

## Reviews of Books

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*Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright, eds. Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2006. 364 pages, \$19.99, ISBN: 978-0-8054-3249-7

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This volume of essays is a welcome contribution to the ongoing intra-Reformed debate about paedobaptism. It is the most significant contribution on the Baptist side since Fred Malone's *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* in 2003 (Cape Coral, Fla.: Founders Press). There are three chapters on baptism in the Gospels, Luke-Acts and the Epistles, one key theological chapter on the relationship between the covenants (Stephen Wellum), five historical chapters and a concluding essay on baptism in the local church. It includes contributions from most of the heavyweight American Reformed Baptists, led by Schreiner. It is predominantly an academic work, which makes Mark Dever's concluding essay from an active pastor the more welcome. The contributors are irenic and gracious in tone, without shying away from expressing clear concerns about paedobaptist theology and practice where appropriate. They are familiar with most of the recent paedobaptist works and devote space to fair expositions of the paedobaptist argument. However, the book as a whole is ultimately disappointing, failing to make a number of vital logical and theological distinctions, and seems to have completely by-passed the Reformed paedobaptist arguments for infant faith. To paedobaptists already widely-read in the debate, there is little here that is not already familiar from Jewett and Malone.

The book's strengths provide challenges to Baptists and paedobaptists alike. The early NT chapters, most especially Andreas Köstenberger, are fine examples of marrying careful biblical theology with appropriate systematic deductions. Most of all, this whole volume takes baptism seriously. It criticises the way many modern evangelical churches, Baptist and paedobaptist, seem to treat baptism

as an optional extra (33, 54, 63). Schreiner, writing on the Epistles, is particularly strong that the NT assumption is that all believers are baptised (68). It is clear that baptism is not simply the individual's public confession of faith, but that 'it is also a sacred and serious act of incorporation into the visible community of faith' (xvii), and thus should be restored to a central liturgical place in corporate worship, that it is an objective work of God (77), and that it signifies union with Christ (89).

There is a persistent rejection of the modern evangelical divorce between physical and spiritual. Baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit should be seen in parallel, never in antithesis (36, 75). Schreiner shows that the key NT baptismal passages of Rom 6, Col 2 and Tit 3 have in mind water baptism, not just Spirit baptism (81-86). Robert Stein's suggestion of a trinitarian partnership in baptism between God, the church and the individual (54) is an intriguing one.

Finally, there is a strong challenge to the consistency of paedobaptist sacramental theology. Schreiner and Wright note that most paedobaptists do not admit their baptised youngsters to the Lord's Supper, despite the fact that 'such a divide between baptism and the Lord's Supper cannot be sustained from the NT, for it is clear that those baptized participated in communion' (5). They note recent moves amongst some paedobaptists to adopt paedocommunion and applaud this consistency, though as Baptists they do not agree with it. In later chapters on the relationship between the covenants and the logic of Reformed paedobaptists, this reviewer was struck by the sophistication and development of Reformed arguments for infant baptism, and reflecting on the challenge over the Lord's Supper, it seems that traditional arguments against paedocommunion have not followed the same level of discourse, often consisting of a simple appeal to discerning the body in 1 Cor 11:29. It appears that the paedobaptist commitment to covenant continuity evaporates during discussions about paedocommunion.

Despite these strengths, this volume demonstrates some major shortcomings. Having upheld the marriage of physical and spiritual, Schreiner argues that the typological antecedent to baptism in Col 2 is not physical circumcision, but spiritual circumcision (78). We may respond why not both, as physical and spiritual need not be divorced? Particularly as Schreiner had only just observed that even

under the old covenant it is spiritual circumcision which matters (Deut 30:6). More generally though, there is a problem of failing to make distinctions where they are needed. Right at the outset, 'admission into the people of God', 'being right with God', being 'members of the church', 'entering God's kingdom' and 'membership in the new covenant' are all equated as the same thing in one paragraph (2). It may be argued that these are overlapping rather than identical categories. This failure to distinguish is also seen in the treatment of the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31. The promise that all will know the LORD is assumed without argument to mean all without exception, every member of the new covenant. It should at least be considered whether this could mean all without distinction, that is every type of person in the new covenant, as indicated by the following phrase, 'from the least of them to the greatest' (Jer 31:34). Please see my article in the next issue of this journal for a fuller exploration of a Reformed paedobaptist reading of Jeremiah 31-32. There is also a failure to distinguish between corporate and individual breaking of the covenant in Jer 31 and Heb 8. Wellum states that paedobaptists believe 'the new covenant is a breakable covenant like the old' (116). It appears that paedobaptists are simply rejecting Jeremiah's promise of an unbreakable covenant. This is an unfair representation. Paedobaptists believe the new covenant is unbreakable in the same way that the old was breakable, that is corporately. Presumably there were faithful Israelites even under the old covenant. And yet, the people of Israel, corporately, broke the covenant (Jer 31:32). But the new covenant will not be breakable in the way the old was. The church of God will not be able to break his new covenant. But just as there were faithful individuals in corporately unfaithful Israel, so there may be unfaithful individuals in the corporately faithful church.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment in this volume is the failure to engage with paedobaptist arguments for infant faith. Almost every essay demonstrates an *a priori* assumption that it is impossible for infants to have faith in any way, most explicitly, 'it is difficult to see how infants can fit with what Paul says since they cannot exercise faith' (77). In 364 pages, the only references to the extensive Reformed heritage regarding infant faith are a footnote from Schreiner: 'Nor is it convincing to posit here that infants can exercise faith' (73); and four

pages touching on Luther and infant faith from Jonathan Rainbow. Yet infant faith is central to the whole argument. Most recently, Rich Lusk's *Paedofaith* (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2005) has recapitulated the biblical and historic Reformed material on infant faith, though unfortunately, that book emerged only a year before the reviewed volume, perhaps too late for most of the authors to have engaged with it. However, Lusk is no novelty. He surveys Luther, Calvin and his successors, Turretin and the Puritans (*Paedofaith*, 80-90), noting the different expositions each gives of infant faith. Admittedly, there is no single Reformed definition of infant faith, but each of these schools argues a biblical case for genuine faith in infants. If such is the case, then the Baptist objection, that paedobaptists are baptising those without faith, falls. Given the centrality of this argument, it was particularly disappointing that it was not covered in Wright's chapter on the 'Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists', especially as that chapter shared considerable overlap and repetition with Wellum's relationship between the covenants. Part of the difficulty encountered in discussing the faith of infants arises from the initial definition of faith deployed. Quite reasonably, Schreiner and Wright use the Reformers' own definition, that 'belief encompasses a person's intellect and affections and leads one to entrust himself to Christ' (6). This is entirely appropriate for a normal adult. However, such a definition not only excludes the possibility of an infant having faith, but raises serious questions about those with severe mental handicap. It is fair to ask of the Baptist position if it therefore permanently excludes from the church those who will never have the requisite intellectual capacity to profess faith?

Finally, the book's argument seems to fail even on its own logic. Throughout it is argued that 'the church is properly composed of those who are members of the new covenant' (96), and that the covenant sign should only be applied to the elect (108, 113). Wellum summarises the distinctiveness of the new covenant:

The change is found in the shift from a *mixed* community to that of a *regenerate* community with the crucial implication that under the new covenant, the covenant sign must only be applied to those who are in that covenant, namely, believers.... Because the church, by its very nature, is a regenerate community, the covenant sign of baptism must only be applied to those who have come to faith in Christ (138).

However, it seems that under this logic, no-one should ever be baptised by the visible church on earth, as we cannot know who are the elect, however convincing a profession of faith is offered by an individual. Baptists would respond that they baptise those whom they have good reason to believe are regenerate (333). Paedobaptists argue the very same, that God promises that the children of his people are also his.

Despite the strengths of exegesis and biblical theology, it sadly feels as though this volume has failed to interact with key foundations of the paedobaptist argument and ultimately fails to advance the debate any further.

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*The Baptized Body*, Peter J. Leithart. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2007. 136 pages, \$15.00, ISBN: 13: 978-1-59128-048-4

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The central question of this book is ‘what does baptism do for the baptised?’ In answering this, Leithart addresses the most contentious aspect of baptism in the contemporary Reformed world, namely its efficacy. His purpose is ‘to drag conservative Reformed churches, all kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century, the century of ecclesiology’ (x).

In Chapter 1, Leithart exposes what he regards to be the unexamined false assumptions that have shaped the modern Reformed view of baptism. These assumptions effectively remove the water from the New Testament passages which speak of baptismal efficacy. He seeks to clear the ground by exposing and correcting false assumptions which lead to what he deems a ‘feeble’ sacramental theology. The presuppositions which he believes have diluted the Bible’s teaching about the efficacy of baptism are wide-ranging and include: an anthropology produced by modern individualism; the atomistic view of human nature assumed by modern liberal politics; the tendency to misunderstand the nature of communication by treating signs rationalistically; and a mechanistic and impersonal view of grace as a substance. By contrast, his thesis assumes that