

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

# Already His

*Raising Baptized Children Without the Revivalist Playbook*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Child at the Font

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The first classroom a baptized child ever enters is not a classroom at all. It is the front of the church, near the font, with a pastor holding him and a congregation watching. He cannot follow a word of what is said. He may cry through the whole thing. But that morning he is taught the most important lesson of his life, and he is taught it not by explanation but by deed. God speaks his name, joins his promise to water, and makes the child his own.

Everything a parent or teacher does afterward is commentary on that morning. If we want to know how to teach a baptized child, we have to begin where God began with him.

### WHAT JESUS DID WITH CHILDREN

The Gospels give us one scene in particular that the church has read at baptisms for centuries.

And 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 on them. (Mark 10:13-16)

Luke, telling the same story, uses a word that means babies: “Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them” (Luke 18:15). These were not children old enough to give a testimony. They were carried. Someone else brought them, and Jesus received them.

Notice three things about the scene.

First, Jesus is indignant. Mark rarely tells us that Jesus was angry, and this is one of the few places he does. What angered him was not the children’s lack of understanding. It was the disciples’ assumption that the children had no business being there until they were older. The disciples were acting as gatekeepers, and Jesus would not have it.

Second, Jesus says the kingdom belongs to such as these. He does not say the kingdom will belong to them once they grow up and decide. He says it belongs to them now. Then he turns the lesson around on the adults: whoever does not receive the kingdom *like a child* will not enter it. The child is not the model of a person who must one day become qualified. The child is the model of how anyone receives the kingdom at all, with empty hands.

Third, Jesus does something. He takes them in his arms, lays his hands on them, and blesses them. The whole scene is about what Jesus gives. The children contribute nothing but their presence, and their presence was arranged by others.

That is a baptism in miniature. The church has always read it that way, and rightly.

### **WHAT BAPTISM GIVES**

When the Small Catechism asks what baptism gives or profits, it answers directly: “It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare” (SC IV). Then it points to Jesus’ own words in Mark 16:16: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.”

The catechism is not overstating the case. The apostles speak of baptism in exactly these terms.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38-39). Forgiveness and the Holy Spirit are given in baptism, and the promise is extended explicitly to children.

Paul tells Titus that God “saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The new birth is a washing, and it is God’s mercy, not our works.

Peter, writing about the flood, says plainly: “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

Paul tells the Galatians, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). He tells the Romans that “all of us who have been baptized into

Christ Jesus were baptized into his death,” so that “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

And Jesus himself told Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Put these together and the picture is unmistakable. In baptism God forgives sins, gives the Holy Spirit, gives new birth, joins the baptized to the death and resurrection of Christ, clothes him with Christ, and saves him. None of these passages carves out an exception for the young. Peter goes out of his way to include them.

The Large Catechism puts the whole matter in a single sentence: the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is to save (LC IV.24). That is what happened at the font on the morning your child was baptized. Not a symbol of salvation. Not a promise that salvation might come later. Salvation.

#### **A MEMBER, NOT A CANDIDATE**

One way to feel the difference between the two classrooms described in the introduction is to listen to the vocabulary each one uses about children.

The revivalist classroom speaks the language of candidacy. Children are “unsaved” or “not yet saved.” They are “reached” or “won.” Lessons “present the Gospel” so that children can “respond.” Teachers track “decisions.” The child is outside the house, and the teacher’s job is to persuade him to come in.

Scripture and the catechism speak the language of membership. The baptized child has “put on Christ.” He has been “born of water and the Spirit.” The promise is “for your children.” He is, in Paul’s image, a member of the body (1 Corinthians 12:13: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”). The child is inside the house, and the teacher’s job is to teach him the household’s ways, tell him the family story, and keep pointing him to the table.

This difference is not a matter of emphasis. A candidate and a member are different kinds of people with different needs. A candidate needs persuading. A member needs nourishing. A candidate is told what he must do to get in. A member is told what has been done for him and what it means to live as one who belongs.

Baptized children are members. They are not members on probation, waiting to ratify the arrangement once they reach the age of reason. They are members because God made them members, and God does not make provisional promises.

This does not mean a baptized child cannot fall away. Chapter 12 deals honestly with that sorrow. Faith can be lost, and a person can despise the gift he was given. But the remedy for that danger is never to treat the gift as though it had not been given. The remedy is to keep returning the child to it.

#### **WHAT THE OLD RITE SAID OUT LOUD**

For most of the church's history, the baptismal service itself taught everyone present what was happening to the child. The words of the rite were a kind of catechism for the congregation. When Martin Luther prepared a German order of baptism, first in 1523 and in revised form in 1526, he kept much of the inherited service and put it into the language of the people so they could understand it. That revised order, often called the Baptismal Booklet, is printed in many editions of the Book of Concord. Its words are worth listening to again, because each part confesses something about the child.

**The exorcism.** Near the beginning, the minister addressed the devil directly: "Depart, you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit." Modern ears find this startling, and many later Lutheran orders dropped it. But the words confessed something true. The child is born under the power of sin and the devil (Ephesians 2:1-3; Psalm 51:5), and God is about to rescue him. Baptism is not a pleasant family ceremony. It is a deliverance. The child is carried out of one kingdom and into another (Colossians 1:13).

**The sign of the cross.** The child was marked with the cross on the forehead and on the breast. Before he could say a word about Jesus, he was claimed for the crucified Lord, head and heart.

**The Flood Prayer.** Luther's order includes a prayer that walks through God's saving acts with water. It recalls how God drowned the unbelieving world in the flood and preserved faithful Noah and his family in the ark; how he drowned Pharaoh in the Red Sea and led Israel through on dry ground; and how, by the baptism of his Son in the Jordan, he sanctified water for a saving flood. Then it asks God to look in mercy on this child, to bless him with true faith by the Spirit, and to drown in him everything inherited from Adam, so that, kept safe in the ark of the church, he may serve God's name with joy and come at last to eternal life.

That prayer frames the child's whole life in a single picture. Baptism is the flood. The old Adam drowns in it. The child is lifted into the ark. Everything that follows, from catechism to confirmation to the deathbed, is life in the ark.

**The Gospel reading.** Then the minister read Mark 10, the very passage we began with, and prayed the Lord's Prayer with his hand on the child's head. Jesus' welcome to

the little children was not an illustration added later. It was read over the child as the warrant for what the church was about to do.

**The questions.** The child was asked whether he renounced the devil and all his works and ways, and whether he believed in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The sponsors answered for him. That is not pretense. It is the church confessing that faith is God's gift and that the child is being brought into the faith of the church, which God will work in him by his word. Chapter 2 takes up this question directly.

**The washing and the blessing.** After the child was baptized in the triune name, he was clothed in a white garment, and the minister spoke a blessing over him: that the almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who had given him new birth by water and the Holy Spirit and forgiven all his sins, would strengthen him with grace to eternal life.

Read that sequence again and ask what it teaches about the child. He was under the devil's power. He has been delivered. He has been marked as Christ's. The old Adam has been drowned. He has been carried into the ark. Jesus has received him as he received the children in Galilee. He has been born again and forgiven. He is now to be strengthened unto eternal life.

There is no step in that rite where the child is left outside, waiting for a later decision. There is no hint that what happened that day is provisional. The rite is the church saying out loud, in the child's presence and the congregation's hearing, *This one is already his*.

We do not need to restore every ceremony of the sixteenth century to keep that confession. Luther himself said the outward ceremonies were not the main thing; the main thing was the word of God and the faith of the church. But we do need to notice what the rite said, because many of our children's classrooms now say something else.

#### **WHOSE WORK IS IT?**

It helps at this point to clear up a confusion that sits underneath much of the trouble in children's ministry. In many Christian traditions, the ceremony performed over an infant is understood as something the parents or the church do for God. Parents dedicate their child. They promise to raise him in the faith. The church promises to help. All of that is good, but in that understanding the infant himself receives nothing from God that day. He will receive salvation later, when he believes and decides.

The Lutheran confession of baptism runs in the opposite direction. Baptism is first and foremost God's work, not ours. The Large Catechism insists that to be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself, so that although it is performed by human hands, it is truly God's own act (LC IV.10). The water is not plain water. It is water "included in God's command and connected with God's Word" (SC IV). The power is in the word, and the word is God's.

That is why the parents' faith, the pastor's holiness, and the child's understanding are not what make a baptism real. Luther's Large Catechism makes the point that baptism does not become invalid even if it is received without faith, because it rests on God's command and word, not on us (LC IV.52-53). That does not mean faith is unnecessary; the gift is received by faith, and the Spirit gives that faith. It means the gift is a solid thing, given from outside the child, that does not fluctuate with his moods or his age.

This matters enormously for teaching. If baptism is chiefly what parents do for God, then a child's spiritual life really does begin later, at the moment he does something for God himself, and the classroom should be aimed at that moment. If baptism is chiefly what God does for the child, then his spiritual life began at the font, and the classroom should be aimed at teaching him what God did and keeps doing.

#### **TEACHING A MEMBER**

What does it look like to teach a child as a member rather than a candidate? Part Three of this book answers in detail. For now, three habits are worth naming, because they flow directly from the font.

**Speak to the child as baptized.** The simplest change many teachers can make is in their pronouns and tenses. Instead of "Jesus wants to forgive you," say "Jesus has forgiven you, and he forgives you today." Instead of "If you trust Jesus, you can be God's child," say "You are God's child. He made you his own when you were baptized." For children in the class who are not yet baptized, which happens and should be handled warmly, the teacher can say "Jesus wants you to be his too, and he gives himself to us in baptism," and then speak with the pastor and the family. But the default address to a baptized child should be the indicative: this is who you are.

**Teach the gift before the demand.** The Ten Commandments are part of the catechism, and children need them. They need to hear that they are sinners, that sin is serious, and that they cannot fix themselves. But in a classroom of baptized children, the Law is not preached to bring them to a first conversion as though they had never been brought to Christ. It is preached to show them their sin so that the Gospel, which has already

been given them and is given again, can be heard as good news. The Law drives them back to the font, not toward a line they have never crossed.

**Point back to the font.** When a child is afraid, when he has done something wrong and knows it, when he asks whether he is going to heaven, the answer is not to ask him to look inside at his own sincerity. The answer is to point him outside, to the water and the word. “You are baptized. On that day God said you were his. He doesn’t take that back. Let’s tell him you’re sorry, and let’s hear what he says to sorry sinners.” Luther gave every Christian, children included, the words for this: when sin and conscience weigh on us, we can say, “But I am baptized!” (LC IV.44). Children can learn that sentence before they can read.

### THE FIRST LESSON, REMEMBERED

The baptized child does not remember his baptism. That is not a weakness of infant baptism; it is a picture of grace. None of us remembers being born, but no one doubts that it happened or that it made us who we are. We know it because we were told, and the people who told us were there.

In the same way, the child learns of his baptism by being told, again and again, by parents, teachers, and pastor who were there and who believe God’s word about it. Every lesson that follows is, in one way or another, the retelling of that first one. *On that day, God made you his. Here is what that means. Here is the story of the God who did it. Here is how his children live. Here is the table he is preparing for you.*

That retelling is the whole work of catechesis. The rest of this book is about doing it faithfully, and about recognizing when the materials in our hands are telling the child a different story.

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*This is where the sample ends. The rest of Already His is the invitation it opens onto.*

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