

David F. Wright, *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom*. Paternoster, Milton Keynes, U.K. 2005, 117 pages. ISBN 1-84227-357-4

Infant baptism as currently practiced in our churches rests on the basis of several cherished assumptions, not all of which are regularly acknowledged. At very least, the baptism of infants is assumed to be rooted in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 14-17), to be warranted by the Great Commission (Matt. 28), and to be supported by both the uniform practice of the Apostles of Jesus and of the unbroken history of the Church. Furthermore, while acknowledging that the practice of infant baptism is compromised in numerous broad denominations which make this sacrament available 'indiscriminately', we take a measure of satisfaction in the upholding of clear standards as to which infants may be baptized. Is not infant baptism therefore in acceptably robust health among us?

Such a degree of confidence, so seemingly warranted by the uniformity of our shared assumptions about infant baptism's foundation, and our general care as to its administration is nevertheless called into question by this small but incisive volume. David F. Wright, the beloved emeritus Edinburgh professor of Patristic and Reformed Christianity, and a Church of Scotland ruling elder, here offers us a distillation of his long deliberation on this theme. He writes neither as a biblical exegete or as a dogmatician, but as a historian of doctrine. I find he writes in such a way that a fair number of our cherished assumptions are called into question. Among these are the following:

- It is seriously misleading to view the age of the Church Fathers simply as an era of infant baptism (p. 6). Of known named individuals in these centuries who were both of Christian parentage and baptized at known dates, 'the vast majority were baptized on profession of faith'.
- By the Reformation and its aftermath, what could sensibly be predicated of infant subjects of the rite came to determine theologies of baptism for persons of all ages (p.7). If vital contact had been maintained with the N.T., 'the limitations of babies could never have been allowed to prescribe what was to be taught or believed about baptism'.
- It was Augustine who provided the theology that led to infant baptism's becoming general practice for the first time in the history of the Church, perhaps in the later 5th century. (p.12)
- Today, a significant theological shift is taking place in the direction of an acknowledgement that 'the norm of baptism is faith-baptism'. (p. 15)
- The unusual prevalence of infant baptism has had the effect of placing 'too much of the NT's witness to baptism off-limits, as it were' (p.23)
- The Reformation's perpetuation of infant baptism alongside its insistence on 'faith alone' in time contributed to 'a reductionist view of baptism...This practice of insisting on a profession (of faith) places a rite of the church's devising above the ordinance of Christ (p.23)
- If infants were included in these household baptisms (e.g. Acts 16.31-34) they were included as believers (p. 36)
- Early Christian services of baptism were constructed for responding believers, with little children accommodated by others who provided (on their behalf) what the service demanded (p. 41)

But for all its trenchant qualities, evident learning and pastoral concern, this reviewer finds that Wright's volume suffers from inherent unresolved tensions. The position he is seeking to maintain can be summarized thus:

- a) It was 'faith' baptism which was the evident norm in Apostolic and post-Apostolic Christianity, with infant baptism – in the earliest centuries, at least – having the status of 'minority report'.
- b) Infant baptism, originally only this 'minority report' – became steadily more prevalent once Augustine's theology of original sin provided a plausible reason for

- the rite's necessity. It was 'grafted' liturgically on to a well-established earlier practice in which the faith-confession of the baptizand provided the first portion of an indivisible complex, the completion of which was baptism with water.
- c) The Catholic tradition after Augustine, by its institution of catechesis for the young, preparatory to a first communion – *and* the Reformation traditions by their attempts to improve this two-stage process by the substitution of profession/confession of faith for the Catholic pre-communion catechesis, have both erred in allowing to be made chronologically distinct what in the NT and early Christianity was held together.

Having traveled this far, one would expect Wright to either allow that we must revert once more to the majority report / minority report status of baptism as he alleges it to have existed in early Christianity (in which case, the historic Baptist position would be largely vindicated) *or* to argue that the practice of infant baptism ought long ago to have been provided with a foundation in liturgy and theology which made it something more than 'faith' baptism miniaturized. Either course, it might be argued, could conceivably be proposed as the apparently proper response to the history of baptismal improvisation which he has documented.

But in point of fact, Wright plumps for neither. Instead, in a final chapter (IV) the author – in a way which to my judgment is no necessary extension of the case he has built thus far – opens a discussion as to whether Christian baptism does not possess an intrinsic efficacy and link with the Holy Spirit's regenerating power such that we could dispense with the now-traditional distinction between a baptism efficacious where faith is present, and a baptism prospectively efficacious as a future faith emerges. In place of this two-level scheme, he would favor the premise that baptism is generally efficacious. The series of delayed explosions which this proposal will now set off among Wright's readers (some of whom, at very least will wonder whether he has not crowned a lamentable existing indiscriminate baptism with hope for an indiscriminate regeneration) illustrates at very least that Wright, the theologian, is on a much less secure footing than Wright, the respected historian of early Christianity.

The pastoral context of those who read this review is almost certainly not as bewildering as is the Church of Scotland context in which the author wrote. As Wright himself admits, there children are currently eligible for baptism with no pledge of Christian faith required on the part of the parents. I would maintain that in such a 'church without boundaries', his discussions about an intrinsic baptismal efficacy are, to say the least, out of place. To suggest that a posited baptismal efficacy is the remedy for a compromised church is – to say the least – unconvincing. We ought to guard against any proposal that awards to sacraments an efficacy greater than that secured by the preaching of the Gospel. Moreover, he has himself so drawn attention to what he alleges to be the poor NT and patristic credentials of infant baptism, that it is difficult to fathom this belated argument that a rite of such allegedly uncertain pedigree is at the same time so invaluable. I doubt that he can have it both ways.

Differences in context and emphasis acknowledged, I would still urge the wide dissemination of this volume. There are matters addressed here which are of such weight that they will gradually catch the attention of many theologians, pastors and ruling elders; no theologian, pastor or presbytery ought to be left to resolve such questions alone.

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