

NAC STUDIES IN BIBLE & THEOLOGY

BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

SIGN OF THE
NEW COVENANT IN CHRIST



EDITED BY

THOMAS R. SCHREINER
& SHAWN D. WRIGHT

SERIES EDITOR: E. RAY CLENDENEN

Introduction

Some within the Christian confession claim that baptism should be classified as a minor issue. Such a sentiment is misdirected, for baptism is regularly connected in scripture with belief and salvation. Baptism, as this book will demonstrate, is the initiation rite into the Christian church. Those who label it as minor are imposing their own categories onto the Scriptures instead of listening to the Scriptures.

Timothy George reminds us that those who practiced believer's baptism during the Reformation risked "persecution and martyrdom," and hence did not view baptism as a minor matter.¹ We are not claiming, of course, that a right understanding of baptism is necessary for salvation. Still, to say that a right understanding of baptism is unnecessary for salvation does not lead logically or biblically to the conclusion that baptism is inconsequential. In saying the above, we do not wish to engage in a polemical debate which ratchets up the temperature to a fever pitch. Our hope is that this book will defend believer's baptism with a charitable and irenic spirit. We realize that other evangelical believers disagree with us, but we hope to persuade many that the course we chart fits with the scriptural witness.

Baptism is important precisely because it is tied to the gospel, to the saving work that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. We do not think baptizing infants is merely a minor mistake, even though we rejoice in the evangelical credentials of many with whom we disagree.² Paul Jewett captures the importance of believer's baptism in saying, "*To baptize infants apart from faith threatens the evangelical foundations of evangelicalism.*"³ This is an awesome statement that stands up under scrutiny, for in Scripture baptism is

¹ T. George, "The Reformed Doctrine of Believers' Baptism," *Int* 47 (1993): 242.

² Interestingly, Douglas Wilson claims that nothing less will do than showing that infant baptism is required in the Scriptures (*To a Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God* [Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996, 9]). We claim that the arguments contained in this book demonstrate that infant baptism is not only not required but is a clear violation of what the Scriptures teach.

³ P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 162 (emphasis his).

regularly linked with admission into the people of God—the church of Jesus Christ. The fundamental teaching of the gospel is that human beings can be right with God only through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1). Infant baptism compromises that teaching by counting infants as members of the church, either via sacramental theology, the alleged faith of the infant, presumptive regeneration, the faith of sponsors, or covenant theology. Sacramental theology clearly compromises the gospel since it teaches that infants enter God's kingdom by virtue of the sacramental action.⁴ Believer's baptism accords with the gospel because it teaches that the objective work of God in salvation necessarily leads to the subjective response of faith. God's work in Christ is not suspended on nothing, with no answering response of faith. The objective work of God in Christ secures a believing response in his people, so that the sign of the new covenant is only applied to those who give evidence by belief of membership in that covenant.

When churches practice infant baptism or allow into membership those who were baptized as infants, they have sundered the biblical connection between baptism and faith. Those who are baptized as infants, upon reading the NT, may think they belong to God by virtue of their infant baptism since baptism is invariably linked with belonging to the church of Jesus Christ in the NT.⁵ We believe that baptism should be reserved for believers because it preserves the testimony of the gospel by showing that only those who have repented and believed belong to the church. Only those who have

⁴ Stanley K. Fowler (a Baptist) argues in his book that baptism is more than a symbol and should be understood sacramentally (*More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 2 [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002]). Fowler rightly argues that baptism is more than a symbol, but the use of the word "sacramental" is unfortunate since it is liable to a number of different interpretations. Fowler's own use of the word may fit with what is argued in this book since he claims that those who are unbaptized but believers may still be saved. It seems, however, that Fowler's book suffers from lack of clarity in using the word "sacramental," and the vagueness of his language makes it difficult to determine precisely what he means.

⁵ Venema objects that this is not the position of covenantal paedobaptists, and laments that they are often misunderstood. See C. P. Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. G. Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 228–29. But the point made here is not that covenantal paedobaptists claim that infants are saved by virtue of being baptized. Rather, we are arguing that such a mistake easily creeps in since baptism is connected in the NT with saving faith and induction into the church of Jesus Christ.

exercised faith are justified. Hence, only those who have trusted in Christ should be baptized. Restricting baptism to believers only, therefore, preserves the pure witness of the gospel.

In addition, believer's baptism also demonstrates that the church is a new covenant community—all those within it know the Lord (Heb 8:11). The church of Jesus Christ is not a mixed community of believers and unbelievers. It consists of those who have confessed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Paedobaptists often say that Baptists do not escape from the charge of a mixed community since some of those who claim to be converted do not truly belong to the people of God.⁶ It is true, of course, that some of those who claim to believe are subsequently revealed to be inauthentic (e.g., 1 John 2:19). Nevertheless, a profound difference still exists between Baptists and paedobaptists, for Baptists do not allow anyone into the church without trying to discern whether the person is truly saved, whereas paedobaptists knowingly include some who do not believe into the covenant community.⁷

Another objection raised by paedobaptists relates to the warning passages. It is common knowledge that Hebrews (e.g., Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:8; 10:26–31; 12:25–29) has a number of warning passages, and indeed severe warnings exist throughout the NT. One recent book on paedobaptism indicates that the warning passages played an important role in the authors adopting a paedobaptist position, and the argument from the warning passages is regularly adduced in the book to support infant baptism.⁸ According to this reading, not all those in the new covenant community truly know the Lord. Such a reading of Hebrews faces severe problems exegetically, for now (if this position is followed) some who have the law

⁶ So, Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 227.

⁷ Many Baptist churches, of course, do not evaluate carefully whether people believe before joining the church. But such a reality shows the weakness of many Baptist churches and their failure to do what their Baptist ancestors preached and proclaimed.

⁸ This argument is often made in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. All of the essays noted here make this point and come from this volume. Strawbridge notes in the introduction that the texts on apostasy were a turning point for him (4). See also J. D. Niell, "The Newness of the New Covenant," 133, 153 n 37; R. L. Pratt Jr., "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant," 169–70, 173–74; R. Booth, "Covenant Transition," 198–99; G. Strawbridge, "The Polemics of Anabaptism from the Reformation Onward," 280–83. The same argument from apostasy is advanced by Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 81–96.

written on their heart and who have received forgiveness of sins (Heb 10:16–18) are not truly forgiven. Paedobaptists who defend this view drive a wedge between those who are elect and those who are forgiven of their sins. Apparently not all of the latter enjoy the former! Now one can even be a partaker of the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4), and not belong to the elect. Perhaps we will be pardoned if we argue that such paedobaptists would be more consistent if they argued that those who are saved can lose their salvation. Perhaps some of their theological offspring will come to such a conclusion.

We can only refer here to another book that we believe handles the warning passages in a way that avoids these errors.⁹ On this view, the warnings are the means God uses to preserve his own, and the warnings are always effective in the lives of the elect. Arminians, naturally, view such a conclusion with suspicion. But such a view of the warnings should not trouble any Calvinist, for Calvinists insist that one must repent and believe to be saved, and that we must preach the necessity of repentance and belief. At the same time, Calvinists are convinced that God will fulfill the condition to believe in the lives of the elect. In the same way, the warning passages are nothing other than a call to believe until the last day, and God uses those very warnings to stoke the fires of faith in his own. Hence, there is no exegetical warrant for diminishing what Hebrews means when it says that all those in the new covenant know the Lord (Heb 8:11).¹⁰ This is not merely an external knowing in Hebrews, but

⁹ T. R. Schreiner and A. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001). The difference between Wilson's view and our own surfaces when Wilson claims that the warnings are not directly addressed to true saints, but he adds to this the thought that believers should "regularly examine their own hearts in the light of such warnings" (*To a Thousand Generations*, 85). Such a view fails to understand the function of the warnings and also makes them unnecessarily complicated, for believers are required, according to Wilson's view, to engage in the strange practice of applying to themselves warnings written to others.

¹⁰ Pratt argues that Baptists fail to see that the new covenant is not fulfilled completely until the Lord returns. Currently, the new covenant is inaugurated but not consummated. Hence, some in the new covenant community are not truly believers ("Infant Baptism," 156–74). This is an intriguing argument, but it misapplies the categories of inaugurated and consummated. We agree that the new covenant is inaugurated and not yet consummated. But such a truth does not mean that some of those who know the Lord, have the law written on their heart, and are forgiven of their sins may not be truly believers. The not-yet element of the eschatology of Hebrews means that those who are now partakers of the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4) are not yet perfected,

represents the law truly written on the heart by the Spirit of God, so that there is no need to resort to the idea that some of those with the law written on the heart are not truly saved.¹¹

The baptistic view, in other words, preserves the purity of the church and emphasizes (or at least should emphasize) that those who are living in unrepentant and significant sin should be disciplined. Paedobaptist churches face a problem here, for they may uphold such a standard for adult believers, but they have also admitted into membership children who are not believers, and these children will not be disciplined for failing to believe. Hence, a mixed membership has been deliberately introduced into the church.

Moreover, paedobaptists face a problem with the Lord's Supper that Baptists do not encounter. The Lord's Supper is reserved for believers who have been baptized, but many paedobaptists do not allow children to partake of the Lord's table until the children have expressed personal faith. But 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. Baptism has been waived as the initiation rite for believers by paedobaptists, and hence some kind of initiation (like confirmation) is substituted before people take of the Lord's Supper. Now a new ritual (confirmation), which is not located in the NT witness, is introduced so that the Lord's Supper is reserved for believers. Baptists insist that such an expedient is unnecessary if the biblical requirement of believer's baptism is maintained. Some paedobaptists have recently responded to this inconsistency and claimed that infants and young children who are baptized may eat and drink at the Lord's table. Such consistency is to be saluted, but an even greater problem exists on this scheme. For now unbelievers are taking of the Lord's Supper, and clearly they are

but they will truly be perfected on the last day. The point of the not-yet in Hebrews is not to cast doubt on whether believers will be saved on the last day. Rather, the not-yet urges God's people to continue to believe until the last day with the firm assurance that God will complete what he has started (Heb 6:13–20).

¹¹ The argument of Hebrews is amazingly truncated when its newness is limited to the abolishing of the ceremonial law (Niell, "Newness of New Covenant," 142–46), and knowing the Lord is interpreted to mean that new covenant believers know the Lord without the mediation of the Levitical priesthood (148–53).

not discerning the body, and hence are eating and drinking in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27–34).

At the outset, we need to be clear about what baptismal position the contributors to this volume are advocating, as well as what baptismal theology primarily they are opposing. The authors are promoting “credobaptism,” that is, the doctrine that Christian baptism should be reserved for believers (from the Latin for “believe,”) in the Lord Jesus Christ. The “belief” required of those seeking baptism is more than mere intellectual assent to some doctrinal truths. Rather, as the Protestant reformers spelled out in helpful detail, belief encompasses a person’s intellect and affections and leads one to entrust himself to Christ. We agree with the 1689 Baptist *Second London Confession* which says that “the principle acts of saving faith have immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life.”¹² Attentive readers, however, will note that there are some differences among the contributors on a few minor issues of baptismal theology (e.g., how to interpret a particular text) and practice (e.g., the wisdom of baptizing young people who profess faith in Christ). These are issues that credobaptists need to discuss in order more faithfully to understand and implement God’s truth in our churches, so we do not want to pretend that these disagreements do not exist. But we want to stress that these are in-house debates. These points of dispute are important, but the contributors to this volume agree on the doctrine of credobaptism.

The book is written to correct a certain form of infant baptist theology, as a perusal of the footnotes will show. There are as many types of “paedobaptists” (i.e., those who baptize infants) as there are Baptists, so we need to clarify whose theology we are addressing. Many paedobaptists around the world believe in a sacerdotal baptismal theology, which asserts that the baptism of the infant (apart from any faith on the infant’s part) cleanses him of original sin. This theory of “baptismal regeneration” is sometimes denoted by the words *ex opere operato* throughout this volume. This phrase (literally, “by the work performed”) is the belief that baptism is ef-

¹² *Second London Confession* 14.2, in W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 269.

fective through the operation of the rite of baptism itself. It conveys God's grace to the recipient unless he or she "places a spiritual impediment (*obex*) in the way of grace."¹³ However, this is not the paedobaptist theology that we are primarily answering in this volume.¹⁴ Our desire, rather, is to respond to evangelical paedobaptists, primarily in the Reformed tradition, who baptize infants not because they believe that baptism regenerates the child but because they believe that baptism brings the child into the covenant community where he or she will have the blessing of hearing the gospel preached as they grow up as members of the church. Certainly there are variations among our paedobaptist brethren, and we shall note some of them in the following pages. The view of paedobaptism affirmed by the Reformed tradition is fraught with an inconsistency: as evangelicals they believe salvation is by faith in Christ alone, but as paedobaptists they give the sign of that faith (baptism) to those who have not exercised faith (infants). It is primarily this theology we are trying to correct in this book.

In this book we begin with Scripture, arguing from the NT Scriptures that believer's baptism is the clear teaching of the NT. Andreas Köstenberger prosecutes this case in the Gospels, Robert Stein in Acts, and Thomas Schreiner in the epistles. Stephen Wellum, then, considers the whole matter biblically and theologically in a crucial chapter. What is the relationship between the covenants? Most evangelicals who defend infant baptism defend their practice from their understanding of the covenants and the relationship between circumcision and baptism. Wellum demonstrates that the theological connection that paedobaptists draw between the covenants cannot be sustained biblically. They rightly see continuity between the old covenant and the new, but they fail to note the significant elements of discontinuity. Wellum unpacks the Bible's teaching on the covenants, showing that it requires believer's baptism. These four chapters of careful biblical exegesis and theology demonstrate that paedobaptism is untenable biblically.

¹³ See R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 108.

¹⁴ Hence, when we refer to the *ex opera operato* view of baptism in this work, we are not in these instances criticizing the Reformed view of paedobaptism.

In the next section of the book we consider the historical and theological challenge to believer's baptism. Here we consider the witness of history and interact with those who have preceded us. We must state at the outset that the Scriptures are the norm, and the practice of the church throughout history is not decisive. Still, any serious defense of believer's baptism must consider the witness of history. Steve McKinion surveys the first centuries of the church, a period that has been much considered in baptism debates. He demonstrates that the evidence shows that paedobaptism arose late and for various practical and theological reasons. Jonathan Rainbow demonstrates that the defense of infant baptism proposed by Ulrich Zwingli, one of the founders of the Reformed tradition in the sixteenth century, was truly a novelty. For the first time in history, baptism was severed from faith and regeneration. The view that the Reformed take for granted as historic, represented in Zwingli's day a break with previous tradition. Shawn Wright interacts carefully with some of the most influential proponents of infant baptism—John Calvin, John Murray, and Pierre Marcel—and shows their biblical and internal inconsistencies. A fascinating and creative defense of infant baptism has been proposed by Meredith Kline. The fertile mind of Kline has fascinated scholars and students, but Duane Garrett demonstrates that Kline's arguments are more creative than biblical. The connections he draws to support infant baptism are insupportable when carefully examined, and the substance of his argument, therefore, collapses. Ardel Caneday unpacks the baptismal thinking of Alexander Campbell. Campbell's theology—difficult to understand, eccentric at points, and very wrong at others—is different from some of the Campbellite thinking that followed him.

In the final chapter Mark Dever considers the practical application of believer's baptism for churches today. What we have written in this book is not merely a theoretical exercise. We believe that the biblical theology of baptism has profound implications for our churches. Dever considers a host of practical questions that pastors wrestle with: from who should do the baptizing to when a person should be baptized. He also sets forth why it is important for the life of the church for baptism to be reserved for believers. Baptism is

not an idle question, for it speaks to the nature of the church as the community of believers.

Our hope is that readers will be challenged and encouraged by what is written in this book. For those who disagree, we only ask that our arguments would be countered with the Scriptures. For those who agree, we pray that what is advocated here will be implemented, by God's grace, ever more faithfully in our churches.