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Review Essays

***Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ.* Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006. 364 pages. Hardcover, \$19.99.**

New Testament scholar Thomas R. Schreiner and church historian Shawn D. Wright, both professors at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, have done a great service to the church in co-editing this compendium of essays from well-known Baptist scholars and pastors treating the often controversial subject of baptism. Complete with a foreword and introduction, there are ten chapters in all, including four essays pertaining to the biblical and theological material pertinent to the issue of baptism, five chapters devoted to the relevant historical challenges to credobaptism, and a final chapter espousing the practical application of believer's baptism within the context of the local church.

In his foreword to the volume, Baptist theologian Timothy George sets the irenic tone that characterizes the essays included in *Believer's Baptism*. Though all Christians should long for unity in Christ, George contends, "unity in love must also be unity in truth, else it is not unity at all. The historic Baptist witness to believers' baptism is grounded on such a commitment to unity in truth" (xix). In their introduction, editors Schreiner and Wright deal briefly with many of the common objections raised against believer's baptism by evangelical paedobaptists. Though many "forms" of paedobaptism exist, Schreiner and Wright are clear from the outset that their desire in the present volume is to point out the inconsistencies within the arguments put forth by evangelical paedobaptists primarily in the Reformed tradition, those who bestow the sign of faith in Christ—baptism—upon those who have not yet exercised that faith (7).

Andreas J. Köstenberger examines the passages relating to baptism in each of the four Gospels within their salvation historical context, demonstrating how John's baptism, Jesus' later "baptism" on the cross at Golgotha, and a future time when Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit—a reference to the birth of the church at Pentecost—are all eschatological in nature. Köstenberger draws the following conclusion about baptism in the Synoptics and John: baptism is immersion in water for believers only upon being born again by the Holy Spirit as an essential part of Christian discipleship (33–34).

Robert H. Stein writes a particularly illuminating chapter on baptism in Luke–Acts, arguing that the components involved in one becoming a Christian—repentance, faith, confession, the gift of the Spirit, and baptism—are all very closely related temporally in Luke–Acts, often taking place on the same day (52). Rightly emphasizing the corporate nature of water baptism, Stein shows that the church baptized believers only in the book of Acts, as those being “added” to the church (Acts 2:41) involved both faith and baptism (55–56). In the book of Acts, to speak of a believer or one who comes to believe in Christ is to speak of one who has been baptized; indeed, water baptism is intimately connected to the new birth.

Employing careful and thorough scholarship Thomas R. Schreiner examines baptism in the epistles, emphasizing Paul’s teaching. Speaking to Paul’s assertion in Ephesians 4:5 that there is “one baptism” that unifies all believers, Schreiner writes of the believers being addressed: “They all shared a common saving experience by being immersed into Christ, and Paul assumes that all believers have been baptized” (71). From the vantage point of the flow of redemptive history, Schreiner argues, baptism “is an initiation rite into the new age of redemption in fulfillment of the Old Testament promises” that have come with the granting of the Spirit promised in Joel 2:28–29 (88). Baptism, then, is not for those who have yet to receive the gift of the Spirit by faith, but only for those who have repented of sin and trusted in Christ alone for salvation.

Stephen J. Wellum’s chapter on baptism and the relationship between the covenants is exemplary, and worth the price of the book. One of the most ubiquitous arguments for infant baptism is the contention of an overarching “covenant of grace” seen throughout the Scripture, signifying basic continuity across redemptive history between the people of God—Israel and the church—and the signs of the covenant—circumcision and baptism (101). However, Wellum asserts, “covenant theology’s discussion of ‘newness’ fails to reckon that in the coming of Christ the nature and structure of the new covenant has changed, which, at least, entails that all those within the ‘new covenant community’ are people, by definition, who presently have experienced regeneration of heart and the full forgiveness of sin (see Jer 31:29–34)” (105). Wellum continues to show how this oversight of covenant theology has “massive implications for the baptismal discussion” (111). The nature of Israel is a “mixed” community of believer and unbeliever, while the church is made up only of those who have received the gift of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost, and baptism is the sign of those who have entered into the Kingdom community by faith and repentance. Wellum concludes, “Ultimately baptism is linked to the proclamation of the gospel itself as it proclaims the glories of our Lord Jesus Christ and the full realities of the gospel of sovereign grace” (160)

Wellum's dismantling of the common argument for infant baptism from an overarching "covenant of grace" is particularly important for Baptists.

Often the baptism debate has focused on the etymology of the Greek word for "baptize" in the New Testament, or on the fact that no babies are ever found to be baptized throughout the Scripture. Indeed, these arguments alone are enough to make a sufficient case for believer's baptism. However, much more can be said in terms of fitting believer's baptism within the framework of salvation history, of God's acts to sum up all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). After all, the use of water in baptism is no arbitrary thing. Throughout the storyline of the Bible, the Scriptures speak of the sea in terms of chaos, and of judgment. When God judges the world for its wickedness, he sends a flood to blot out man from the face of the land (Gen 6–7), saving only Noah and those with him in the ark (cf. 1 Pet 3:20–21). In chasing after Moses and the Israelites after God has delivered them from their bondage in slavery to the Egyptians, Pharaoh's army is swallowed up by the Red Sea, and not one of them survives this act of God (Ex 14). The prophet Jonah is swallowed up by a great fish in the sea in judgment for disobedience to God, only to be spit up onto the shore after crying out to the Lord for deliverance (Jonah 1–2). The prophets see wicked monsters and wicked kingdoms emerge from the sea (Isa 27:1; Dan 7:1–8), waging war against God and against the kingdom of his coming Son of Man.

With this in the background, then, it is no coincidence that Christ, "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15), identifies with sinful Israel in being baptized by his cousin John (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). After being lowered beneath the surface of the waters and being lifted back out, a voice from heaven declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). This one who is both fully God and fully man is not overcome by water, but rather rebukes the winds and the waves and they are still (Matt 8:23–27). He is one who walks upon the very surface of the sea itself (Matt 14:22–33). Jesus points forward to another baptism (Mark 10:38–39), which takes place in his drowning in his own blood while being nailed to a tree for the sins of the world, and John proclaims a time when Jesus will baptize believers with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). Jesus, then, grants his church the authority to go and make disciples of Christ, baptizing them, for Christ himself will be with them always (Matt 28:18–20). At the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the promise of the "age to come" prophesied in Joel 2:28–32 is fulfilled (Acts 2:16–21), and the church is born. All those who receive the Spirit of this new age are then baptized in water, and in this way are added to the church (Acts 2:41).

The rightly ordered local church, then, as the visible manifestation of the body of Christ, should consist only of those who have believed on Christ for salvation and have been baptized in water upon profession of that faith. This kingdom outpost proclaims the gospel of Christ's kingdom, inviting others personally to trust in Christ by faith what they will someday see by sight: Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:9–11). Baptism signifies one's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3–5), and the individual being baptized and the church performing the baptism are both declaring that another sinner has been forgiven of his sins and hid in Christ, having been ripped from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1:13–14). Being lowered into the water represents judgment—and the place of judgment where Christ stood on our behalf, paying the penalty for our sin in his death. Being lifted up out of the water represents our justification and resurrection by virtue of being found in the one who has been declared just through his resurrection from the dead (Rom 4:25). Only believers in the Lord Jesus are valid candidates for this baptism, for the new covenant has been ratified in the person and work of Christ, meaning that all of those in the believing community will know Christ, “from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer 31:31–34). This church longs for the day when its King will return in final victory, when the Judged One proves also to be the Conquering King, for the open declaration of the sons of God, for the eradication of sin and death and tears, and for the time when the sea will be no more (Rev 21:21). Believer's baptism, then, is an issue tied directly to the gospel itself, and Baptists have more than just word studies to prove it.

Following Wellum's chapter, early church historian Steven A. McKinion peruses the Patristic writings on the issue of baptism, noting that there is no written defense of infant baptism before the third century (168). Such a demonstration is crucial in nullifying a frequently employed defense of infant baptism, that is, the argument from church history, as for at least the first two centuries of the church the practice of believer's baptism appears to have been the norm.

Jonathan H. Rainbow then dissects Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier's doctrine of baptism within his sixteenth century context, explaining the differing theologies of infant baptism espoused by his contemporaries. Rainbow asserts: “At the core of Hubmaier's doctrine (of baptism) was the conviction that the inner reality of faith and conversion and the outer sign of water baptism belong together” (200). For Hubmaier and other Anabaptists, baptism was not “merely” a sign, but was “more” than a sign. Recovering such a robust view of baptism, Rainbow rightly points out, “may help baptists to recover a full-bodied doctrine of baptism instead of the minimalistic view that is often heard in baptist circles today” (205).

Shawn D. Wright examines the work of three Reformed paedobaptists—John Calvin, John Murray, and Pierre Marcel—and points out the inconsistencies in their arguments for paedobaptism in six areas: the doctrine of the sacraments, definition of baptism, the “mixed” character of the church, the “covenant of grace” as a foundation for paedobaptism, New Testament warrant for paedobaptism, and salvation by faith alone. Particularly devastating is Wright’s critique of the New Testament warrant for infant baptism in each of these men’s writings, for they offer few biblical passages in support of the practice, and even those are exegeted poorly.

Duane A. Garrett interacts with the work of influential twentieth century Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline, a vociferous supporter of infant baptism as an extension of circumcision based upon a certain understanding of the Bible through the grid of the suzerain-vassal covenant. Garrett’s critique of Kline is detailed and incisive, and he does a fine job of pointing out the natural extension of Kline’s argument—conclusions that even Kline himself attempted to avoid (280–84).

Ardel B. Caneday writes on the doctrine of baptism put forward by Alexander Campbell, arguing that Campbell’s views on baptism are commonly misunderstood as baptismal regeneration, while conceding that many of Campbell’s followers have held to such a view. After examining Campbell’s writings on baptism, Caneday concludes by stating “that it is both historical and theological malpractice for Baptists and others to impute to Alexander Campbell the flaws of his theological heirs” (328). Seeing as Campbell was not a paedobaptist, it is somewhat difficult to see just how this essay fits within the editors’ aim to interact with evangelical paedobaptists. Even if one grants the argument that Campbell did not espouse baptismal regeneration, evangelicals would still have qualms with his anti-confessionalism and his heterodox views of the Trinity, among other things.

Last, Mark E. Dever seeks to answer many common questions about how baptism ought to be done in the context of the local church, questions pertaining to who should baptize, how baptism ought to be done, who is to be baptized, when baptism is to be done, and various other queries. In addressing the issue of whether baptism is a prerequisite for admittance to the Lord’s table, Dever asserts that “[q]uestions of visitors coming occasionally to the table may be separated from the question of Christians regularly coming as members under the care and guidance of that particular congregation” (341 n. 16). Dever’s argument here could be augmented by expanding upon any biblical rationale that he sees for allowing unbaptized Christians occasionally to the Lord’s table within the context of the local church.

In all, this book is an excellent collection of essays that serves both as an apologetic for believer's baptism and a challenge to the doctrine of paedobaptism. The authors cover the biblical and theological material, as well as many relevant historical issues with extensive thoroughness. Perhaps a chapter on Baptist confessional identity could solidify some foundational issues to provide common definitions through which to view the rest of the book's arguments. In addition, given the fact that even some Baptists are often cited in arguing against the necessity of believer's baptism for church membership and admittance to the Lord's table—including John Bunyan—it may have strengthened the overall arguments of the book to include an essay on what constitutes a “consistent” Baptist. These minor possible shortcomings, however, are far out-weighted by the book's strengths. This book would be an excellent resource for any pastor—Baptist or otherwise—or really any thinking Christian who desires to know more about believer's baptism and the inconsistencies in the paedobaptist arguments. May God grant his churches a burning desire to preach the gospel always, even in—perhaps especially in—the cataclysmic drama that is the baptism of the newest subjects of the King.

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***The Formation of Christian Doctrine.* By Malcolm B. Yarnell, III. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007. 218 pages. Softcover, \$19.99.**

The study of theological method seemingly cannot be traced to Christian antiquity. That Christian theologians employed specific theological methods is clear, but theological method as a subject seems to have arisen in the modern era. Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (1811; rev. ed., 1830; ET, 1850, 1966) dealt more with the theological curriculum than with theological method. During the twentieth century theological method became a recognized discipline when Roman Catholic theologians began to write on “foundational theology” and Protestant theologians on “prolegomena.” Now a Southern Baptist theologian has produced the first Baptist contribution to this field. In doing so Malcolm Yarnell treats not only the method of systematic theology but also the method of historical theology.

Yarnell chooses to represent the free church/believers' church tradition, positions himself in the mainstream of Southern Baptist theology, defines Evangelicalism as solely the theology of the magisterial Reformation, balances his full treatment of the sufficiency of Scripture with his adoption of this reviewer's concept of *suprema Scriptura* in place of a strict

sola Scriptura, and affirms that theological method is “disciplined response to divine revelation.”

From his mainstream Southern Baptist stance the author claims that “the Reformed, Roman Catholic, and liberal theological traditions outside the Southern Baptist fold have their counterparts, respectively, in the Founders, Landmarkist, and Moderate movements within that tradition” (p. 33). He then undertakes a detailed treatment of key representatives of these three traditions: Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), Dutch Reformed, stressing grace as restoring nature and the universal church over any sectarianism and deemphasizing personal faith; Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (1927–), now Pope Benedict XVI, with his “architectonic” or “centralist” ecclesiology (vs. Walter Kasper and Vatican Council II) and his tending to conflate the Church with God; and Maurice Wiles (1923–2005), Anglican liberal, theologically “hospitable,” and advocate of “doctrinal criticism.”

In contrast to these three and their alleged Southern Baptist counterparts, Yarnell then proceeds to lay out his believers’ church method by taking as his model not an early Baptist such as John Bunyan or John Gill or the Mennonites’ founder Menno Simons or Baptists’ Anabaptist hero Balthasar Hubmaier but rather the lesser known Anabaptist lay theologian Pilgram Marpeck (c. 1495–1556). Building on *Gelassenheit* (“yieldedness”) and *Nachfolge* (“discipleship”), the Southwestern professor draws from Marpeck the centrality of the divine-human Christ, the coinherence of the Word and the Spirit, the defense of “biblical order” in place of “human invention,” and the believers’ church, without any concurrent embrace of a specific philosophy.

Turning to the method of historical theology, Yarnell assesses the fifth-century definition by Vincent of Lérins of tradition (“that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all”), John Henry Newman’s developmental thesis, and Johann Adam Möhler’s organic model with the infallible *magisterium*, together with the recent evangelical criticisms thereof by Alistair McGrath and Peter Toon, who allege denial of the sufficiency of Scripture. But does the Bible speak concerning doctrinal development? Yes, Oscar Cullmann has argued, distinguishing the transmission of the gospel (apostolic tradition) from tradition as a distinct source of authority (post-apostolic tradition). On the contrary, Yves Congar, a Roman Catholic, defends a more conflated view of tradition on the basis of the Paraclete sayings in the Gospel of John. Even so, Yarnell, building again on Marpeck, contends for the illumination of the Holy Spirit “for the entire church.” He is favorable to C.H. Dodd’s Christocentric Petrine and Pauline *kerygma* but critical of Cullmann’s view that tripartite confessions in the New Testament are liturgical but without confessional significance.

Taking serious note of the work of the English Methodist general historian Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979), who “seamlessly correlated scientific history with personal faith” (p. 161), Yarnell develops a theology of history in which Jesus is Lord of eternity as well as time, of all human beings, of providence, of both testaments, and of all the churches. Taking a close look at the work of the Southern Baptist church historian Robert Andrew Baker (1910–1992), he develops a pattern for a free church history of theology in which the golden age of the New Testament was followed by the Constantinian fall and various efforts at restitution and which is cross-centered and marked by Trinitarian revelation, personal salvation, and covenantal freedom.

A few critical comments are in order. First, the use of “free church” and “believers’ church” interchangeably is unfortunate in view of Yarnell’s penchant for detail and the multiple meanings of “free church” (non-establishment, non-creedal, non-liturgical). Second, Yarnell’s use of “Evangelicals” not only runs contrary to most contemporary usage but also can leave the impression that Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Bible Church members are non-evangelical. Moreover, this reviewer has never claimed that Evangelicalism can be traced to the sixteenth-century magisterial Reformation, partly because of its lack of the evangelistic-missionary impulse, but only to the first Great Awakening. Third, the author’s critique of any “invisible church” and lack of formulation of the “universal church” leaves open the question as to what he does with the non-local uses of *ekklesia* in Paul. Fourth, are not those in the minorities or “fringe movements” (p. 29) within Southern Baptist life most likely to contest Yarnell’s claim to represent the mainstream or to argue that truth outweighs numbers of adherents?

Most theologians begin their writings with articles and small monographs; Yarnell’s first book is a major contribution to theological literature as well as a worthy reflection of the Southwestern Seminary heritage. It is required reading for any who consider themselves to be well informed on theological method and may indeed stimulate its discussion. This may be the most important theological monograph by a Baptist so far in the twenty-first century.

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