

Interaction with Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright's *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant* (B&H: Nashville, 2006).

In *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant* (B&H: Nashville, 2006), Tom Schreiner and Shawn Wright compile essays from a number of scholars who draw from both Scripture and history in order to defend and affirm a baptistic understanding of baptism (contra infant baptism). In essence, the writers attempt to rescue the belief in believer's Baptist from mere traditionalism, and, in its place, show that "Baptism is important precisely because it is tied to the gospel" (1). Given the complexity of the baptism debate, *Believer's Baptism* is not an easy read. It presumes a great deal of background on the part of the reader. All the same, the book contributes to the church several key points regarding baptism.

First, in what is probably the best chapter in the book, Stephen Wellum demonstrates that the most authoritative foundation for believer's baptism is a biblical theology of the covenants. In particular, he shows that covenant theology reduces the Abrahamic covenant "to its spiritual aspects alone" (109), de facto ignoring indispensable indications that the covenant with Abraham also involved a physical, national people, namely Israel.

This leads to a second key idea. The evidence for believer's baptism is obscured by theological conjecture and poor exegesis. If the debate on baptism is ultimately to rest on Scripture, leaders must teach critical thinking skills and hermeneutical rigor. In Wellum's essay, he shows that paedobaptists err when they a priori assume that "that both circumcision and baptism signify the same realities", thus requiring them to reduce the Abrahamic covenant to the mere spiritual (120–21). Therefore, Wellum argues that they commit eisegesis, reading "new covenant realities into the OT and vice versa, without unpacking the covenants" (125). Similar, errors in logic undermine sound exegesis. For example, paedobaptists beg the question when

they assert that the church and Israel are both “mixed communities” (137). We must respond that sociological realities due to human ignorance do not justify a theological category called “the visible church”, as if God himself calls non-Christians a part of His Church, Christ’s body. Shawn Wright’s “Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists” exposes numerous inconsistencies that riddle the historical paedobaptist arguments. Also, Wright undercut a commonly held argument given by paedobaptists that is simply a non sequitur. He says, “There is no such check in a paedobaptist scheme. Paedobaptist churches will *necessarily* admit unregenerate persons to the membership; credobaptists will only do so *accidentally*, and they can correct the fault by the exercise of church discipline” (227).

Third, we are reminded that historical appeals have limited value. In two chapters, we read of “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement” and “‘Confessor Baptism’: The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists”. However, the essays do not advance the conviction that believer’s baptism is *biblical*. Rather, they show the complexities of the issue and so an appreciation for the care that must be taken to avoid mistakes. The arguments made in each chapter can be likened to Baptists who frequently use arguments from silence, practical concerns, pastoral authority and tradition to support their views. Such appeals are inconclusive except for those who are simply debating history.

Fourth, infant baptists’ arguments are typically weak due to the amount of conjecture and selective proof-texting. For example, Robert Stein points out that paedobaptists strangely but consistently assume that to have children in a household implies the presence of infants (61–63). In addition, Duane Garrett presses Meredith Kline’s appeal to suzerainty as the basis for baptismal theology. Garrett suggests that a consistent application of the treaty metaphor to

baptism “must require all persons under his authority to be baptized”; this would include wives and slaves (281–282).

Fifth, baptism is regularly associated with themes that necessarily imply salvation. For example, in Like and Acts, it is connected to repentance, faith, the gift of the Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins (41–52). In view of the New Covenant promises, which the New Testament applies only to believers, it would seem that baptism is restricted to believers in the same way. Furthermore, in the Epistles, crucial texts like Rom 6:3–4 and Col 2:11–12 equate baptism with Christ’s own death and resurrection (74–79). Baptism marks those who are “in Christ”.

Sixth, there is no prohibition or instruction for or against elders, pastors, or any other clergy being the only people allowed to administer baptism (330–331).

Seventh, Schreiner and Wright when they reiterate Jewett, “To baptize infants apart from faith threatens the evangelical foundations of evangelicalism” (1). How so? To begin, admitting unregenerate persons into the membership of the church compromises the church’s ability to do church discipline and teach the gospel without confusion, since church membership is easily and often associated with or hints at salvation. Further, such open admittance of infants nurtures a community based on tradition rather than the gospel. After all, those who are members do not all profess faith in Christ. These unregenerate members eventually assume roles of influence and leadership, and so compromise the integrity of the church’s witness. In order to justify infant baptism, one must make logical leaps and unfounded assumptions. Consequently, the church no longer uses sound hermeneutical principles, instead deferring to convention, nuance, and a priori commitments. Such a move weakens any commitment to solo Scriptura.

How should one assess the value of this anthology? To start with, the writers collectively have presented a sound and comprehensive apologetic for believer’s baptism. It is more

formidable that most treatments on the subject in large part because it takes so seriously the arguments put forth by their opponents. As a result, the exegesis is scholarly; its theological and logical analysis is precise; its historical accounts defend against revisionist objections, and Mark Dever even includes some concise points on application for the local church. In short, it does not merely aim to convince people who are already Baptists. It breaks the arguments from silence with a humble and respectful tone, even while pressing the meaning of words, phrases, and their theological implications.

A few issues need further elaboration or answers. For example, the book's defense of immersion as the mode of baptism is not terribly strong, though Schreiner's use of Rom 6:3–4 and Col 2:12 is highly suggestive (79–81). The question remains, however, whether strong inference is enough to warrant forbidding people from church membership and the Lord's Supper, if they are "unbaptized" in the sense that they were sprinkled with water, not immersed, as a believing adult. Is it a matter of conscience, such that the "weaker" brother can still honor God and not sin by going against conscience and getting "rebaptized"? Also, it is unclear how the authors would reply to a minority of Reformed theologians, who might suggest that the Abrahamic covenant is *only* spiritual (not just "primarily" so). In this case, Galatians 3 and other texts are used to say that the "offspring" *only* refers to Christ, not any other physical descendent of Abraham. Accordingly, Rom 4 and Heb 11 could be used to say the land–promise points only to the inheriting of the whole world (not just Palestine). In view of the whole, these questions are minor. *Believer's Baptism* should be considered a new standard on baptismal theology.

As noted, a few questions still need to be considered:

1. Is disagreement on the *mode* of baptism (not the timing) sufficient to deny a person church membership and the Lord's Supper? Does the strength of the argument lie in Scripture or on denominational tradition?
2. How would we respond to the person who says, "The Abrahamic covenant is not 'primarily' spiritual; it is *only* spiritual"?
3. How might we soundly refute the objection that the New Covenant ultimately refers to God's people at consummation and that present benefits are but foretastes, consequently, we cannot say that those now in New Covenant are *only* Christians? That is, just as some were in the Mosaic covenant yet did not have circumcised hearts and thus enjoy the full benefits of membership, could not the New Covenant work the same way?
4. Is there any value in arguing over what Baptists have historically believed?
5. Functionally, might "baby dedications" have a similar impact on a congregation as permitting "infant baptism"? What drawbacks might be attached to the practice (given that it is not in Scripture)?
6. What practical advice can be deduced from Scripture (if any) regarding possible requirements or delays a person must undertake after professing Christ, but before receiving baptism? As is well documented, even the early church has a period of instruction before baptism. In some contexts and cultures today, "praying a prayer" and perhaps even baptism may not suggest to a person that they are converted and have committed their life entirely to Christ. It would seem most arguments against delays rely on arguments from silence.
7. Is it fair to say that evangelicals' use of a "sinner's prayer", functionally, plays the role of that baptism is meant to play, according to Scripture?