

Might Cicero Be Saved? (And Similar Questions)

...it often happens that devout parents, particularly the wives, have sought consolation from us because they have suffered such agony and heartbreak in child-bearing when, despite their best intentions and against their will, there was a premature birth or miscarriage and their child died at birth or was born dead. ...

First, inasmuch as one cannot and ought not know the hidden judgment of God in such a case – why, after every possible care had been taken, God did not allow the child to be born alive and be baptized – these mothers should calm themselves and have faith that God’s will is always better than ours, though it may seem otherwise to us from our human point of view. ...

Second, because the mother is a believing Christian it is to be hoped that her heartfelt cry and deep longing to bring her child to be baptized will be accepted by God as an effective prayer. ... Who can doubt that those Israelite children who died before they could be circumcised on the eighth day were yet saved by the prayers of their parents in view of the promise that God willed to be their God? God (they say) has not limited his power to the sacraments, but has made a covenant with us through his word. Therefore we ought to speak differently and in a more consoling way with Christians than with pagans or wicked people (the two are the same), even in such cases where we do not know God’s hidden judgment. For he says and is not lying, “All things are possible to him who believes” [Mark 9:23], even though they have not prayed, or expected, or hoped for what they would have wanted to see happen. Enough has been said about this. Therefore one must leave such situations to God and take comfort in the thought that he surely has heard our unspoken yearning and done all things better than we could have asked.

In summary, see to it that above all else you are a true Christian and that you teach a heartfelt yearning and praying to God in true faith, be it in this or any other trouble. Then do not be dismayed or grieved about your child or yourself, and know that your prayer is pleasing to God and that God will do everything much better than you can comprehend or desire. “Call upon me,” he says in Psalm 50[:15], “in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” For this reason one ought not straightway condemn such infants for whom and concerning whom believers and Christians have devoted their longing and yearning and praying. Nor ought one to consider them the same as others for whom no faith, prayer, or yearning are expressed on the part of Christians and believers. God intends that his promise and our prayer or yearning which is grounded in that promise should not be disdained or rejected, but be highly valued and esteemed. (Martin Luther, “Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968], pp. 247-50)

The question remains whether an unborn infant, with only a hand or a foot projecting from the womb, can be baptized. Here I will confess my ignorance and make no hasty decision. I am not sure whether the reason they give is sufficient – that in any part of the body whatsoever the entire soul resides. For it is not the soul but the body that is externally baptized with water. But neither do I share the view of those who insist that he who is not yet born cannot be born again (even though it has considerable force). I leave these things to the teaching of the Spirit, and meanwhile allow everyone to enjoy his own opinion [Rom. 14:5]. (Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the

Church,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 36 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], p. 74)

If the uncircumcised males of the Jews are lost, what is one to conclude about infants who died before the eighth day? What about the other sex, the girls? Likewise, what about our own infants, either those who are stillborn or those who die shortly after birth, before they are baptized? Concerning infants who died before the eighth day the answer is easy, just as it is easy to give an answer about our own infants who die before Baptism. For they do not sin against the covenant of circumcision or of Baptism. Since the Law commands them to be circumcised on the eighth day, could God condemn those who die before the eighth day? Accordingly, the souls of those infants must be left to the will of the Heavenly Father, whom we know to be merciful. Furthermore, what Paul says in a gentle manner about “those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam” (Rom. 5:14) and about Jacob and Esau – “though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad” (Rom. 9:11) – holds true in their case too. Even though infants bring with them inborn sin, which we call original sin, it is nevertheless important that they have committed no sin against the Law. Since God is by nature merciful, He will not let their condition be worse because they were unable to obtain circumcision in the Old Testament or Baptism in the New Testament. With regard to the girls among the Jews the answer is easy. For because this sign was prescribed only for the male sex, it does not pertain to the girls. Nevertheless, since the girls are Abraham’s descendants, they are not excluded from Abraham’s righteousness; they attain it through faith. But those adults who despised circumcision or who despise Baptism are surely damned. (Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 3 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961], p. 103)

As to the question which has been raised about infants who died before the eighth day I know this: that they are not condemned by this law concerning circumcision. But my answer to the question what God does with them is that I know that I do not know. If they became eight days old and were not circumcised, they would not belong to the people of God. But when they die before the eighth day, this is a matter of God’s judgment, of which I have no knowledge; it is beyond me, except that I know that God is merciful. This good thing God wanted me to know, for He informs me to this effect in His Word. But He did not want me to know the other things. In this way we stay on the road which God Himself has pointed out to us through His command and promises. On it one cannot go astray. (Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 3, p. 140)

...even though the Gentiles are excluded from circumcision, they are nevertheless not excluded from the blessing if they believe with faithful Abraham. But for the Jews bodily circumcision was also necessary over and above faith; for if they slighted circumcision, they ceased to be the people of God and were not only excluded from the government of this people but from the blessing which the Seed that was promised those who were circumcised would bring. Heaven was closed to them, their sins were retained to them, and their reward was hell and its fire. This is truly being excluded from the people of God. This statement...does not involve infants who died before the eighth day. Even though they have original sin, a merciful God will nevertheless find a way to deliver them, just as He does with other sinners. But so far as this threat is concerned, they are delivered from it, because they have committed no sin against the law of circumcision. There remains in them the guilt of birth or of original sin and no guilt so far as circumcision is concerned.

One must have the same opinion about the little boys who were not circumcised either

because of the carelessness or the wickedness of their parents, just as today there are some who are not baptized, as, for instance, Pope Clement VII, about whom there was a persistent rumor that he had not been baptized. Such little children should be committed to the dispensation of the goodness of God. For what guilt against this law have the little children who either die or are neglected by ungodly parents? Therefore they should be left to the goodness of God and should not be condemned as the scholastics have condemned them. (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 143-44)

...there is the question why God wanted the males circumcised on the eighth day... I myself...think that this question should be dealt with briefly; for what concern is it of mine why God wanted it so, when the fact that He did want it so is sufficient? One should not inquire into the reason for God's will, just as one should not inquire into the reason for His wisdom, His omnipotence, and His goodness. For these things are inscrutable, and the condition we are in demands, not that we ask why but that we obey Him who commands. ... Above all, however, maintain with certainty that the males who died before the eighth day were not condemned by reason of this law; for they in no wise sinned against this law. Neither did the women, who although they were not circumcised, nevertheless were part of the people of God. The Master of the Sentences and other teachers argue that such infants perish; but we have here a clear text on which we can safely rely, a text which states that God condemns neither the uncircumcised infants nor those who have been circumcised after the eighth day. But if you were to debate about the original sin of infants, that is a different question. Here we are asking about circumcision, concerning which the Lord makes the statement that the soul of the infant the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day must be rooted out of the people of God.

This threat must not be extended or given a wider scope than God gave to it. But from this law, which deals with infants who were uncircumcised after the eighth day, it follows with sound logic that those who do not get to be eight days old will not be condemned. A well-known rule states that kindnesses must be increased but that stern measures must be restricted. Here we are doing this to the glory of God. For it is His nature to forgive and to have compassion. Therefore we do not maintain that He is too severe toward the infants of His own people whom death has prevented from being able to obtain this covenant; for He "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4). This statement must be adduced against those teachers, and the promises must be given the widest scope. Wrath and harshness, however, must be curtailed. With much greater justification this maxim, which is drawn from the experience of ordinary life, will have validity here! Christ says (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13): "For if you who are evil can give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?"

Therefore let us not debate about the little children who were uncircumcised before the eighth day; let us leave them to the goodness of God. But let us debate about things that are not uncertain and unknown, about things that have been enjoined upon us by the divine Word. Let us not be concerned about what God does with others. As for ourselves, let us listen to Christ, as the Father's voice from heaven commands. But the secrets of the Divine Majesty which God has not revealed to us in His Word – let us pass them by and leave them untouched. Then we shall not be cast down headlong. Accordingly, Sirach is right when he warns (Ecclus. 3:22): "Seek not the things that are too high for you," for the exploration of the Divine Majesty has not been committed to us. Nor is it expedient for us. For he who searches out majesty is overwhelmed by it (cf. Prov. 25:27). As I have often said, God in His essence is incomprehensible and dwells in a light which we cannot approach even with our thoughts (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16), and to want to inquire into His judgments is truly

to strive for things that are impossible. Therefore we must stay with the Word; there we must hear what He promises us and what He threatens. This is done with profit, as the first and the 119th psalm teach. The other things, which have not been revealed in the Word, must simply be dismissed; for one cannot meddle with them without danger. (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 137-38)

The common consensus of opinion has ever been that if a person dies a believer, though unbaptized, he would not be condemned, for a case like this might happen that a person is a believer, and though desiring baptism, he is overtaken by a sudden death, as happens occasionally in the case of infants before, during or after their birth. Now, these infants had been previously offered and commended to Christ by faith and prayers of their parents or other people, and in accordance with His promise: "Suffer the little children to come unto me," etc. – He no doubt receives them. (Martin Luther, *Church Postil*. Halle, XI 1332 ff.; quoted in William H. T. Dau, *Lectures on Graebner's Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* [St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Mimeo Company, n.d.], 59-60)

Should we pray for the dead? Here in this Gospel reading [Luke 16:19-31] no middle state is pointed out between the bosom of Abraham and hell; those in Abraham's bosom do not need that prayer, and it does not benefit those in hell. We have no command from God to pray for the dead; therefore, no one can sin if they do not pray for them. No one can sin in what God has not commanded or forbidden. Yet, on the other hand, since God has not let us know what the condition of the souls is, and we must be uncertain about what is happening with them, we would not and could not prevent them nor make it a sin to pray for them. We know for certain from the Gospels [Mark 5:42; Luke 7:15; 8:55; John 11:44; Matt. 27:52] that many dead people have been raised, and we must confess that they had not yet received their final verdict. Thus we also cannot be certain that any other person has received his final verdict.

Now, since this is uncertain, and we do not know whether the soul has been sentenced, it is not a sin to pray for them. However, you should pray in such a way that you let it remain uncertain and say, "Dear God, if the soul is still in the state that it can be helped, then I pray that You would be gracious to it." When you have done that once or twice, then cease and commend the soul to God. God has promised that He will hear what we pray. Therefore, when you have prayed once or three times, you should believe that He has granted your prayer and never again pray it, so that you do not tempt or mistrust God. (Martin Luther, "Gospel for the First Sunday after Trinity," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 78 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015], p. 64)

This they call God's "ordered" power, namely, when He makes use of the service either of angels or of human beings. ... But if at times some things happen without the service either of angels or human beings, you would be right in saying: "What is beyond us does not concern us." We must keep the ordered power in mind and form our opinion on the basis of it. God is able to save without Baptism, just as we believe that infants who, as sometimes happens through the neglect of their parents or through some other mishap, do not receive Baptism are not damned on this account. But in the church we must judge and teach, in accordance with God's ordered power, that without that outward Baptism no one is saved. (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 3, p. 274)

They [the papists] maintain that while those [unbaptized] infants are damned, they are not suffering punishment by fire or by worms but are merely without the vision of God. They do not have the light which would enable them to see God and the angels. Nevertheless, they are not tormented. ... We have overturned all this completely and maintain that unbaptized infants do not have such a sphere. But in what state they are or what becomes of them we commend to the goodness of God. They do not have faith or Baptism; but whether God receives them in an extraordinary manner and gives them faith is not stated in the Word, and we dare not set down anything as certain. To be deprived of the vision of God is hell itself. (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 4 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964], p. 315)

...Peter...says in 1 Peter 3:18ff. that Christ died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order that he would bring us to God. He was, indeed, put to death according to the flesh but made alive according to the spirit. In the same, He in spirit, came and preached to those who were in prison, who were once unbelieving when one waited on the patience of God at the time of Noah, while the ark was being constructed. Here Peter clearly says that Christ appeared not only to the dead fathers and patriarchs, some of whom Christ, as He arose, no doubt raised with Himself to eternal life; but that He also preached to some who at the time of Noah did not believe and waited on the patience of God, that is, who hoped God would not deal so harshly with all flesh. He (Christ) did this preaching in order that they might know that their sins were forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ. (Martin Luther, Commentary on Hosea, St. Louis Edition VI, 1224 [translated by Gaylin R. Schmeling])

[1 Peter 3:]19. In which He went and preached to the spirits in prison, 20. who formerly did not believe when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21. 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 clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22. who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to Him.

This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle means. At first the words give the impression that Christ preached to the spirits, that is, to the souls who did not believe many years ago, when Noah was building the ark. I do not understand this. Nor can I explain it. Nor has anyone ever explained it. But if anyone chooses to maintain that after Christ had died on the cross, He descended to the souls and preached to them there, I will not stand in the way. These words could give such a meaning. But I do not know whether St. Peter wants to say this.

On the other hand, these words could also be understood to mean that after the Lord Christ had ascended into heaven, He came in the spirit and preached, yet in such a way that His preaching was not physical. For He does not speak with a physical voice and no longer performs the natural functions of the body. Therefore if this meaning, which the words seem to express, is correct, namely, that He preached to the spirits in His spiritual life, such preaching must also be a spiritual preaching which He does inwardly in the heart and in the soul, so that it is not necessary for Him to go with the body and preach orally. The text does not state that He descended to the souls and preached to them when He died; for it reads "in which," that is, when He was put to death according to the flesh and was made alive according to the spirit, namely, when He divested Himself of His existence in the flesh and of the natural functions of the body and entered into a spiritual existence

and life such as He now has in heaven. Then He went and preached. Now He did not descend again into hell after He had assumed such a new existence. Therefore one must understand these words to mean that He did this after His resurrection. Since these words tend to force one to conclude that spiritual preaching is spoken of, we shall cling to the opinion that St. Peter is speaking of the office which Christ administers through external preaching. For He commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel physically. But in addition to the preaching, He Himself comes, is spiritually present, and speaks and preaches to the hearts of the people, just as the apostles address their words orally and physically to the ears of the people. Then Christ preaches to the spirits who are in captivity in the prison of the devil. Thus the going, like the preaching, should be understood in a spiritual sense. (Martin Luther, "Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 30 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967], pp. 112-14)

But here [in the Flood] God's wrath makes no difference; it overwhelms and destroys the adults together with the infants, the cunning together with the artless. This horrible punishment seems to have induced the apostle Peter, like someone in a frenzy, to utter words we cannot understand even today. This is what he says (1 Peter 3:18-20): "Christ was made alive in the spirit, in which He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water." It is surely an amazing verdict and almost a frenzied utterance that this awful spectacle appears to have wrung from the apostle. Peter declares by these very words that there was some unbelieving world to which the departed Christ preached after His death. If this is true, who would doubt that Christ brought Moses and the prophets with Him to those people bound in prison, in order to make a new and believing world out of an unbelieving one? Peter's words surely sound as though they conveyed this meaning, although I would not make any authoritative statement about them. Furthermore, there is no doubt that those whom he calls the "unbelieving world" are not the godless despisers of the Word and the tyrants; of these it is sure that they were condemned if they were destroyed in their sins. He appears to be applying the term "unbelieving world" to infants and others whose artlessness prevented them from being able to believe; they were carried away by the offenses of the world as by a swift stream and were engulfed, so that they perished together with it and only eight souls were saved. Thus Peter emphasizes the vastness of the horrible wrath. But he also praises the patience of God for not removing the saving Word from those who, at the time, counted on God's patience and therefore did not believe or could not be persuaded that God would subject the entire world at the same time to such shocking punishments. We do not know how this was done; but this we know and believe: that God is wonderful in His works and is all-powerful. Therefore He who preached to the living when He was alive, also was able to preach to the dead when He was dead; for all things hear, feel, and touch Him, even though human comprehension does not grasp this. Yet it is no disgrace, even if we lack knowledge about some mysteries of the Holy Scriptures. The apostles had their own individual revelations, about which it is presumptuous and foolish to engage in extensive discussions. One such revelation dealt with Christ's teaching the souls of those who perished at the time of the Flood; to this it is perhaps fitting to apply the section in the Creed that speaks of Christ's descent into hell. (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 2 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960], pp. 85-86)

Cicero was an excellent philosopher; he felt that the soul is immortal. Just so he has excellently described natural, moral, and rational philosophy. He was a precious man, a man who had read and

passed judgment on many things and then could also speak. He wrote about his subject in earnest, did not play so and Grecize (*graecissavit*) as did Aristotle and Plato. I hope our Lord God will be gracious to him and his like, though it is not for us to judge and determine this matter. Rather we should remain with the revealed word: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). But as to whether God could make some other provision and discriminate among other people in His own time and way, it does not behoove us to know. For there will be a new heaven and a new earth, wider and broader than the present. He can well reward individuals according to their merits. (Martin Luther, quoted in *What Luther Says* [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959], pp. 1050-51 [WA-T 3, 3904, 3925])

Cicero is the best philosopher, for he felt that the soul is immortal. He wrote best on natural, moral, and rational philosophy. He is a valuable man, reading with judgment and able to express himself well. He wrote in earnest and did not fool like the Greeks Plato and Aristotle. I hope God will forgive such men as Cicero their sins. Even if he should not be redeemed, he will enjoy a situation in hell several degrees higher than that destined for our Cardinal of Mayence. (Martin Luther, quoted in Preserved Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* [second edition] [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914], p. 342)

My gracious lord, Count Albrecht of Mansfeld, etc., has requested me to instruct you, gracious sir, by letter on the question whether God can or will save people who die without faith. ...we have formidable passages of Scripture [to the effect] that God cannot and will not save anyone without faith. Mark 16[:16] says, “He who does not believe will be lost.” Also Hebrews 11[:6], “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” Also John 3[:5], “Whoever is not born of water and the Spirit cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Also John 3[:18], “He who does not believe is condemned already.” If God were to save anyone without faith, he would be acting contrary to his own words and would give himself the lie; yes, he would deny himself. And that is impossible for, as St. Paul declares, God cannot deny himself [II Tim. 2:13]. It is as impossible for God to save without faith as it is impossible for divine truth to lie. That is clear, obvious, and easily understood... It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. Who would doubt God’s ability to do that? No one, however, can prove that he does do this. (Martin Luther, Letter to Hans von Rechenberg [1522], *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968], pp. 51, 53-54)

Then there was talk about the blood of the Anabaptists that Ferdinand [Archduke of Austria] had spilled and about the constancy of the Anabaptists. Peter Weller asked whether they would be saved. The doctor [Martin Luther] replied, “We judge according to the gospel: he who doesn’t believe in Christ can’t be saved [John 3:18]. Therefore we must be sure that they are in error, etc. However, God can also act outside the prescribed rule, although we can’t judge otherwise.” (Table Talk #1444 [1532], *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 54 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], p. 152)

[Martin Luther said:] “Zwingli drew his sword. Therefore he has received the reward that Christ spoke of, ‘All who take the sword will perish by the sword’ [Matt. 26:52]. If God has saved him, he has done so above and beyond the rule.” (Table Talk #1451 [1532], *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 54, p. 152)

ADDENDUM

Another matter which has worried me for some time: In your absolutely correct and necessary insistence that Christ is the *only* Way to Salvation, do formulate more carefully especially as regards hell. It is surely not helpful to be insisting at every turn that such and such shall undoubtedly burn in eternal hell. As with unbaptised babies, so with those who never heard the Gospel, for instance, the Church has been much more reticent than that. We certainly don't want to give the impression that we share the idea attributed to my hero, Thomas Aquinas, that knowledge of the tortures of the wicked will be part of the joys of Heaven! On the basis, particularly, of I Peter 3 and 4, I have for some years believed that God may yet have more and other ways of mercy in Christ than what He has told us about. Of course, I agree with the Preus statement that we cannot act on the basis of the assumption that there *are* other ways after death. *We* are bound to God's revealed will, and must act accordingly. But He is not bound not to do more, or to be more merciful than He has promised! Of course it is clear that if one takes I Peter 3 & 4 in its most obvious, natural, historical-grammatical sense, as giving a case of salvation of such as died while still impenitent on earth, that too is not an instance of another way, outside of Christ: He is still the *only* Way, but He offered that Way to those beyond the grave.

To repeat, we cannot base our proclamation or ecclesiastical action on this sort of speculation, but are bound to God's revealed will. But, as Dr. Koehne once pointed out to me: when Adam sinned, all he knew was 'the day you eat thereof you shall surely die.' He knew nothing, because God had not revealed it, about any future Savior or Salvation. Yet God had already provided this. Hence I like the explanation a Russian Orthodox lay-theologian once gave me of the formula '*anathema maranatha*': it means that the Church's judgments (*anathema*) stand until the Lord returns (*maranatha*). Then the Great Judge will make His own decisions.

In any case, I think John 21:21, 22 has some relevancy: To Peter's question 'What about him?' the Lord replies 'That's my business – you just follow me.' I think the whole Bible is like that. It tells me my duty, responsibility, and opportunity – but I'm not to become too theoretically dogmatic about my neighbor's fate. That's up to God.

I am by no means arguing against the seriousness of the Last Judgment, or the reality of hell – only I believe these things should not be stressed sort of in isolation (poor apologetics!), but must be seen in the total New Testament context. And this means to me at least that the dogmatic 'defense perimeter' around the central New Testament truth that Jesus is *the* Way, *the* Life, and *the* Truth, without Whom no one shall come to the Father, should not be overextended to such doubtfully defensible propositions as: 'Whoever cannot affirm with dogmatic certainty that all those who have never heard about Christ will undoubtedly burn eternally in hell is not an orthodox theologian.'

I realize that this is a very inadequate treatment of a very serious issue, but I do not pretend to have exhausted it. These are only random thoughts as they have occurred to me over the years. If you can contribute to their further clarification, I'd be very thankful. (Kurt E. Marquart, Letter to Herman Otten; quoted in *Christian News*, Vol. 49, No. 21 [June 6, 2011], p. 5. Emphases in original.)