes the truth of a particular viewpoint of the issue. This viewpoint is considered so obvious as to need no authoritative revelation of it, but instead simply includes passages involving the doctrine by necessary implication or inference.⁷ Many remain in between these two extremes that either consider it futile to search the Bible for the truth on the subject or consider it already obvious. Some explore the Bible for any teachings that may give understanding of the fate of babies in these devastating deaths, unsure of the certainty of the answers they will find. I, on the other hand, believe that the Bible must provide a clear answer to the important question of infant salvation, and although it may not be immediately obvious, it is possible to find the truth of the matter in the Word of God.

Many of the claims that have been put forward regarding the fate of infants who die at an early age are a result of reconciling this doctrine with other doctrines. Difficulties arise in trying to reconcile the grace of God with the doctrines of sin, predestination, election, baptismal grace and regeneration, identity of parents, and the necessity of personal repentance and faith. Different understandings of any of these subjects can lead to drastically different conclusions on the subject of infant salvation. In each case, the holding of a particular view impairs the mind for examining impartially anything that may be said in the Bible about the fate of infants who die. When theologically interpreted, any scripture relating to the subject is viewed and tested, perhaps unconsciously, in the light of the other doctrine, and interpreted accordingly.

In this thesis, I will first examine closely two of the most influential doctrines on infant salvation: Luther's view that only baptized infants are saved, and the theory of

⁷ John Bomberger, *Infant Salvation* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1859), 65.

universal infant salvation that all infants who die at a young age are saved. Luther's view examines the situation according to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, while universal infant salvation focuses on the grace of God. First, I will give a summary of the views of both Luther and proponents of universal infant salvation, as they apply to infant salvation. Then, I will briefly examine the cultural context of how children were treated at the time of Jesus. Lastly I will study Jesus' personal interactions and teachings concerning children, and provide the interpretations of Luther and the universal infant salvation perspective of each selection. Both Luther and proponents of universal infant salvation substantially base their claims on these accounts of Jesus and children. Ultimately, I will show that the salvation of all children is a more accurate interpretation of Jesus' relationships with children as seen in the gospels than Luther's belief that only baptized infants enter heaven.

Luther's Views

In the 1520s, the Anabaptists contested infant baptism throughout Europe. In response to the influential effect of Anabaptist teachings, Martin Luther and other Reformers found it necessary to equip the laity with solid biblical and theological arguments in defense of infant baptism. The result was a number of thorough interpretations in sermons and other writings of the scriptural meaning of child baptism. If the frequency with which he referred to it is a reliable guide, it is clear that Luther's appreciation of baptism continued to grow. His praise of it was loudest from the mid-1520s onwards, and it assumed the highest profile of all in the writings of the last years of his life.⁸ Luther's high regard for baptism is important evidence of its centrality in his theological concerns. This great appreciation of baptism is conveyed in his "remining of baptismal theology"⁹ whose power and originality have attracted close attention. Remarkably, in his writings Luther presented at least seventeen separate arguments in favor of infant baptism¹⁰. Although none of his writings or preachings focused exclusively on infant salvation, his numerous teachings on infant baptism clearly stated his opinion on the topic.

Luther's understanding of the covenant of baptism was intimately related to his doctrine of justification by faith, in its absolute dependability as a work of God, being permanently valid without regard to human factors. In 1537, he felt troubled by what he regarded as an attempt by Jews to take advantage of the confusion among Reformers and

⁸ Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994): 1.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Paul Zietlow, "Martin Luther's Arguments for Infant Baptism," *Concordia Journal* 20 (April 1999), 150.

Anabaptist Christians and renew the question of Jesus' messiahship.¹¹ Apprehensive about his own responsibility for this situation, in addition to writing a violent polemic against the Anabaptists, Luther preached sermons on the Gospel of St. John. He emphasized the divinity and honor in the act of baptism, as it is shown in the baptism of Jesus. Heaven was opened for the occasion, and it included all the elect angels along with all three persons of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he stated, since baptism is a divine act in which God Himself participates and since it is attended by the three exalted Persons of the Godhead, it must be prized and honored.¹² Furthermore, God is actively at work in baptism without regard to the work of humans. In contrast to John's baptism, which directed men to the future forgiveness of sin, the baptism of Christ is an actual washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit that grants this forgiveness.¹³

This belief in the redeeming power of baptism showed in Luther's frequent scriptural references to Mark 16.16, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." In his *Order of Baptism*, Luther explicitly stated, "The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath *regenerated thee through water and the Holy Ghost* and hath forgiven thee all thy sin, strengthen thee with his grace to life everlasting."¹⁴ After this event of baptism, Luther comforted himself in times of temptation and despair with the assurance that he was baptized, and he counseled others to do the same.¹⁵ He relied on the promise in Romans 6.4 that through baptism, believers are buried with Christ into

¹¹ Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia, 2005, s.v. "Luther, Martin."

¹² Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4: The Thirteenth Sermon*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 22 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 174 (hereafter LW.).

¹³ Ibid., 175.

¹⁴ Luther, *The New Order of Baptism*, LW 53:108.

¹⁵ Jane E. Strohl, "From *The Child in Luther's Theology: 'For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for...the Young?'*," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 142.

death, so that they can also rise with Him and walk in new life.¹⁶ For Luther, to be baptized meant to be promised salvation and eternal life, both in the soul and body.

Luther continued to argue that an infant's need for the regeneration of the sacrament of baptism is just as urgent as any other person's, because a child comes into the world already damnably infected with original sin and inherently unable to trust, fear, or love God. In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther noted that infants are innocent of actual sin, but are born in original sin with the same guilt as Adam.¹⁷ Luther stated in *Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*:

For just as a child is drawn out of his mother's womb and is born, and through this fleshly birth is a sinful person and a child of wrath (Eph 2.3), so one is drawn out of baptism and is born spiritually. Through this spiritual birth he is a child of grace and a justified person.¹⁸

Since all descendants of Adam are born guilty of original sin, infants need baptism. They need forgiveness, cleansing, and salvation as much as adults do.

According to Luther, baptism is not only necessary for infants, but equally as effective for them as for adults. In baptism, children themselves can believe and have their own faith, which God puts in them through their sponsors who intercede for them and bring them to baptism in the faith of the Christian church. This faith is effective enough for the child to receive the grace of God, so that when the sponsors lift the child up out of baptism they could say, "Lo, your sins are now drowned, and we receive you in God's name into an eternal life of innocence."¹⁹ Their sin is altogether forgiven in

¹⁶ Luther, *Lectures on Romans: Chapter Six*, LW 25:53.

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸ Luther, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, LW 35:27.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

baptism; not in such a manner that it is no longer present, but in such a manner that it is not imputed.²⁰

In addition to infant baptism being necessary and effective in the salvation of infants, Luther declared that it is the only way for their salvation. He preached boldly that this is the only way in which children can be brought to Jesus.²¹ In *Concerning Rebaptism*, a letter to two pastors counseling them on how to deal with the heresy of the Anabaptists in 1528, Luther presented one of his most thought-provoking arguments for infant baptism with a simple risk-analysis. Weighing the spiritual consequences of each alternative, he argued that to err on the side of infant baptism is preferable to erring on the side of losing souls. According to his calculations, failure to baptize infants could result in their damnation if they were not saved later as adults, but to baptize infants mistakenly would have less serious consequences.²²

But, Luther did more writing on the subject of infant salvation than theological documents. Luther was “not [only] the Bible commentator nor the theologian nor the disputant about the freedom of the will, but the great heart practicing as well as preaching his theology and dealing realistically with all kinds of people in their daily walks of life.”²³ Luther had a wide range of practical wisdom and a great variety of people who sought his counsel. He attempted to aid the people of Wittenberg, his colleagues and students by face-to-face encounters, and also engaged in a voluminous correspondence to reach others beyond his immediate vicinity. In personal letters and documents, he used

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Luther, “From *Third Sunday After Epiphany*,” in *Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 275.

²² Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:251.

²³ Abdel Ross Wentz, review of *Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert, *Religion in Life* 25 (1956): 626.

common sense, informed and shaped by his interpretation of the Gospel, to comfort the sick and dying, intercede for those in trouble or need, encourage the persecuted and imprisoned, give instructions to those who were in doubt, give counsel in questions of marriage and sex, extend help to clergymen facing special problems, and exhort rulers, cities, and states concerning their practical duties in the sight of God.²⁴

In particular, he offered spiritual counseling on the topic of infant salvation after an experience with the subject in his personal life. In 1542, his daughter Magdalene, who was only 13 at the time, fell ill and died in her father's arms. Although in her last minutes she reportedly calmly resigned her life to the will of God, he struggled to have the same sense of assurance.²⁵ That same year, Luther's pastor, John Bugenhagen wrote an interpretation of Psalm 29. Before sending the manuscript to the printer, he showed it to Luther. Luther noticed a reference to "little children" in the text, and suggested that Bugenhagen improve the book by adding a word of comfort for women whose children had died at birth or had been born dead and could not be baptized. Although unwilling to write such an appendix himself, Bugenhagen agreed to allow Luther to attach any statement which he prepared on the subject. The brief but significant piece Luther wrote as an appendix has since outlived the book to which it was originally attached.²⁶

In this document, titled *Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage*, Luther made an exception in his teaching of baptismal regeneration for children that die before they have an opportunity to be saved by baptism. In responding to mothers who feared for the salvation of their miscarried or stillborn infants, Luther assured them that

²⁴ Ibid., 626.

²⁵ Charles Hoffman, "Springs of Living Water," *Sermons Online*, San Dieguito United Methodist Church, <http://www.sdumc.org/sr110302.html>.

²⁶ Luther, *Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage*, LW 43:245.

their prayers, even in the form of inconsolable sighs, would find a hearing with God, and that their faith would serve God's purpose to save even in the absence of baptism.²⁷

Luther reminded them that God's power is not constrained by the sacrament; that the Word, by which God unites Himself with humanity, acts through the sacraments "certainly but not exclusively". While usually, he said, baptism is necessary for salvation and its absence condemns those who reject or despise it, those who are deprived of the sacrament through no fault of their own (such as premature death) constituted a different case.²⁸ The only children he included in this exception, however, were children of Christian mothers.

²⁷ Ibid., 249.

²⁸ Ibid., 250.

Views of Proponents of Universal Infant Salvation

Beginning in his own lifetime, many people besides the Anabaptists questioned the claims Luther made about infants born to non-Christian parents. Luther, his assistant Melancthon, and others, while all still “Early Lutherans” denied infant salvation to those who were unbaptized in the original 1530 (*Unvaried*) *Augsburg Confession*. However, this was quickly mitigated by Melancthon in the 1540 (*Varied*) *Augsburg Confession*.²⁹ Consequently, Classic Lutheranism usually hesitated to definitely damn the early-dying infants of heathens. At the same time, Ulrich Zwingli taught the universal salvation of all early-dying infants on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. In light of the views of both the Lutherans and the Zwinglians, John Calvin went back to the scriptures in another attempt to refine a biblical perspective.³⁰ He upheld prebaptismal grace and God’s merciful sovereignty toward the infants of the wicked to conclude that all infants are saved. In general, the Post-Calvinist Church looked at the salvation of early-dying infants in the same way as Calvin. The early Protestant Anglican Church, the early Calvinist Confession, and the Puritan contemporaries all professed belief in salvation of all infants.³¹

In the Twentieth Century, the Presbyterian Church has consistently continued to support the doctrine of universal infant salvation; however, many modern Baptist theologians claim at most the possibility of “hopeful agnosticism” as to the everlasting

²⁹ Francis Nigel Lee, “Dying Saved in Infancy: Are Any Dying Babies Lost?” (PhD diss., Whitefield Theological Seminary, 2002), 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

destination of any dying babies.³² Some Roman Catholics, some Lutherans, and Anglicans continue to espouse the position that baptism is necessary for salvation. Strong Calvinist circles admit uncertainty about whether some or all infants are elect and therefore saved. Some Roman Catholic theologians posit limbo for babies who die unbaptized, as a kind of neutral place because God cannot justly allow them into heaven nor can he mercifully send them to hell. Thus, the views are many and varied. On the whole though, since the seventeenth century, the view that all infants are saved has become the most popular in varying theological traditions.³³

John Bomberger, a 19th century minister of the German Reformed Church, wholehearted advocate of “Apostolic Christian” faith, and proponent of universal infant salvation explained the main components of the universal infant salvation view that has been popular for centuries in his book titled *Infant Salvation*. Universal infant salvation affirms that all children who die in their infancy are saved due to the mercy of God that overcomes original sin and the fallen nature of all humans. The infant, therefore, though incapable of works of any kind, is a subject of grace, and operated upon by the influence of the Holy Spirit in order to be changed and fitted for a life in heaven. The atoning righteousness of Christ regenerates its heart. Its infantile life may be cleansed by the same purifying grace which washes away the sins of an adult. The great blessings of regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification may be divinely given to babies as to any other class of human beings.

³² Ibid., 175.

³³ *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 1st ed., s.v. “The Salvation of Infants.”

Proponents of universal infant salvation admit original infant depravity.³⁴

Consequently, by nature all infants are liable to the extreme penalties of sin in the strongest and most explicit terms. As Romans 3.23 clearly states, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Hence, all people, infants included, are represented as being abominable and unworthy in the sight of God. This is a natural consequence of the fall of the first parents: Adam and Eve. All men died in Adam, and if the root is unholy, the branches must be so too.³⁵ Further evidence of this doctrine is the constant liability of little children to the bodily sufferings and temporal evils brought about upon the human race through sin. Because the moral character of sinful parents is inherited by their children, they also are heirs to the temporal penalties of sin. Such physical evils only follow in the track of moral evil. If there were no moral depravity, there would be no physical disorders or suffering.³⁶ Scripturally it is clear that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6.23). Death and all those diseases and sufferings which lead to death come upon everyone, whether infant or adult, because of sin.

The necessity of infant regeneration follows from the doctrine of the universal depravity of human nature. There must be an antecedent change in the moral character of a corrupt soul in order to qualify it for the presence of the holy God, or for the enjoyment of a holy state. Additionally, infant regeneration is necessary from the fact that the only way of salvation for any of the human race is through a real and living union with Jesus Christ. As it is only by being naturally in the first Adam that people die, so it is only by being supernaturally in the second Adam (Jesus) that they can be made alive. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father except

³⁴ Bomberger, 9.

³⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

through me” (John 14.6), He explicitly declared that there is no way for little children to be saved except through Himself, the only Savior of the lost race.

However, it is the regeneration of infants, not their conversion, which is necessary. These two terms are often confounded, as though they mean precisely the same thing. Yet there is a very essential difference between them. Regeneration is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit on the soul of man. In it man is passive. Conversion, on the other hand, is a free and voluntary act of the penitent sinner by which, with the help of divine grace, he renounces and turns from sin and unrighteousness, and dedicates himself to lead a holy life. While this voluntary act of conversion may be impossible for infants, their regeneration by the Holy Spirit is both possible and necessary.³⁷

The process by which all infants are saved through regeneration is unknown. Divine grace transcends the comprehension of finite minds, and so the method that the grace of the gospel can be made available for little children is incomprehensible to humans. Bomberger acknowledged this incomprehensibility of Jesus’ works throughout his life:

“His Gospel may not fully display and explain the process by which those children are qualified for admission into that covenant, any more than it exhibits the process by which the dead son of the widow of Nain was brought to life again, or that by which the daughter of Jairus was restored to her parent’s arms.”³⁸

It is not the process, but the result which matters. Even if the details of the process in such cases were laid out for humans to see, they would probably not comprehend them. However, the actions and teachings of Jesus in the Holy Scriptures provide evidence that provision is made for the salvation of children, which I will expand upon later.

³⁷ Ibid., 31.

³⁸ Ibid., 57.

Since children are depraved and need the renewal of their nature to qualify them for heaven, and they are susceptible of such renewing grace by the operation of the Holy Spirit making them new creatures in Christ Jesus, then they should receive baptism as the formal confession of their spiritual need and of the formal confirmation of these blessings, here on Earth.³⁹ Baptism is the appointed sign and seal of salvation; however, is not the action that, in itself, achieves the salvation. According to this view, children who die in infancy will certainly be saved, whether they are baptized or not. Little children who are denied the sacrament by the negligence or unbelief of parents, pastors, or other circumstances beyond the control of the children, will not perish in consequence of such neglect.⁴⁰ They should still be baptized, though, because it is God's command that all who share the blessing of His covenant of mercy should receive a sacramental sign and seal of participation in those blessings.

³⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 121.

Historical and Cultural Context

In order to evaluate these different views of infant salvation, it is important to examine the gospel material describing the interactions of Jesus and children on which both are largely based. However, this New Testament material on children must be viewed within its historical and cultural setting to be properly understood. Specifically, an understanding of the roles of children in Greco-Roman antiquity is crucial for reading the New Testament texts. Two social and religious contexts, the Hellenistic context and the Jewish context, significantly overlap with, as well as differ from, each other.

The Hellenistic Context

There were two contrasting sentiments toward children in the first-century Greco-Roman context. On the one hand, parents loved and took pleasure in their children, as ancient letters and funerary inscriptions attest.⁴¹ Cicero's letters are the nearest to a modern collection of 'private' letters available from the first century BC.⁴² Although he was devastated and largely affected by the death of his daughter Tullia in 45, he most likely represented the mainstream view of Roman society when he listed children among the things that made life tolerable: "wealth, ability, children, relatives, and friends".⁴³ Not only were children enjoyable, they were necessary. For a family, childlessness was a disaster and it was a common belief that a childless man deserved to be consoled.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 89.

⁴² *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "Tullius Cicero, Marcus."

⁴³ D. R. Shackleton-Bailey, *The Correspondence of Cicero* (Cambridge: Penguin Classic Series, 1978), 14, quoted in Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 85.

⁴⁴ Wiedemann, 94.

Children were necessary for economic survival and well-being, and as heirs in whom their parents would live on after death. The state considered children indispensable for economic, cultural, and military purposes.

On the other hand, childhood was viewed largely negatively as a state of immaturity to outgrow. The standard of measurement was the free adult male Roman citizen, so people considered children fundamentally deficient and not yet human in the full sense.⁴⁵ They were physically small, underdeveloped, and vulnerable. Because they were regarded as mentally deficient and ignorant, they lacked the prime Roman virtue of reason and could not participate in the rational world of Roman citizens.

In light of these attitudes, it is not surprising that children occupied a low rung on the social ladder. Tradition and custom allotted the most important place to older people.⁴⁶ The most powerful evidence for this low status was the legal position of children and the brutal practices toward children allowed by Roman law. Children had no rights of their own and were legally subject to their father, who had almost absolute power over them.⁴⁷ The historian Plutarch described an example of child exposure which occurred in ancient Sparta when a child was born:

Offspring was not reared at the will of the father, but was taken and carried by him to a place called Lesche, where the elders of the tribes officially examined the infant; if it was well-built and sturdy, they ordered the father to rear it, and assigned it one of the nine thousand lots of land; but if it was ill-born and deformed, they sent it to the so-called Apothetac, a chasm-like place at the foot of Mount Taygetus, in the conviction that the life of that which nature had not well equipped at the very beginning for health and strength was of no advantage either to itself or the state.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "From *The Least and the Greatest*," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 32.

⁴⁶ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed., s.v. "child, children"

⁴⁷ Gundry-Volf, 33.

⁴⁸ Hans-Ruedi Weber, "The Gospel in the Child," *Ecumenical Review* 31 (1979), 228.

This procedure highlights what was quite common in the ancient world of both the Greeks and the Romans. The widespread practice of child exposure threatened the survival of whole families and cities. Also, on the whole, the special personality of boys and girls was not recognized. Children had no rights, and girls and the offspring of slaves particularly were held in low esteem. Being less 'popular' than boys, many girls may have been undernourished.⁴⁹ Boys had worth only as future soldiers, citizens, and fathers of families. Childhood was viewed above all as a training ground for adult life, not as a valuable stage of life in itself. This accounts for the great stress placed on education.

The Old Testament-Jewish Context

Children's significance and role in the Old Testament-Jewish tradition is equally mixed. They were seen as gifts from God, instruments of God's activity, and symbolically a guarantee of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. However, they were still viewed as ignorant, capricious, and in need of strict discipline.

Children of Jewish families were greatly loved and received as blessings from God. To have many children was an abundant blessing and a great source of joy. Notably, children were a central feature of God's promise to Abraham to bless him and make of him a great nation by giving him descendants as innumerable as the dust of the Earth and the stars in the heavens. They were national assets with the important role in the family as continuity for the faith, history, law, and traditions of the nation. Also, the code of Mosaic Law improved the rights of children considerably.⁵⁰ It did not permit a

⁴⁹ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "Children."

⁵⁰ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. "Family Life and Relations."

father to put his child to death without referring the case to the elders. The law also prohibited children from being held responsible for the crimes of their parents. In addition, Jews distinguished themselves from many of their contemporaries by rejecting harsh practices toward children, including abortion and the exposure of newborns.⁵¹ Through circumcision, the male infant held a place within the covenant community as a member of God's covenant with Israel.⁵²

On the other hand, children were not romanticized. In rabbinic literature their status under religious law was “paraphrased by the constantly recurring triad ‘deaf and dumb, weak-minded, underage’ (Erub. 3.2; Shek. 1.3; Sukk. 2.8; 3.10.)”⁵³ Children were commonly viewed as falling short of the ideal represented by the adult male law-observant Israelite. It was only around the age of 12 or 13 that Jewish children became full participants in the covenant. Those who could not yet recite the *Shema*, the basic affirmation of the Jewish faith, and those who had not yet memorized the precepts of the *Torah* could not fully participate in the worship and life of the covenant people.⁵⁴ Until that age, they were “children” (*paidia*), and like the rest of Greco-Roman society, valued mainly as potential products of the art of education.

As seen above, the evidence of the treatment of children in the first-century Mediterranean world is twofold. Children were both appreciated in various respects and viewed negatively in others. This complex picture of children in Greco-Roman antiquity, including Judaism, forms the background for the New Testament teaching on children.

⁵¹ Gundry-Volf, 34.

⁵² John T. Carroll, “Children in the Bible,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (2001): 123.

⁵³ Gundry-Volf, 35.

⁵⁴ Paulette Taylor-Wingender, “Kids of the Kingdom: A Study of Matthew 18:1-5 and Its Context” *Direction* 17, no.2 (1988): 21.

And, as we shall see, the New Testament picture itself is complex, while its most positive aspects are quite striking for the time. Jesus' way with children was so astonishing that even his disciples could not comprehend them.⁵⁵ His words and gestures were in sharp contrast to what was current in his own world. The gospels present Jesus as a friend of children in a way that departs radically from this larger cultural and biblical pattern. The honor and respect that Jesus gave to children, who were normally viewed as people of immaturity, low social status, and virtual powerlessness, demonstrated a drastic role reversal. Because of this, the gospel material contains some of the most profound teaching on children in the Bible.⁵⁶

Besides the exceptionality of His position, there are several reasons it is advantageous to study Jesus' relationships with children in attempting to discover the scriptural teachings about infant salvation. Jesus was the incarnation of God, and the living Word. As Son, His mission was to reveal not Himself but the Father. Therefore, his actions and words were the actions and words of God. His relationships with children on Earth showed the feelings of His heavenly Father towards children. Additionally, because Jesus was ultimately the Savior, it is important to examine His life for any teachings on salvation. Lastly, both Luther's view that only baptized infants are saved, and the view of universal infant salvation are based considerably on interpretations of the actions and teachings of Jesus concerning children. Studying the foundational biblical texts will help to discover the accuracy of their points.

⁵⁵ Carroll, 128.

⁵⁶ Gundry-Volf, 34.

The New Covenant

In the Ancient Near East, a covenant was a formal, binding mutual agreement between two parties. As indicated by the designation of the two sections of the Bible, the Old Testament (or Covenant) and the New Testament, a covenant in the Bible is the major metaphor used to describe the relation between God and His people. As such, the covenant is the instrument constituting the kingdom of God, and therefore it is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical ideal of religious community.⁵⁷ The second portion of God's Word is called the New Testament, or Covenant, because it has to do with a new kind of relationship. At the same time, the Bible indicates that part of this New Covenant is that people who were once excluded could now be "grafted in" with those who were under the Old Covenant.⁵⁸

A general understanding of the current covenant relationship between God and His people is important in order to have a specific understanding of His relationship with infants. Although examination of Jesus' interactions with children during His life can give important clues towards the idea of infant salvation (which will be done later in this thesis), His death was the crucial event that made salvation possible. Through His death, Jesus secured the New Covenant. Therefore, a new relationship was formed between God and His people, including infants. The interpretation of this indirect interaction between Jesus and children is of primary importance in understanding both His previous actions on Earth, and His future actions of acceptance of infants into heaven.

⁵⁷ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed., s.v. "Covenant."

⁵⁸ Christopher Pope, *God's Covenant, Old and New*, <http://faith.propadeutic.com/covenant.html>.

In a sense, there is only one covenant and plan of redemption and salvation that God has given to humanity since the fall of Adam and Eve. The differences we see in the workings of God at different times in history are related to different administrations of this same covenant. So there are many ways the plan has been the same in both its Old Covenant and New Covenant forms.⁵⁹ Both covenants were made by God as demonstrations of His grace and love. Jesus Christ was the only Mediator of the covenants, even though His form was somewhat of a mystery to the faithful of the Old Testament who awaited God's promised Anointed for redemption (Genesis 49.10, Job 19.25, Isaiah 53.6). His sacrifice offered salvation and redemption from sin, through the righteousness of God alone. Forgiveness of sin has always been available only through faith in Christ, through which God's people receive eternal life.

Though there is only one plan of salvation, the Bible teaches that there have been old and new forms of the covenant. The Old Covenant encompassed the time from Eden to the first coming of Jesus Christ. Christ's coming established the New Covenant, which will last forever, and is better than the old one. This is especially evident in the differences between the covenant in its old and new forms.⁶⁰ One specific difference is whereas the Old Covenant looked forward, the New Covenant looks back. Historical perspective allows those in the New Covenant to see recorded in the pages of the Bible the specific, historical fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies that were often ambiguous or symbolic. Also, the New Covenant set God's people free from the law and its curse to which they were servants under the Old Covenant. The burdensome code of laws and externally enforced body of commandments, statutes, and ordinances that

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

proved the faith of those under the Old Covenant were replaced with a far lighter burden when Jesus came, and the His teaching was written on the hearts of His people.⁶¹ The simplicity of the law of Christ, as described in the New Testament, is not a lower standard, but is actually a higher one. However, with a greater knowledge and understanding of salvation, and closer friendship with God, it is easier to trust His Spirit and serve Him as Lord.⁶² Also, while the Old Covenant was primarily for the Jews, the New Covenant includes all nations. Nearly all Old Testament believers were Jews, and all Jews were affected by the land and protection promises of the Old Covenant. God worked through this one ethnic group, geographically located in the promised land. The spread of God's favor to other nations showed up only as a part of end-time prophecy (Isaiah 56.7), which was fulfilled during the Book of Acts, as the gospel spread to Jews living outside Judea, and soon thereafter to Gentiles. The New Covenant also has different ordinances, and better spiritual promises.⁶³

The signs of the covenants also differed. In the beginning of the Old Covenant, God ordered Abraham to be circumcised along with all the males in his household (Genesis 17.9-13), and this became the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was performed on the eighth day after birth, customarily by the boy's father, as an expression of faith that God's promises would be realized.⁶⁴ Because it was applied to the reproductive organ, the sign involved the propagation of the race.⁶⁵ This sign was not to be treated lightly. The penalty of exclusion from the covenant rested upon the uncircumcised (Genesis 17.14).

⁶¹ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed., s.v. "Covenant."

⁶² Christopher Pope, *God's Covenant, Old and New*, <http://faith.propadeutic.com/covenant.html>.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. "Circumcision."

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The sign of the New Covenant was baptism. Although there is evidence that different types of baptism as ceremonial washings were practiced in the Old Testament, in the New Testament John preached a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3.3) to prepare for the Messiah, and Jesus used it as a sacrament which was the sign of the New Covenant. At first, Jesus allowed His disciples to continue John’s baptism (John 3.22), but later he seemingly discontinued the practice (John 4.1-3). This probably occurred because His ministry fulfilled John’s, so He severed Himself from John’s works of preparation.⁶⁶ In Matthew 28.19, He reconstituted baptism as an ordinance based on the death and resurrection of Christ. It was no longer a forward-looking phenomenon but had now become a realized activity centering on the gospel message. Like circumcision, it signified the entrance of the believer into union with the triune God. Baptism was the seal of the salvation covenant. A debate today centers on the continuity and functional similarity between the two signs of the covenants, as well as differing interpretations of other aspects of the New Covenant in their application to infant salvation.

Luther’s Interpretation

Luther’s understanding of the New Covenant supported his view that infants need to be baptized in order to be saved. He based his beliefs on an analogy between baptism and circumcision that was first advanced as an argument for infant baptism in Italy or North Africa sometime in the second quarter of the third century.⁶⁷ Besides a few

⁶⁶ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. “Baptism.”

⁶⁷ J. P. T. Hunt, “Colossians 2.11-12, The Circumcision/ Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no.2 (1990): 232. Hunt reached this conclusion by placing side-by-side the evidence of Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian that is discussed later in this chapter.

superficial differences, this analogy supposed the general similarity of the rites of the two covenants. Although the earliest certain references to infant baptism in the West and East were those of Tertullian and Origen respectively, neither gave any indication that the analogy between circumcision and baptism formed part of the early rationale for it.⁶⁸

Origen, however, referred several times to the analogy, but nowhere connected it with infant baptism. In the first part of his *Homily XIV on Luke*, he discussed the spiritual significance of Christ's circumcision in his infancy as a representative act. He said that this same representative act was attributed to the Christian in baptism, which therefore brought an end to the requirement for physical circumcision.⁶⁹

The earliest explicit use of the analogy between circumcision and baptism as an argument for infant baptism was recorded in Cyprian's Letter 64 to Fidus. Fidus believed that the analogy between circumcision and baptism meant that a baby should be baptized on the eighth day, and not before. In this letter, Cyprian reported the decision of the synod which met at Carthage in 253 to discuss the matter, and replied that since infants are subject to original sin, they should be baptized immediately after birth.⁷⁰

Although writing nearly a century later than Cyprian, Gregory Nazianzen gave an insight into how the analogy with circumcision may first have been used in connection with infant baptism.⁷¹ Gregory assumed that repentance and faith are prerequisites for baptism, and that children should normally be about three years old before they are baptized since at this age they are at least capable of a partial understanding of what baptism means. However, he used the analogy between circumcision and baptism to

⁶⁸ Hunt, 228.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 230.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 231.

⁷¹ Ibid., 233.

justify the baptism of infants “in extremis.”⁷² It is possible that what originally may have been used as the justification of an emergency procedure became an argument for the regular practice of infant baptism.

In the fourth century the analogy between circumcision and baptism occurred more frequently in connection with infant baptism. It was developed to say that infants were subject to original sin, baptism was a protection against demons and heresy, and like uncircumcised males in the Old Testament, unbaptized children were cut off from God’s people.⁷³ In its classic form, the argument from infant circumcision to infant baptism rested not so much upon the nature of the correspondence between the two rites, but upon the view that the circumcision of infants established the principle that infants are included in the covenant. However, this argument was not used in connection with infant baptism in the patristic period, during which time the argument from infant circumcision to infant baptism was dependent rather upon the view that the Christian rite of baptism is the typological fulfillment of the Jewish rite of circumcision.⁷⁴

Luther based his beliefs on both the classical and later arguments of the analogy. While comparing the rites, the main difference he highlighted was that circumcision was performed before Christ in anticipation of the grace which is in baptism, while baptism is observed after Christ on the strength of the grace which He had secured.⁷⁵ Despite this difference between the past and future tense, both sacraments look to the last judgment when all will be revealed, and the grace offered through them is the same. Luther believed “through the faith and prayer of the church, young children are cleansed of

⁷² Ibid., 233.

⁷³ Ibid., 233.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁷⁵ Luther, *The Word of God and the Sacraments*, LW 54:55.

unbelief and of the devil and are endowed with faith, and thus are baptized; because this also is the gift that was given to the children through the circumcision of the Jews.”⁷⁶

Luther was clear that the similar grace of both circumcision and baptism was void without these sacraments being based on the promise of God.⁷⁷ Circumcision only saved people because it was attached to the future Christ. In the same way, it is the promise which is added to baptism that makes it effective. He explained “one does not have faith in a seal which stands by itself, nor in a letter by itself.”⁷⁸ The sign and promise should be tied to each other, because neither works without the other.

Since the sacrament of circumcision was necessary to save infants in the Old Covenant, Luther believed that baptism was equally as necessary to save infants in the New Covenant. Circumcision was given to Abraham and the Jews, and included infants on the eighth day after their birth. He stated that it made the children of Abraham believe that they were the people of God, according to God’s promise.⁷⁹ Therefore, Luther concluded that the New Covenant and sign must be much more effective and make those a people of God who receive it. It is more effective because God commanded that all of the world should receive it. On the strength of that command (since no one is excluded), Luther believed that Christians should baptize everyone, and have the faith that they are saved.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Luther, *The Adoration of the Sacrament*, LW 36:301.

⁷⁷ Luther, *The Word of God and the Sacraments*, LW 54:55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁹ Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:253.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

Universal Infant Salvation Interpretation

Rather than focusing on the rites of the covenants, supporters of universal infant salvation base much of their views on the grace included in the New Covenant. Charles Spurgeon, England's best-known preacher and major figure in revivalism for most of the second half of the nineteenth century, supported the belief that when this grace is considered, it is "highly improbable, not to say impossible, that an infant soul should be destroyed."⁸¹ The power of grace over sin directly refutes the idea that baptism is necessary for infant salvation. Because all death is a result of the sin in the world, when an infant dies before he is baptized as a result of an event over which he has no control, sin has prevented his baptism. If, by doing so, sin has also prevented his salvation, then the consequences of sin are themselves directly preventing the reversal of that sin by redemption; in which case sin has abounded more than the grace of Christ.⁸² Yet the scripture says that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." (Romans 5.20) While, through His son, God has forgiven unimaginable sins, it seems consistent that with such grace as this that He should not pass by the multitudes of infants plagued with original sin and refuse to save them.⁸³

The grace offered in the New Covenant was for all people of all nations. This means that Christ died for all people, which includes unbaptized infants.⁸⁴ Christ's righteousness is strong enough to overcome the sinfulness of every individual of Adam's race.⁸⁵ As a consequence, though all people are not saved, all people do receive

⁸¹ Charles Spurgeon, "Infant Salvation," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Blue Letter Bible, http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/charles_spurgeon/sermons/0411.html.

⁸² Adrian Hastings, "The Salvation of Unbaptized Infants," *The Downside Review* 77, no. 248 (1958): 176.

⁸³ Spurgeon.

⁸⁴ Hastings, 178.

⁸⁵ H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/holiness-tradition/wiley/>.

sufficient grace to be saved. So, salvation is a possibility for all because of the sacrificial offering of Christ. In the scriptures, Paul testified to this by describing Jesus as one “who gave himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Timothy 2.6)

Because of this grace, we can be confident that those we lose in infancy or earlier are secure in Christ. However, this universal salvation does not stretch to all who have never heard the gospel. Romans 1.18-21 specifically says that such people are “without excuse” because they know enough about God and about right and wrong to be guilty. Unlike those under the sometimes termed “age of accountability,” they have reached sufficient, mature understanding in order to comprehend convincingly the issues of law and grace, sin and salvation.

This distinction between children and those who have reached an age where they could be expected to comprehend and express their faith can be interpreted from treatments of children throughout scripture. Children are said to have “no knowledge between good and evil.” (Deuteronomy 1.39) Isaiah 7.16 then speaks of a child coming to an age when he knows to “refuse the evil, and choose the good.” Once they are past this point, Nehemiah 10.28 describes that “all who have knowledge and understanding join with their brethren, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law.” This was even mentioned in the New Covenant, in which Paul stated that he spoke and understood as a child when he was one, but as an adult, he put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13.11). Until then, proponents of universal infant salvation believe that God's grace and mercy presented in the New Covenant allow all infants to be saved.

Jesus' First Encounter with John the Baptist

The eternal relationship of God and infants was finalized by the formation of the New Covenant, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, this relationship was also demonstrated temporally by Jesus' interactions with children throughout His life. The interpretations of these concrete illustrations of the relationship are important for any conclusions about infant salvation and an infant's eternal relationship with God.

The first recorded encounter of Jesus and a child occurred when both He and the child were still in the wombs of their mothers. As a part of Luke's infancy narrative, this encounter was probably recorded separately and at a later date than the rest of the gospel. Additionally, problems of corroborating witnesses and conflicting details bring into question the complete historical accuracy of the story. However, Luke thought that it was an appropriate introduction to the career and significance of Jesus. On this basis, the story should be considered, in order to examine the possible interpretations that can be drawn from Jesus' earliest recorded encounter with a child.⁸⁶

At this time, the Holy Ghost had recently conceived Jesus in the womb of His mother, and John the Baptist was only six months from his conception.⁸⁷ Earlier, the angel Gabriel had foretold the birth of John, and declared that he would be great in the sight of the Lord and filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (Luke 1.15). After this announcement, his mother, Elizabeth, remained in seclusion for five months, so that her pregnancy was not known to outsiders (Luke 1.24). Then, the

⁸⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1977), 38.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 331. Brown bases his conclusion that John the Baptist was only six months from his conception on Luke 1.26's placement of the annunciation of Jesus' birth at the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Subsequently, Mary's visitation to Elizabeth occurred "at that time" according to Luke 1.39, which literally means "in those days".

annunciation of Jesus' birth concluded with the angel giving Mary the news of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy (Luke 1.36-37). The resulting encounter of Mary and Elizabeth ended the seclusion that had surrounded Elizabeth's pregnancy, and is described in Luke 1.39-44:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."⁸⁸

Notably, in this incident, John the Baptist jumped in the womb. It has been argued that, as a physician, Luke may have been describing a medical movement of the baby. However, the verb used is the same one used for skipping or leaping, as of sheep in a field.⁸⁹ Also, verse 44 specifies that it was from gladness that the baby moved. Additionally, Elizabeth's "loud cry" portrayed Luke's need to capture the sense of unrestrained joy. The interpretation of these particular events are crucial to both Luther's and proponents of universal infant salvation's conclusions about infant salvation.

Luther's Interpretation

In 1528, Luther used this passage at length in *Concerning Rebaptism* as part of a biblical argument that infant baptism is valid, and therefore rebaptism is unnecessary. In one particular section, he provided cases of children who could believe although they did

⁸⁸ This and all other bible quotations are Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

⁸⁹ Brown, 332.

not speak or understand.⁹⁰ For example, he stated that the Jews offered their sons and daughters to idols, shedding innocent blood, which meant the children must have been pure and holy, and therefore with spirit and faith. Likewise, the innocent children whom Herod had murdered were not over two years of age, so admittedly they could not speak or understand; yet they were holy and blessed. Lastly, Luther added the example of John the Baptist from this passage of Luke, who was only a child in his mother's womb, but "as [Luther] believed, could have faith."⁹¹ According to Luther, this was direct biblical evidence against the Anabaptist claim that children may not have faith. Therefore, he continued, it is not contrary to scripture to hold that a child believes, with John the Baptist as an example. If it is in accord with scripture to hold that children believe, then the Anabaptist argument that children cannot believe is unscriptural, which is exactly the point that Luther wanted to make.

He continued even further to say that the same Christ is present in baptism who came to John in his mother's womb. In His Word and baptism Jesus calls forth faith in the child as He then produced in John. Since John the Baptist had faith as an infant in this passage and according to Luther, other infants may have faith as well through baptism, then the Anabaptists should not discard the first baptism of a person since they cannot conclude that it is meaningless.⁹²

Luther's method of interpretation of the passage was based on his conclusion that John the Baptist was given faith while still in the womb of his mother, which could be seen in John's reaction to Jesus. He used this example to discredit the biblical soundness

⁹⁰ Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:239.

⁹¹ Ibid., 240.

⁹² Ibid., 242.

of rebaptism. In addition, Luther combined this conclusion with the biblical idea of the presence of Christ in baptism in order to generalize this concept to infants in general.

Universal Infant Salvation Interpretation

Although based on the same initial claims, this passage is interpreted drastically differently by proponents of universal infant salvation to support the idea that all infants are saved. Instead of combining the infancy narrative with the teaching of baptism, they view the story from the standpoint of salvation. From this, they conclude that John the Baptist was regenerated in the womb, and claim that this can happen similarly to other infants without external ceremonies.

Proponents of universal infant salvation agree with Luther's statement that the encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist in the womb shows that the grace of God has virtually no lower age limit. They claim that after the angel predicted that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb, his recognition of Jesus showed that this had already happened.⁹³ Therefore even a child in the womb of its mother can experience the grace of God in such a way as to be filled with the Holy Ghost passively and to leap for joy actively. This is evidence that faith is not tied to conceptual understanding in such a way as to preclude infants from this blessing. Instead, they are given faith when, where and how God Himself pleases.

However, the ability of infants to have faith, as demonstrated by John the Baptist, is understood by proponents of the theory of universal infant salvation as more than proof that infants should be baptized. Many view this faith as a result of the regeneration that occurred in John during the encounter with Jesus, and which can happen in other infants

⁹³ Brown, 333.

even before they are baptized.⁹⁴ There are a number of reasons given to assert that John the Baptist was regenerated even in the womb. As described in Luke 1.15, God had prophesied, through the angel He sent, that the child would be great in the sight of God. This assured that he would at some point be saved.⁹⁵ This angel also attributed to the child the quality of being filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. It is not possible for an unbeliever to be filled with the Spirit, because to have the Spirit is to be saved. For someone who is saved, to be filled with the Spirit is to be equipped by God for special work in His service.⁹⁶ Then in the later passage from the first chapter of Luke, Elizabeth, speaking under the influence of the Spirit, said that the baby leapt for joy in the womb at the sound of the mother of his Lord. If John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, he was saved from birth. If John the Baptist reacted with joy to hearing what he somehow knew was the sound of his savior's mother's voice, he must have been saved because a believer reacts with joy to interaction with God and non-believer does not.⁹⁷

Even if it is held that the evidence supports only the idea that John the Baptist was saved at birth, it proves the point that it is possible for a child to be regenerated by God prior to any ability by the child to understand the gospel, and prior to baptism.⁹⁸ This evidence does not establish that many children are saved from birth, or that other children have been saved at birth, but it does show that it is possible for a child to be saved at birth, without any external action by any human force. This is a crucial point in making the argument that God saves children who die in their infancy.

⁹⁴ Richard Bacon, *Revealed to Babes: Children in the Worship of God* (Dallas: Blue Banner Books, 2001), 41.

⁹⁵ A.D. Bauer, *The Beginning: A Second Look at the First Sin* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2004), 256.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

Jesus' Healings of Children

It has been estimated that when Jesus lived, infant mortality rates ran as high as 30 percent, and the terrors of disease, famine and war claimed 30 percent of those who survived by the age of six and 60 percent by the age of sixteen.⁹⁹ In this time of great health problems for children, they were conspicuous in the cast of characters who receive healing from Jesus in the synoptic Gospels. Mark, in a narrative aside at the end of an episode of healing, mentioned the age of Jairus's daughter, who was twelve, which was right at the transition from childhood to adulthood (Mark 5.42). No age was specified for the son tormented by an unclean spirit, but his father indicated the boy had been plagued by the condition "since childhood" and the narrator called him a young child (Mark 9.14-29). Similarly, the age of a gentile woman's daughter to whom Jesus reluctantly extended healing at a distance remained undefined, but she too was evidently a young child (Mark 7.23). If Jesus had earned a reputation as a healer of children, it is not surprising that people would have brought young children to Him to be touched by Him (Mark 10.13; Luke 18.15), or have had Him lay hands on them and pray for them (Matthew 19.13), even when there was no mention of sickness. Children and adults who cared about their well-being certainly discerned Jesus to be a friend of children.¹⁰⁰

Luther's Interpretation

To interpret these passages, Luther relied on the context of the verses, as well as the method in which the children were brought to Jesus, in order to claim that the shared

⁹⁹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. "Luke 18.15-30"

¹⁰⁰ John Carroll, 128.

similarity of family faith was the crucial aspect in each child's healing. The lesson that Luther drew from these passages of Jesus' healings of children was that God accomplishes much through the faith and longing of another, even though there is originally no personal faith. Because children are dependent on parents or other adults to act on their behalf, Luther acknowledged that in all of Jesus' healings of children, their parents worked as the intercessor in bringing them to Jesus, or receiving His healing. In particular, Luther gave four examples: Jesus raised the widow's son at Nain because of the prayers of his mother apart from the faith of the son, Jesus freed the little daughter of the Canaanite woman from the demon through the faith of the mother apart from the daughter's faith, and similar situations occurred with the king's son, and the paralytic.¹⁰¹ In *Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage*, Luther used Jesus' consistent response to intercession of parents on behalf of their children to console women with the hope that prayers for their children who died before they were able to be baptized could be answered with the same mercy. In this one exception that Luther made to his claim that only baptized children are saved, he focused on Jesus' saving power through the parents of the children, not the children themselves, and therefore continued to limit the possibility of salvation to those who were born to Christian parents. He suggested that God could follow His frequent pattern throughout scripture and save the children of those who believed in Him.

Universal Infant Salvation Interpretation

However, proponents of the view that all infants are saved believe that the passages about Jesus' healings of children tell less about who the kids and their parents

¹⁰¹ Luther, *Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage*, LW 43:250.

were and more about who the biblical God is. Therefore, while interpreting the passages, they focus on the character Jesus displays, and use this to make conclusions concerning His Father in heaven. It is true that because they were children, they depended on the faith of their parents to initially bring them to Jesus. However, once they were there, Jesus had compassion for the children, and He exerted Himself for their benefit. His actions showed that the children themselves were proper objects of His saving grace.¹⁰² The examples Jesus offered were children who were unbaptized,¹⁰³ so these healings of specific children fit in with Jesus' stated general love for all children. He was one who gave freely to those who were ready to receive.¹⁰⁴

According to the supporters of universal infant salvation, these actions of Jesus on Earth demonstrated the character of His Father in heaven, and therefore can be applied to both persons of God. In solely considering Jesus' healings of children, the damnation of any infants seems inconsistent with God's known character. This character was stated even more clearly when, in another instance, Jesus specified that "it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Matthew 18.14) While developing a systematic theology for the Nazerene Church, H. Orton Wiley claimed these actions of Jesus along with the "general tenor of the scriptures, when viewed in the light of divine love and the universal grace of the Spirit, will allow no other conclusion" than universal infant salvation.¹⁰⁵

While Jesus' love for children in scripture does not prove in any final way that they can be saved, it does create the basis for believing that God would be predisposed to

¹⁰² Bauer, 241.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 244.

¹⁰⁴ Weber, 231.

¹⁰⁵ Wiley.

save them.¹⁰⁶ For there is no reason to doubt that in the same way that Jesus saved children temporally on Earth, He will save them eternally in heaven.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Bauer, 244.

¹⁰⁷ Webb, 31.

Jesus' Use of Children as a Model for the Kingdom of Heaven

Another critical interaction which Jesus had with children is described in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. On the way to Capernaum, the disciples had been arguing about who among them was the greatest. When they arrived at the city and met with Jesus, He sensed the problem, took a child, put him by His side, and used him as a model for the kingdom of heaven. Once again, Jesus redefined the world normed and controlled by adults as a world in which kids were paradigmatic of God's character and activity, and showed a sharp re-evaluation of the social value of honor. Yet each of the synoptic gospels developed the theme in its own way.

In this passage, Matthew emphasized the child as a model of humility.¹⁰⁸

According to him, when Jesus summoned a child and used him as an object lesson, He said to his disciples,

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. (Matthew 18.3-5)

This gesture set the tone for the entire discourse, which placed great importance on the fortunes on the "little ones" (vv. 6, 10, 14). The greatest were said to be the lowly, the humble, and those who accept for themselves the low status of children. In fact, only those who reject the adult-like striving for power and position and instead aspire to be like children will participate in heaven's reign. In this situation, Jesus was instructing the community of disciples and especially those who exercised leadership within it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Carroll, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 131.

He taught that genuine leadership in the Christian community is marked by humility, with the young child as a model. Moreover, community leaders should not exert power over vulnerable children but act in humility toward them, knowing that hospitality shown to a young child is shown to Jesus as well.

Mark wrote for an audience oppressed and persecuted by abusive Roman authority. In response, some Christian leaders and prophets had been proclaiming an imminent powerful return of Jesus and substantiated their message through miracles and signs. Partially to counter these views, Mark used this teaching of Jesus to present children as models of discipleship.¹¹⁰ In direct response to the ignorance of His disciples, shown by their recent argument concerning greatness, Jesus summoned them to a formal teaching session, in which He not only provided a lesson, but an example to aid their learning.

He sat down and called the twelve; and He said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And He took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, He said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." (Mark 9.35-37)

The passage underscores the disciple's lack of perception.¹¹¹ In contrast, Mark presented children as people who embody an appropriate, faithful response to the work of God in the world, and in Jesus' ministry. For an example of what God's people look like, and for what it means to have a share in God's sovereign rule, Jesus pointed his disciples to young children.¹¹² A child modeled discipleship in a way the disciples could not, and was the surprising paradigm of God's character and ways in the world.

¹¹⁰ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed., s.v. "Child, Children."

¹¹¹ Carroll, 128.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 129.

Lastly, Luke emphasized children as among the poor and powerless in this passage.¹¹³ He structured the scene to begin with the report of a dispute among the disciples about who among them is the greatest, and end with Jesus' clear and unequivocal answer to this question: "He who is least among you all is the one who is great." (Luke 9.48) Between the question and answer Luke described Jesus recognizing the disciples' thoughts, setting a child among them, then explaining the gesture to mean that to when one welcomes a child, one welcomes Jesus and also God who sent him. This structuring of the story highlights Jesus' radical revision of notions of greatness (the outer frame), and also makes clear the connection between this lesson in true greatness and the image of the child (the inner verses).¹¹⁴ Jesus inverted all ideas of greatness by saying that it was the least and the lowest within the community who have real status. A child epitomized greatness by way of low status. The community for which Jesus is Lord should offer welcome and hospitality to the least among them: the children.

Luther's Interpretation

Luther acknowledged the context of the situation in which Jesus used children as an example to teach about humility, discipleship, and powerless in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke respectively. However, he believed it was wrong to interpret these passages as solely part of these contexts, with the children acting only as symbols. He argued, "the misled spirits like to fend [the significance of children] off by saying, Christ is not speaking of children, but of the humble. But this is a false note, for the text

¹¹³ Ibid., 130.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 131.

clearly says that they brought to him children, not the humble.”¹¹⁵ In addition to teaching to be humble, Jesus was teaching to be like children. Because of this, Luther interpreted the passage according to what he believed Jesus’ teaching with children taught about real children, and specifically their baptism.

In particular, Luther concluded that children were holy. If they were not, he claimed, Jesus “would indeed have given us a poor ideal with which to compare ourselves”.¹¹⁶ By claiming that Jesus saw children as holy, as themselves, and not as a result of a trait such as humility, Luther argued that their baptisms were therefore valid.¹¹⁷

Although Luther argued that Jesus’ use of children as an example showed the holiness of children as a whole and not as a result of a particular trait, he continued to analyze specific parts of children referred to in these biblical passages to counter further rebukes of the validity of infant baptism. A common argument against the baptism of infants during Luther’s time, as well as today, was that infants cannot rationally hear God’s Word, so they cannot believe, and therefore should not be baptized. Luther maintained that this was not true by citing Jesus’ use of a child as an example for people to emulate in Matthew 18.3.¹¹⁸ In his sermon on the third Sunday after Epiphany, he stated that not only are children able to have faith without reason, they are able to have a better faith because of their lack of reason. According to Luther, reason is a hindrance to understanding the work of God. Part of understanding Jesus’ use of children as an example is to understand that “Christ held before us that we must become children and

¹¹⁵ Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:240.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹⁸ Luther, “Third Sunday After Epiphany,” 277.

fools, and condemn reason”.¹¹⁹ This furthered Luther’s claim that Jesus’ use of children as examples showed that they were suitable to be baptized to additionally assert that they were possibly even more suitable for baptism than adults.

Universal Infant Salvation Interpretation

Supporters of universal infant salvation interpret Jesus’ use of children as examples drastically differently than Luther. While Luther used the passages to provide evidence that infants are acceptable to be baptized in order to be saved, supporters of universal infant salvation argue that they show that infants are acceptable to be saved without any physical act. The examples Jesus offered in the passages were children who were unbaptized and did not belong to any “Christian” organization since no such organization existed.¹²⁰ According to A.D. Bauer, one proponent of this viewpoint, “it is somewhat intuitive that the Creator would not be likely to offer as a model for salvation a human in the infant stage who in that stage either could not be saved at all or who required some external action, specific parents or some ceremony to be saved.”¹²¹

Jesus’ ministry to children showed the inverted order of the kingdom of God. In a society where children were usually a secondary focus, they were central to Jesus. When usually they were valued only as the potential products of the education, in Jesus’ ministry a child was one whose very presence became the clue to answering the disciples’ questions.¹²² Children were unconcerned with status and unburdened by privilege. Whereas Judaism held children outside the covenant until their thirteenth year, Jesus

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 277.

¹²⁰ Bauer, 244.

¹²¹ Ibid., 244.

¹²² Ian Stockton, “Children, Church and Kingdom,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): 93.

declared that children were already recipients of the kingdom. To embrace this inversion, means a “change of heart, a change of consciousness, [and] a change of values,”¹²³ not seeking to include children in the former hierarchy with adult-like requirements of earthly actions and duties.

Jesus taught that the adult must become childlike as a precondition of salvation. The incident stressed Christian childlikeness and called people to convert and become like children. But children are like children already. It would be a great contradiction for the model to be excluded and the modeled to be accepted.¹²⁴ “To present children as examples of salvation if they cannot be saved would be like offering fire as an example of cold or night as an example of sunlight.”¹²⁵ In this interpretation, proponents of universal infant salvation examine Jesus’ implied teaching of children’s welcome into the kingdom of heaven through His use of them as models, and the lack of earthly requirements these children had fulfilled. According to this interpretation, while directing the lives of adults, Jesus implicitly revealed his acceptance of children into His kingdom.

¹²³ Ibid., 93.

¹²⁴ Webb, 32.

¹²⁵ Bauer, 244.

Jesus' Welcoming of Children and Statement of the Kingdom of Heaven

Mark 10.13-16 describes one of Jesus' most significant interactions with children.

They were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them. (Mark 10.13-16)

Similar accounts of the occurrence are described in Matthew 19.13-15 and Luke 18.15-17, although Matthew used the term "kingdom of heaven" where Mark and Luke use "kingdom of God," terms which most scholars view as synonymous.¹²⁶ All three descriptions state the case without reference to the time or place of the event. Neither do they specify the kind of people bringing the children. However, they are more clear about their focal point in the passage: the children. *Paidia*, variously translated "young children", "little children" or simply "children" as it was in this passage, is held by V. Taylor and other scholars to have been children of any age from infancy to twelve years.¹²⁷ But Luke has them as *ta brephe* (infants) and Cranfield points out that *paidion* "usually denotes a young child", so they were most likely young children.¹²⁸ This is even more probable because Jesus was able to take them up in his arms.

The disciples rebuked those who brought these children. They obviously had their reasons for the rebuke which Jesus disapproved. It is not specified why the disciples

¹²⁶ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. "Kingdom of God (Heaven)."

¹²⁷ V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark. The Greek Text With Introduction, Notes and Indices* (London: MacMillan, 1977), 422, quoted in A.O. Nkwoka, "Mark 10:13-16: Jesus' Attitude to Children and Its Modern Challenges." *African Theological Journal* 14, no. 2 (1985):102.

¹²⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark. And Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: CUP, 1963), 322, quoted in A.O. Nkwoka, "Mark 10:13-16: Jesus' Attitude to Children and Its Modern Challenges." *African Theological Journal* 14, no. 2 (1985):102.

reacted this way, and whether their reaction should be understood as entailing a negative view of children is open to question. However, various reasons for their unwelcoming behavior have been advanced: they thought children were insignificant and that Jesus was too busy, they were officious, or they wanted to guard against any idea of superstition.¹²⁹

In any case, Jesus forcefully overrode the disciples' intervention. He became indignant, in one of only two references to Jesus' anger in the New Testament (the other being in Mark 3.5).¹³⁰ This suggests the seriousness of excluding children from the blessings of the reign of God. He then issued the double command "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them."

Once the children were allowed access to Him, Jesus went beyond the expectations of those who brought the children to Him. They desired simple touching. But Jesus embraced the children as kindred, and thus superior to the disciples, took them up in His arms and blessed them fervently.

The second half of what Jesus said lifted the incident from being merely a glimpse into Jesus' compassion for the children. He turned the episode into a lesson on the nature of His kingdom. His theological motive for receiving children was that "to such belongs the kingdom of God."

Luther's Interpretation

This passage from Mark 10.13-16 was appealing to Luther and other Protestant Reformers as Anabaptists challenged them to furnish their 'scripture-alone' justification

¹²⁹ James Francis, "From *Children and Childhood in the New Testament*" in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburg: T&T Clark Ltd, 1996), 74.

¹³⁰ Gundry-Volf, 37.

for baptizing babies.¹³¹ His interpretation combined it with other passages commanding the baptism of all people to demonstrate that infants are also a part of this command. From his first German *Taufbuchlein* of 1523, Luther incorporated the Markan passage.¹³² Explicitly, he adopted the text with a special zeal as the clear example and command of the Lord for infants to be baptized.¹³³ In Luther's *Table Talk*, a collection of Luther's stories and remarks collected by his students, Luther stated that the baptism of children is "distinctly enjoined" in Mark 10.14 because it demonstrated that when Jesus Christ directed his apostles to go and instruct and baptize all nations, he did not mean that children should be excluded.¹³⁴ He even included the passage as the gospel text in his order of baptism.¹³⁵

Because Luther believed that this interaction of Jesus and the children supported infant baptism, he used it frequently to convince others of the urgency of this action. In one of his sermons, after repeating Jesus' command from Mark 10.14 to allow the children to come to Him, Luther argued that "this can only be done in baptism".¹³⁶ For he believed that without baptism, God's powerful spirit does not enter into a child's life and regenerate it.¹³⁷ Therefore, he argued, since Jesus commanded to bring the children to Him, it must be right and Christian to fulfill this command in the only way possible: to baptize infants.

¹³¹ David F. Wright, "From Out, In, Out: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism" in *Dimensions of Baptism*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 205.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 203.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹³⁴ Luther, "From Of Baptism," in *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, n.d.), 201.

¹³⁵ Luther, *The New Order of Baptism*, LW 53:107.

¹³⁶ Luther, *Third Sunday After Epiphany*, 278.

¹³⁷ Zietlow, 152.

Luther also contended that this passage not only showed that Christians should baptize infants, but that they can be certain that God blesses these baptized infants and accepts all of them into the kingdom of heaven who come to Him in this way. He supported this confidence with Jesus' words when He accepted the children in Mark 10.15: "To such belongs the kingdom of God."¹³⁸ Luther used these three verses to provide a substantial part of his argument that infants should be baptized, and that this baptism is valid.

Universal Infant Salvation Interpretation

Proponents of universal infant salvation argue that Luther's interpretation of the passage from Mark 10.13-16 is not historically valid, and therefore not a sufficient support of the necessity of infant baptism. Although the passage has received little attention from scholars,¹³⁹ David F. Wright has done substantial research on the relationship between it and infant baptism. His findings show that while many times, it is only highlighted as a focal point of the paedobaptismal controversy, it was actually taken over from an originally non-baptismal setting.¹⁴⁰ There is very little evidence that the early church associated Jesus' blessing of little children with baptism. Nearly all information of baptismal liturgy in the age of the Fathers shows the use of only adult baptism, so it would be anachronistic to draw conclusions for the silence enveloping the use or non-use of Mark 10.13-16 in baptism of infants. In fact, the first unambiguous inclusion of children in the baptismal rite was in the Hippolytan *Apostolic Tradition* in

¹³⁸ Luther, *Third Sunday After Epiphany*, 278.

¹³⁹ A.O. Nkwoka, "Mark 10:13-16: Jesus' Attitude to Children and Its Modern Challenges." *African Theological Journal* 14, no. 2 (1985): 100.

¹⁴⁰ Wright, 205.

Rome early in the third century,¹⁴¹ and the first citation of Mark 10.14 for the unambiguous support of infant baptism was in the *Apostolic Constitution*, compiled probably in Syria around 400 CE.¹⁴²

In the last several years, revisers of baptismal liturgies have abandoned the reading of this synoptic incident in baptizing babies, which until then had prevailed since the Reformation. Instead, they have favored other New Testament passages which speak explicitly of baptism without specific reference to young children, because no such baptismal references are found in the New Testament. Recent revised service books have placed Mark 10.13-16 and its parallels in a place the revisers find more appropriate: non-baptismal thanksgiving for a child's birth or adoption.¹⁴³

Because supporters of universal infant salvation believe that neither the original context nor interpretation of Mark 10.13-16 indicate a need for infant baptism in order for infant salvation, they believe the passage supports the salvation of all infants, whether they are baptized or not. Jesus' interaction with the children in this circumstance confirmed this crucial idea. In fact, R. A. Webb believes it to be "the biblical passage which comes nearest to being a dogmatic proof-text on the subject of infant salvation".¹⁴⁴

In it, Jesus refers to the kingdom of God. This reference to His kingdom shows that He is the Messiah, and that He came to establish a heavenly, not earthly, kingdom. According to the first three Gospels, the proclamation of the kingdom of God was Jesus'

¹⁴¹ Geoffrey J. Cuming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students* (GLS, 8; Bramcote: Grove Books, 1976), 18, quoted in David F. Wright, "From Out, In, Out: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism" in *Dimensions of Baptism*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 193.

¹⁴² M. Metzger, *Apostolic Constitutions* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 344, quoted in David F. Wright, "From Out, In, Out: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism" in *Dimensions of Baptism*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 194.

¹⁴³ Wright, 192.

¹⁴⁴ Webb, 33.

central message.¹⁴⁵ In contrast to all that had gone before Him, who had conceived of the kingdom being established by a heavenly supernatural being, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as an event taking place in his own person and mission.¹⁴⁶ The presence of the kingdom is further seen in the fact that the rule of God, present in Jesus, is a gift to be received. This kingdom is freely inherited by the people of God. Jesus spoke of entering the kingdom (Mark 10.23-24) and receiving the gift of eternal life (Mark 10.30) as though they were synonymous.¹⁴⁷ When using children as models of how the kingdom of God is received, Jesus states that “to such belongs the kingdom of God.” Therefore, the kingdom belongs not only to them, but also to ‘such as these’--- to all who receive it without presumption and self-justification.¹⁴⁸ While “the saying leaves the reader to fill the gaps and understand ...who else could be numbered among ‘such as these’,” the actual children are clearly numbered among them.¹⁴⁹

The context of the verse shows that when Jesus referred to children as “of such is the kingdom of heaven,” he was referring to all children. A few scholars argue that the children to which Jesus referred were already members of the covenant community because, according to Matthew 19.1, the incident took place in the province of Judea and their parents exhibited a familial faith in bringing the children to Christ in the first place.¹⁵⁰ However, most point out that the crowd to whom Jesus was speaking was probably a promiscuous multitude, composed of Jews and others. He had been spending the winter months preceding the time of His crucifixion in the region of the Jordan,

¹⁴⁵ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. “Kingdom of God (Heaven).”

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. “Matthew 19.13-15.”

¹⁴⁹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1st ed., s.v. “Luke 18.15-30.”

¹⁵⁰ Bacon, 52.

beyond Jericho. Crowds from this area gathered around Him in numbers that increased daily. It was during His last public instruction in the midst of this situation that these children were brought to Him.¹⁵¹ It is also evident from the rejection that they received from the disciples that they had not been baptized by them, nor by Jesus, because Jesus did not baptize people.¹⁵² So it is most likely that Jesus was addressing a group of various unbaptized children. In addition, Jesus did not say “Let *these* children come to me,” but instead He used the more general “Let *the* children come to me,” leaving no serious dispute that the command was designed to have universal force.¹⁵³

Proponents of universal infant salvation use their determination from other areas of the Bible that membership in the kingdom of God signifies salvation, and their interpretation of the passage as including all children to make inferences about the relationship between God and infants. They conclude that Jesus’ visible physical welcome of all children was symbolic of God’s invisible spiritual welcome of all children. His invitation revealed that He was ready to receive the children with His saving grace.¹⁵⁴ His words and actions assured that there is nothing in the natural constitution of infants which stands as an undefeatable obstacle to their salvation.

¹⁵¹ Bomberger, 77.

¹⁵² Spurgeon.

¹⁵³ Bomberger, 76.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 86.

Conclusion

Luther and proponents of universal infant salvation clearly have drastically dissimilar interpretations of the gospel accounts of Jesus' interactions with children. The two focus on different theological doctrines in their interpretations: Luther emphasized original sin and baptismal necessity, while the proponents of universal infant salvation highlight the doctrine of grace. At a time when more and more people are turning to the church for answers on the topic, and it is crucial that Christians have a true and consistent response, these conflicting interpretations of the Bible have lead to different and inconsistent answers concerning the issue of infant salvation.

Luther's Views

Throughout Luther's life, he sought to restore baptism to its significance as the foundation-stone of the Christian life, and equip Christians to understand their lives as a "perpetual baptism". And although he was usually good with words, Luther seemed to have had difficulty finding words adequate to describe the transcendent importance of baptism for the Christian life.¹⁵⁵ At least he could not sufficiently praise this sacrament and its benefits. His attempts included claims that "there is no greater comfort on Earth than baptism,"¹⁵⁶ it is "far more glorious than anything else God has commanded and

¹⁵⁵ David W. Lotz, "The Sacrament of Salvation: Luther on Baptism and Justification," *Trinity Seminary Review* 6, no. 1 (1979): 3.

¹⁵⁶ Luther, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, LW 35: 28.

ordained,”¹⁵⁷ “it is so full of comfort and grace that Heaven and Earth cannot comprehend it,”¹⁵⁸ and it should remain “our highest and most precious treasure.”¹⁵⁹

Although effective in arguments against the Anabaptists of his time, Luther’s focus on baptism led to an overemphasis on the sacrament in all situations, which was detrimental to his view of infant salvation. Every one of his teachings on infant salvation was part of a larger argument for infant baptism, except for the one pastoral counseling which he wrote to console mothers who had had a miscarriage, in which he broke from his claim that baptism is necessary for salvation. This was most likely Luther’s attempt to read scripture with scripture, and join the principles of baptism from other parts of the New Testament with the gospel accounts of Jesus and children. However, in this situation his intentions to join the principles were excessive to the point of reading baptism into passages where it did not properly apply. In this way, infant baptism permeated his every thought about the subject, even when it was not originally mentioned in the text.

In his analysis of the New Covenant, Luther focused on the analogy between baptism and circumcision to support infant baptism, although historically it was not used for this purpose for almost two hundred years. Even when it was first used, it was most likely meant to apply to an extreme situation. However, Luther took the analogy out of its context of historical interpretation in order to support infant baptism. This overemphasis in its application was detrimental to its previous balance with repentance and faith, and also infant salvation.

¹⁵⁷ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW 36: 57.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

Luther also taught that infant baptism was implied in many Biblical texts about Jesus and children in which the sacrament was never mentioned. After claiming that Christ encountered John the Baptist and gave him faith while they were both still in the wombs of their mothers, Luther said that the same can be true for other children through baptism. Although, as he said, “the same Christ is present” in both situations, it is ironic and misleading that he used a story in which an infant believed without baptism and baptism is never mentioned, to prove that children can receive faith through baptism.

Luther used another instance, when Jesus used a child as a model for the kingdom of heaven, to support infant baptism when the text did not directly do so. In fact, the only times when he mentioned the significance of this passage, as it applied to children, were in reference to his perceived application to baptism. His two most significant commentaries on the passage held that Jesus’ use of children as models indicated that children were both holy and without reason, the enemy of faith. Both of these points directly addressed an Anabaptist argument against infant baptism. While they may have been effective applications in this context, by stating his applications of the passage to infant baptism as the only truth, without regard to the passage from which they originated, Luther overstated the role of baptism.

Lastly, Luther drastically overemphasized the role of baptism in Mark 10.13-16 in which Jesus welcomed the children and stated that “to such belongs the kingdom of God.” This is the clearest example of Luther stretching Jesus’ words in order to further his own ideas. Luther stated that baptism was “distinctly enjoined” in a verse that never mentioned baptism. In addition, he stated that baptism is the only way to obey Jesus’ explicit command to let the children come to Him. However, although this situation was

a part of a time of teaching for Jesus' disciples and the people around them, Jesus never referred to this sacrament that Luther claimed was central and crucial for His instructions.

When Luther used Biblical passages about Jesus and children to demonstrate that infants are suitable for baptism, he overemphasized the doctrine of baptism to give a false claim that it is necessary for salvation, as well as obscure the meaning of baptism as a rite of babyhood rather than its true significance as a sacrament of the gospel.¹⁶⁰ Some of his applications of the stories of Jesus' interactions with children to baptism were justified in response to the arguments of the Anabaptists against infant salvation. However, his overemphasis of these applications and persistence in claiming they were the only proper applications lead him to incorrectly conclude that, in general, infant salvation can only be achieved through infant baptism. Ironically he supported this claim with biblical passages that did not even mention baptism. Ultimately, his principle of baptismal regeneration, one of the most fiercely litigated doctrines, and the one that has most hindered the church in making a clear statement of doctrine on the subject of infant salvation,¹⁶¹ is based on weak support.

Views of Proponents of Universal Infant Salvation

In contrast, proponents of universal infant salvation have constructed a logical progression of their interpretations of the gospel stories of Jesus and children to prove their view. According to them, John the Baptist encountered Jesus while he was still in the womb of his mother, and was regenerated. This shows that it is possible for other infants to encounter Christ and be regenerated at a young age as well. Jesus' many

¹⁶⁰ Wright, 200.

¹⁶¹ Webb, 234.

healings of children demonstrated His love for them, His ability to heal them on Earth, and His desire to want to help them. This desire to bless children combined with His ability to regenerate them shown in the example of John the Baptist seems to predispose Jesus to regenerate all children. Then when Jesus used the children as a model for the kingdom of heaven, He taught that they were an example of what adults should become in order to be saved, and therefore already acceptable for salvation themselves. Explicitly, He said this when He declared that “to such belongs the kingdom of God,” while welcoming children into His arms. In His death and formation of the New Covenant, Jesus died so that grace could be offered to every human, and salvation could be a possibility for all, even infants. It is by this grace that all infants are saved.

Some may argue that the theory of universal infant salvation misinterprets Jesus’ teachings using children that were intended to simply be analogies to apply to real children. Jesus taught about the inverted hierarchy of importance in the kingdom of God, and as the most humble and lowly in the human race, children were his chosen models. Also, because they were among the least respected in the culture of the time, Jesus expressed His love towards them as a demonstration of His love for everyone. If the passages about children were meant exclusively for these symbolic lessons, interpreting them as demonstrations of the relationship between God and infants would lead to drastically incorrect conclusions about infant salvation.

However, there are two reasons that this is not a sufficient rebuttal of universal infant salvation. First, in relation to Luther, the acceptance of these stories as concrete lessons about the relationship between God and children, instead of solely analogies is not an adequate argument, because Luther did the same thing. When Jesus welcomed

children, Luther argued that people brought to him “children, not the humble.” His conclusions from these passages included the ways in which children should be welcomed into the church today, and the significance of this welcome for all children. He did not exclusively evaluate the supposed analogy presented. Secondly, Jesus made it clear that His interactions with children were not simply analogies. He often continued to preach about His lessons involving children by applying them to the children themselves. In Matthew 18, in the same statement in which He used a child as a model to emulate in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, He made a reference to the literal child. He said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18.5-6) In this circumstance, Jesus is referring to and teaching about the actual child. Although in the sentence prior to this teaching, He used him in a comparison, this shows that He was also using him literally. Because of this, interpreting the passages as referring to real children and not just analogies is an acceptable interpretation.

After establishing that Jesus was teaching about real children, others may argue that supporters of universal infant salvation use a method of interpretation that could be seen as similar to that of which I accused Luther. While Luther interpreted each passage according to his views on baptism, proponents of universal infant salvation view them from the perspective of salvation. They use the earthly relationships and teachings that they see demonstrated between Jesus and children in the gospels, and interpret them as being representative of those children’s future salvation. However, I believe that this focus in their interpretation is justified according to the identity of Jesus. Even if it does

not always use a formally salvific terminology, the Bible introduces on practically every page the theme of salvation.¹⁶² In particular, the actions of Jesus, whose name means “God is salvation”, should be observed according to this possible and probable application to salvation. As the one and only Savior, His life should be interpreted accordingly. In particular, His teachings involving children and the kingdom of God (which is a “reverent circumlocution for divine salvation”¹⁶³) should have a significant effect on any doctrine of infant salvation.

Thus, universal infant salvation is a more appropriate interpretation of the interactions of Jesus and children. “And if infant salvation be taught in the sacred scriptures, it is true, however much it may now seem to us to conflict with predestination, election, baptismal regeneration, the necessity of personal repentance and faith, or any other doctrine we may have learned from the Master’s lips, or include in our creed.”¹⁶⁴ Although much of the understanding of the combination of these doctrines is beyond the limitations of our finite minds, it is worth further study to attempt to fit them in with the found truth of universal infant salvation.

Applications for Today

The biblical doctrine that by grace all infants go to heaven should be involved in pastoral counseling for anyone who has experienced the death of a child. In the same way that Luther attempted to calm the fears of women who had had a miscarriage with his article on the subject, the truth of this even greater hope should be used to comfort

¹⁶² *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed., s.v. “Salvation.”

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Bomberger, 73.

anyone who needs it. Clergy can certainly assure mourners that their child was accepted by God into heaven.

But this doctrine can be used for more than pastoral counseling. The church can learn to welcome children in the same universally-inclusive way in which Jesus has. Children, according to Christ Himself, have a place in the worship services of the church singing to the glory of God and praising Him.¹⁶⁵ For God has called us to worship Him in the congregation of His saints, and children are definitely included in the scope of that call. Any earthly actions toward children should be based on the eternal love and acceptance which Jesus has offered to each of them.

¹⁶⁵ Bacon, 70.

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