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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Baptism in the thought of David Wright

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KEY WORDS: David Wright, baptism, infant baptism.

[This is a lightly revised and corrected version of the paper that was actually given on the day. The tone of the oral presentation, including its informality, has deliberately been retained. References in square brackets refer to items in the bibliography at the end.]

Introduction

Professor David Wright and I have discussed the issue of baptism on many occasions over recent years. The present paper is based not just on his writings but also, to a lesser extent, on these discussions. This is an advantage that I have not enjoyed in my research on Calvin. There are many occasions when I would have appreciated the opportunity to discuss with the Reformer his view on this or that. Mind you, I am told that this was no obstacle for a well known medievalist of a previous generation. Apparently he became a spiritualist in his dotage and used to disconcert colleagues at conferences by coming out with remarks like, 'as the emperor Justinian told me last night...!' So being able to discuss baptism with David has been a great help. On the other hand, greater opportunity brings with it greater responsibility. When presenting papers on Calvin I have not had to face the prospect of the Reformer himself sitting in the audience, ready to protest should I misrepresent him.

For the last twenty years David Wright has devoted increasing time to the question of baptism. His writings are listed at the end of this paper and references to them will be found in the text, by the number of the publication and the page number, within square brackets. David's preoccupation with baptism was sparked by two events. The Lima Report on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was published in 1982 and two years later David published two brief responses to this work [1 & 2]. The following year, in 1985 he presented two papers to a Joint Study Group between representatives of the Church of Scotland and the Baptist Union of Scotland, and these in turn led to two further publications [3 & 4]. From then on the flow of publications continued at a steady rate, averaging slightly over one a year. I have read twenty-six of them and I think that excludes nothing of significance. The stimulus of these two ecumenical events (*BEM* and the study group with the Baptists) meant that the issue of infant baptism has been central to David's research, with nearly half of the publications being on that topic and most of the remainder devoting substantial attention to it. A more distant stimulus to this research is the interest that was sparked during David's

undergraduate studies by his reading the famous Jeremias-Aland debate – my source for this biographical nugget being oral tradition. David's scepticism towards some of the claims made for infant baptism is in line with Charlie Moule's comment about the debate in his lectures. Apparently Moule commented that Jeremias's book contains *at least* all of the evidence for infant baptism [8:262; 20:305; 21:192; 23:18]!

There are two sides to David that have helped to shape his studies on baptism. First, we all know of his commitment to thorough and meticulous historical research. Over half of the works examined engage with the patristic material, ranging from broader surveys to detailed study of specific questions. Over a quarter consider baptism in the Reformation era. These include studies on Bucer, Calvin, the Westminster Assembly and the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic theologian George Cassander.

Secondly, while two thirds of the studies are strictly historical, a third of them discuss the question of baptism today, entirely or in part. I originally proposed as my title for today, 'The Wright View of Baptism'. This proposal was declined by the organizers. Whether this was a commendable move to preserve the tone of the conference or evidence of a dour Scottish lack of humour I will leave you to judge for yourselves. My somewhat flippant proposal had a serious side to it. David's writings on baptism exemplify, as we would all anticipate, rigorous and detailed historical scholarship. Reading them illuminates both the main stream of baptismal history and some hitherto unexplored backwaters. But David is not just an antiquarian concerned to explore the past in a detached academic fashion. His concern has been not just to illuminate past history but to ask what is the 'Right View of Baptism' – right as opposed to wrong. Far from prejudicing the rigour of his historical scholarship this has helped to set the agenda for him and led him to ask probing historical questions, some of which had previously been overlooked.

We have thankfully left behind us the modern pretence that our studies are purely objective and that our personal beliefs have no influence upon our historical and academic studies. In the Brave New World of postmodernity it is now acceptable to acknowledge a personal interest in a topic and the influence of a personal world view. David holds together the strong points of both approaches, the modern and the post-modern. He has always thought and written as a committed Christian and this has coloured both his choice of topics to study and his approach to them. But that does not mean that his writings have become propaganda as he has brought to his research a ruthlessly honest critical mind. These general comments apply very specifically to baptism. As a loyal member of the Kirk David might have been expected to mount a defence of its practices and, in particular, the practice of infant baptism. Far from it. He has been a consistent critic of the practice from his earliest writings on the topic.

Today I would like to explore in turn these two sides of David's writings, the historical and the theological. For each I will draw attention to some of the points that he has emphasised and also make a few critical comments. I should perhaps state that on baptism, both as regards the historical and the theological

issues, my own views are very similar to David's, though not identical. (President Lyndon Johnson once said that if two people think exactly the same way, only one of them has thought!) So I present this paper as a critical admirer one might say. Looking at it from another point of view, in some ways we are standing in the same position, but facing in opposite directions. That is, David argues against the indiscriminate use of infant baptism in the context of a church that has regarded it as the normative form of baptism.¹ I have found myself arguing for the legitimacy of infant baptism, in a context where it has been regarded as a later aberration. In our different contexts we have come to very similar conclusions, though placing the emphasis in different places.

Historical studies

Most of David's historical studies have focused on the Early Church and the issue of infant baptism has figured large in these. In particular he has drawn attention to the relative (not absolute) absence of infant baptism in the early centuries. It should be noted, before we proceed, that I shall be following David's own practice and using the word 'infant' to describe those unable to answer for themselves – not necessarily new-born babes, but certainly not those who would attend what today we call an 'infant school' [3:2f.; 14:389f.].

David clearly dissents from the view that infant baptism was uniformly practised at any stage before the fifth century. He never questions that infant baptism occurs at an early date and never actually denies that it occurred in the apostolic age, though some of the earlier studies left me with the impression that he was uncertain on this question [esp. 3]. Later he affirmed that he was 'now inclined to regard infant baptism as consistent with Scripture but not required by it' [12:62] and the 'now' is presumably opposed to 'then'.² One of his latest writings, on the Apostolic Fathers, notes the pervasive emphasis on faith, but doesn't understand this 'to exclude youngsters not yet of age to believe' [24:130]. He concludes that 'the baptizing of the newborn was not a cause of discord in any of the Apostolic Fathers' churches' and observes that the critical issue is 'how we should interpret their silence' [24:133]. He argues that throughout the patristic period we see a variety of practice with those from Christian homes being baptised at all sorts of ages, from infancy on. One feature of his argument is that the prime concern appears to be to demonstrate the extent to which infant

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- 1 The Church of Scotland continued to treat infant baptism as normative after many other churches (such as the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church) had come to accept some element of variety. In particular, the Church of Scotland Special Commission on Baptism, chaired by T. E. Torrance, produced lengthy reports (1953-1963). Cf. 9:57f.; 11:266; 23:18f.
 - 2 In subsequent discussion he has clarified that the change involved lies in the acceptance that infant baptism is not *required* by Scripture. Also, while he regards it as consistent with Scripture, he does not believe that there is sufficient historical evidence to be sure that it was practised in apostolic times.

baptism was *not* practised, to show that it was not the normative practice in the patristic era. 'I am myself convinced that the baptizing of infants was, until the era of Augustine and beyond, far more minimal and marginal, at least in the West, than is often assumed' [20:304].

Why was there this variety? In a number of places David suggests different possible reasons for the variety – and these are not, of course mutually exclusive. (1) those born before/after their parents' conversion – as with proselyte baptism [3:18]; (2) those babies that were/were not circumcised [3:18-20]; (3) those in danger of dying, picking up the suggestion of Everett Ferguson that infant baptism may have arisen from the emergency baptism of dying infants [3:12, 22; 23:17] – interestingly, the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic theologian George Cassander suggested that initially it might have been only such babies that were baptised [8:263]; (4) regional variation [8:267; 23:17]; (5) temporal variation – e.g. the decline in the fourth century [23:17]; (6) unprincipled personal preferences [23:17].

One important contribution that David has made is to remind us of the need to be critical of the early sources for infant baptism. In particular, we need to bear in mind the genre of our sources. There are sermons and other writings that contain exhortations either to baptise or not to baptise babies. These testify to the views of the authors and show what views were considered acceptable, but do not in themselves prove that anyone actually followed the advice given. Then there is evidence as to when specific individuals were baptised, either through literary biographical information or from inscriptions. In between these two types are church orders and other works regulating practice. These do not give hard statistical information but are clearly a far more reliable indicator as to what actually happened than are exhortatory sermons. So, for example, Cyprian's account of the controversy over whether baptism should be delayed until the eighth day might lead one to suppose that the practice of infant baptism was universal, but other evidence indicates that it was not. On the other hand, the controversy would not have occurred were significant numbers of babies not being baptised.

David has pioneered what might be called a biographical approach to the question of infant baptism [14; 15; 20:287-92] – asking which specific individuals were baptised as babies. He poses the question: 'Who was the first Christian we can name to have been baptized as an infant?' and then proceeds to ask, 'Can we name anyone before the fourth century?' [14:389]. (He is, of course, aware that the third-century inscriptions name those baptised in infancy, but these were all baptised shortly before they died and so provide evidence only for emergency infant baptism.) This leads to a survey of the evidence. He gives an extensive list of men and women raised in Christian homes in the central and later fourth century none of whom was baptised as an infant. 'Although several of these persons later became vocal among the ranks of preachers condemning baptismal delay, only in the case of Augustine is criticism voiced of his own parent's default' [14:393; cf. 20:290]. In fact the case is stronger still in that Augustine's complaint is not that he was not baptised as a baby but that his own request for baptism

was refused – as is later acknowledged by David [20:291, 306]. While still a young boy he fell ill and asked to be baptised. Arrangements were made but when he recovered his baptism was deferred, because of the fear of post-baptismal sin (*Confessions* 1:11:17). Another study examines the vexed question of the timing of the baptism of Julian the Apostate [26]. Ironically, Julian has been called the first Christian emperor ‘as the first to receive baptism other than at the point of death’, though David does not reckon that the evidence is reliable enough for us to be certain when, or even whether, he was in fact baptised [26:9f.].

The biographical approach asks important questions and points to the inadequacy of simply relying upon statements in the sources that might lead one to think that most Christian babies were baptised. But there are weaknesses in this approach that must not be forgotten. First, Jeremias aptly notes, regarding the paucity of early references to the baptism of babies, ‘how seldom in the OT the circumcision of male infants is expressly mentioned’ and yet no one doubts that it took place.³ Where contemporary biographies of early Christians fail to mention their baptism it could perhaps be argued that an adult baptism would have been more likely to be included in a biography than baptism as a baby. Again, from a statistical point of view the argument from the examples of the élite Christians about whose lives we have full information is highly precarious. It reminds me of the person writing in a newspaper after the recently general election expressing amazement at the Labour victory since everyone *he* knew was intending to vote Liberal Democrat. We are all in danger of supposing that the circles in which we move are genuinely representative. So, it may be true that, ‘The evidence is plentiful, with no instances to the contrary, that the baptizing of their newborn children had no place in the minds of even the most pious Christian parents during this period’ [15:10]. But this evidence is drawn from a tiny and certainly not representative sample. Similarly the statement that, ‘of the notion that newborn babies should be baptized there is no glimpse at all’ [15:17, the final sentence] is subject to the significant qualifier found in the previous sentence – ‘in these circles’. Another study, shortly afterwards, refers to ‘the opening up of that fateful gulf in late antiquity in the West between the generality of the Christian *plebs* and the ascetic élite’ [17:377]. Could it be that the élite showed a greater reserve towards infant baptism than did the *plebs*? One might compare a not untypical example from an Anglican church today where a thoughtful committed Christian couple decline to have their baby baptised, while a non-churchgoing couple desire it for social and superstitious reasons. The biographical information is inevitably drawn from a tiny and unrepresentative sample. My point in this is not to deny the value of the biographical approach, simply to warn against deducing too much from the conclusions. I am not suggesting that David is himself unaware of the unavoidable limitations of the method.

Given that many children born to Christian parents were not baptised in in-

3 J. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM, 1960), 23.

fancy, what did happen to them? In a detailed study David explores the evidence for the dedication of infants that were not baptised. There is evidence from the fourth century of such children being enrolled as catechumens from birth and also of their being signed with the cross. As with infant baptism, the evidence is very fragmentary. As David rightly points out, 'responsible researchers are required to be even-handed in adverting to the limitations of our evidence' [17:364]. This statement is addressed to those sceptical about the prevalence of 'some non-baptismal ecclesial welcome of the babies of Christian parents', reminding them of the paucity of evidence for 'actual occurrences of infant baptism'. It should also be pointed out that the evidence for any alternative to infant baptism is if anything even more tenuous than that for infant baptism. Putting it differently, Hippolytus's (or whoever else's) *Apostolic Tradition* may be the first explicit evidence for infant baptism, but it is equally the earliest evidence for the baptism at *any* age of someone raised in a Christian home, as opposed to an adult convert. The silence is not exclusively about infant baptism but more generally about how Christian children were initiated into the faith. (Though it should be noted that the household baptisms of Acts are at least *possible* examples of infant baptism.)

David has also examined the use of specific texts in the context of baptism. He notes, as do many others including Everett Ferguson, the importance of John 3:5 in the early centuries [3:12; 4:60f.; 8:268]. 'No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit,' and it was not doubted that the water referred to was the water of baptism. He has also examined the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14 [3:14-18; 18]. Another passage examined is Jesus' blessing of the children in Mark 10:13-16 and parallels, one widely used in the defence of infant baptism since the Reformation. The first occasion in patristic literature where this passage is used unambiguously to support infant baptism comes in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, dating from around AD 400 [21:194]. Tertullian, of course, cited the passage in the context of urging the delay of baptism (*De baptismo* 18) and his use of it suggests that it was already being used to justify infant baptism [21:194f.; cf. 23:75].

The Nicene Creed affirms 'one baptism for forgiveness of sins'. What does that mean? It has often been taken as an affirmation of the identity of believers' and infant baptism, an interpretation pioneered by Augustine [20:302f.]. But this is not correct. The Greek fathers contemporary with the creed did not see infants as needing forgiveness of sins, for whom baptism had other benefits. So the 'one baptism' is not a reference to infant baptism but rather an affirmation that there is no opportunity for a second baptism for sins committed after the first [6:10f.; 7].

One point that David repeatedly makes is that infant baptism was a rite in search of a theology. That is, any controversy about infant baptism in the Early Church concerned *why* it took place, rather than *whether* it should take place [4:50f., 54, 59, 62; 6:11]. It was Augustine, of course, who supplied what was for a long time to be the answer to this question, with his doctrine of original sin.

Another point that David repeatedly makes is that it was the baptism of be-

lievers that was normative and that infant baptism occurred in this context [e.g. 3:5; 11:266; 20:302; 24:126]. Putting it differently, one might say that believer's baptism was the default setting and that infant baptism took place as an acceptable variation from the norm. The *Apostolic Tradition* provides a good example of this, where the baptism of infants takes place in the context of what is clearly a rite of converts' baptism. The same is true of later evidence. In the time of Augustine and still later the parent or sponsor of the infant to be baptized was asked 'Does he believe?' [4:60; 20:300-302].

We must not forget the Reformation. In a recent paper on baptism David examines Calvin's doctrine [25]. Calvin differed from most of his contemporaries in not taking paedobaptism as the standard or normative form of baptism. In the definitive edition of his *Institutes* he first devoted a chapter to baptism in general, expounding the baptism of believers, before adding a chapter that argues for the legitimacy of infant baptism. In this respect Calvin is of greater value for understanding baptism today than are the majority of his contemporaries.

One of the features of David's historical studies is his ability to come up with some remarkable facts. I was surprised to discover that the Anabaptist leader Menno Simons acknowledged that infant baptism may go back to the apostolic age, albeit as a result of pseudo-apostles and false teachers [8:264]. Better known to some will be the recent statement that 'it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole "households" received Baptism, infants may also have been baptized' [23:15f.; 24:123]. Those not in the know may be surprised to learn that this lukewarm affirmation of the apostolicity of infant baptism ('quite possible') comes from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Finally, I wonder how many were aware that 'Boris Yeltsin was nearly drowned by a tipsy priest when being baptized in a Siberian village as a child' [13:84]!

Theological studies

If there is one thing that marks David's understanding of baptism it is his insistence on the need for a reality check. As he observes, in his book that is being published today (*What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism?*), the claims made for baptism are, unlike many doctrines, 'to some degree empirically or historically verifiable'. For example, the Church of Scotland claims of baptism that its recipients are incorporated into the church. Yet only a small proportion of those baptised as infants go on to become members [23:83-85]. For the majority baptism is neither a beginning nor an initiation but simply a dead end that leads nowhere [12:59].⁴ In most cases it does not lead to Christian discipleship [17:362;

4 David cites a survey conducted by the Church of Scotland's Commission on Mission and Evangelism Resources that sought the views of forty 'people who called themselves Christians but rarely if ever attended church'. Thirty-two of these favoured the availability of infant baptism for those desiring it. Yet all forty were agreed that baptising a baby made it no more likely that it would attend church when older (23:101).

23:24]. And so we have an 'infant-dominated descent into unreality' [23:72]. One effect of all of this has been to encourage a low view of baptism which has lost touch with the high view found in the New Testament [12:62; 13:76; 23:23-25]. We shall return to this point in due course. Not only has infant baptism been ineffective but it has also served as an inoculation against catching the real thing in later life [10:105; 12:55, where it is qualified].

But despite the prevailing lament against the harmful effects of the practice, there is an acknowledgement that it does have a legitimate role – though he would favour the idea of a ten-year moratorium on the practice, after which it could be 'resumed on a much sounder basis' [12:64]. The legitimate practice of infant baptism would include a discipline of administration and also a higher view of its effects [12:64f.]. In another, later, work he explores at length the 'habitats' of infant baptism, discussing its relation to family, church and society [19].

Infant baptism is not to be abolished, but the normative role of believers' baptism needs to become clear. Geoffrey Wainwright spoke a long time ago of a modified Baptist position as the most hopeful way forward [6:16]. This would involve the recognition that believers' baptism was the normative pattern, with a recognition of a legitimate place for the baptism of infants alongside it, as happened in the early centuries.

In keeping with this, David has repeatedly protested against the way in which paedobaptism has become the normative pattern of baptism and the doctrine of baptism has been interpreted in the light of it. This has especially been the case with the Church of Scotland. In particular, 'the helpless and unresponsive passivity of babies should not be made theologically integral to baptism; still less should traces of Adamic perversity be discerned in a frightened baby's squawking and squealing at the font... Of course we do not... baptise ourselves, but that does not require that none comes to baptism unless carried in another's arms' [11:268; cf. 20:309; 23:20f.].! Such an approach to baptism goes all the way back to Augustine [20:297f.].

In his book, published today, David discusses, with approval, the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and praises it for the restoration of the catechumenate [23:77-80]. He discerns there a serious attempt at the reform of infant baptism and its adaptation to today's context, ironically to a more thoroughgoing extent than has been found in the Reformed churches [23:61f.].

Perhaps the point where I have the greatest hesitation about David's view of baptism is where he repeatedly argues that infant baptism must be treated as 'real and complete Christian baptism' [4:63; cf. 23:92f.], 'truly or fully or really baptism as the New Testament intended' [10:102; cf. 11:264; 12:57f., 64]. We have no warrant to treat infant baptism 'as less than the full dominical ordinance or sacrament' [6:17]. As far as it goes this is acceptable. I agree with him that both forms of baptism should be based upon the same theology of baptism [11:267]. But one should not deduce from this that the baptism of a baby has the same *significance* as the baptism of a mature believer. It is one thing to affirm that infant baptism is true Christian baptism, another to emphasise its completeness. In my view, the only valid grounds for maintaining infant baptism are those proposed

in *BEM*. That is, the process of infant baptism followed by nurture leading to an adult confession of faith is an 'equivalent alternative' to the process of infant dedication followed by nurture leading to an adult confession of faith in baptism. In the New Testament Christian initiation involves repentance, faith, baptism and receiving the Spirit.⁵ This is converts' baptism, baptism at the point of conversion, as we see repeatedly in the Acts of the Apostles. For those raised in a Christian home it is extremely unlikely that these things will all come together in a single moment. For such folk initiation will almost certainly be chronologically extended, spanning the period between birth and the point where they are ready to make their own mature confession of faith. Given that baptism is not going to come at the precise moment of conversion (if there is such a precise moment for the great majority of those raised as Christians), the question is whether it should come at the beginning or the end of this process.

What is equivalent here are the two *processes* of initiation, the paedobaptist way beginning with baptism and the Baptist way culminating with it. David is in agreement with this [11:269. Cf. 12:59f.]. It follows from this that infant baptism cannot be regarded as *full* initiation. 'It is surely a critical test of a satisfactory baptismal theology that it can encompass both infants and believers' baptism within a *single* understanding,' David states [19:263, my emphasis]. If this means that both are based upon the same New Testament doctrine of converts' baptism, good and well. But baptism as the beginning of the process of initiation cannot have the same meaning as baptism as the culmination of that process. The New Testament teaching about baptism is about converts' baptism, about the baptism of those who have repented and believed.⁶ To insist that the statements made in the New Testament about converts' baptism must be applied *unchanged* to infants at their baptism is surely to promote another 'descent into unreality'? Simply to apply this teaching to the baptism of infants who do not yet repent or believe is surely mistaken. To suggest that the baptised infant already 'has it all' is to invite a new cycle of 'unreality' and nominal Christianity. It should also be noted that there are similar problems in understanding the baptism of an eighteen-year-old who has believed and followed a path of discipleship since the age of twelve. Here again, to apply the full weight of the New Testament teaching on baptism is to engage in unreality – this time not by claiming too much for the status of the baptizand but by claiming too little for his pre-baptismal experience. In each case, those baptised long before or long after coming to a faith of their own, the answer is not to make claims for their baptism *in isolation from* the other aspects of initiation, but to see the baptism as one (very important)

5 J. D. G. Dunn, in his *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970), 91, sees three elements in Christian initiation: repentance, baptism and the gift of the Spirit. But he then states that repentance and faith are 'opposite sides of the same coin'. It makes more sense to call these four elements, as does David Pawson in *The Normal Christian Birth* (London etc.: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 9-90.

6 Hence in the New Testament baptism conveys the same things as faith, such as salvation (1 Pet. 3:21), forgiveness (Acts 22:16) and union with Christ (Gal. 3:26f.).

element of a process that also includes repentance, faith and receiving the Spirit. Baptism has significance, but *only* as a part of that process, and the precise significance of baptism at the time when it happens will vary according to *where* in that process it occurs. I suspect that David might not dissent from this, but his repeated emphasis on the identity of infant baptism and believers' baptism/*New Testament baptism* could easily be taken to deny it.

An issue that has already been discussed is the question of the *efficacy* of baptism. As has been noted, David blames infant baptism for the devaluing of baptism, for the ignoring or even denial of the high teaching about baptism found in the New Testament. Such an attitude is undoubtedly found among many who practise infant baptism, especially among evangelicals. This attitude is also, as David notes, at least as prevalent, in fact considerably more so, among Baptists. From the sixteenth century the predominant (though not exclusive) view among those rejecting infant baptism has been a thoroughgoing symbolism, reducing baptism to an outward sign of what has *already* happened. An amusing example of this is found in the Baptist systematic theologian A. H. Strong who described baptism as a symbol of an already existing union, comparing this to a wedding service!⁷ This analogy might have more appeal in an age where many couples cohabit before getting married, but that is hardly what Strong had in mind. There have been some noteworthy exceptions in the Baptist tradition, such as the New Testament scholar George Beasley Murray⁸ and the systematic theologian Stanley Grenz.⁹

I wonder whether infant baptism isn't being blamed for too much at this point. The fact is that the reduction of baptism to a mere symbol has consistently been the majority view among Baptists, but only a significant minority view among paedobaptists. If the prime cause were the ineffectiveness of infant baptism one would expect that Baptist history would demonstrate a steady recovery of a higher view of baptism. This is not to deny that infant baptism has been one significant factor among others. David himself mentions another factor, the extent of disagreement over baptism, citing the example of a prominent Church of Scotland minister who stated that 'if the Lord had allowed his church to be so divided for so long about baptism, he could not have meant it to be too important' [11:264. Cf. 11:262-67]! He has also explored the implications of the diversity of views about baptism for the understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture [11].

In his writings David has repeatedly opposed the devaluing of baptism and has also pointed to the New Testament texts that point in a different direction [12:53f.; 23:75f., 88-93]. He interestingly outlines Bucer's move from a more symbolic view in the 1520s to a more 'realist' view in the later 1530s [9]. In his

7 A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (London: Pickering & Inglis, n.d. [reprint of 1906 edition]), 946.

8 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

9 S. J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 672f., 684f.

exposition of the Westminster Confession he argues that it teaches baptismal regeneration, though of course, as he clearly states, not all who are baptised are born again and with those who are it need not happen at the moment of baptism [13:80f.].¹⁰

David notes the objections raised by many evangelicals against the statements of *BEM* about the effects of baptism – that baptism does this or that. I can testify to this as I hear these objections every year from students in my course on the sacraments. He perceptively comments that, ‘we balk at the indicatives of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* when it is the indicatives of the New Testament that truly bother us’ [12:59]. I do question again, however, the blaming of infant baptism at this point [12:58f.]. The objections I hear are overwhelmingly from Baptists and they are objecting to these statements being made about the baptism of believers.

Finally, a word about what it is that David opposes in infant baptism. We might illustrate this by considering three different eras: pre-Christendom, Christendom and post-Christendom. He has little (if anything) to say against the minority practice of infant baptism alongside the norm of believers’ baptism in the Early Church. He clearly opposes the indiscriminate baptism of babies today, in a post-Christian society, where the majority of those baptised have and will have no vital connection to church life. This is, of course, hardly an original stance and will be shared by many who have no problems with the baptism of the children of practising Christians. But David is also critical of the manner in which infant baptism became the normative (and at times sole) form of baptism during the era of Christendom. Such a stance is, of course, held by Baptists but has not been argued so vigorously by one who accepts the legitimacy of infant baptism. This is a different point from the rejection of indiscriminate infant baptism today, which is baptism separated from church life and Christian nurture. Universal infant baptism was not guilty of either fault – at least not when the Church was doing its job properly and initiating baptised children into Christian life. So David repeatedly quotes Barth’s observation that infant baptism belongs to Christendom [12:57; 13:77; 16:289; 23:13] – and therefore to the past. But he also bewails the effect that it had under Christendom, in particular the effect that it had on baptism itself. Hence the title of his book: *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism?* In one particular item he charts and laments Augustine’s contribution to this process [20:306-10]. The outcome was that “‘the awe-inspiring rites of Christian initiation’... would become the midwives’ routine of the Middle Ages and, on a longer perspective, the innocuous and colourless mini-rite of modern Western Protestantism lambasted by Karl Barth’ [20:308]. In the first of four recent lectures on ‘The Making of Early Christians’ he outlines the way in which baptism functioned before this change, in his account of ‘the Baptismal Community’ [22].

10 In the time of discussion that followed the reading of this paper David stated that his own view of baptism was in accord with chapter 28 of the Westminster Confession.

Conclusion

David's studies on baptism have shed considerable light both on the history of its practice, especially in the Early Church, and on the question of its legitimate role today. We look forward to his future publications on the topic, whether drawing together the existing material or extending its scope.

Abstract

This article surveys and evaluates the contribution to our understanding of baptism made by twenty-six writings of David Wright on the topic. His rigorous historical studies have cast further light on the Early Church, dispelling the idea that infant baptism was at any point universal or normative for children raised as Christians. During this period infant baptism was a rite in search of a theology, there being consensus about its validity but not its meaning. David Wright himself accepts the validity of infant baptism, but insists that believer's baptism must remain the normative pattern of baptism. Finally, the inefficacy of indiscriminate infant baptism has encouraged a low view of baptism as a mere symbol, contrary to the high view of the New Testament.

David Wright's publications on baptism

- 1 *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry (the 'Lima Report'): an Evangelical Assessment*, Rutherford Forum Papers: 3 (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1984).
- 2 'The Lima Report: *Baptism and Eucharist Compared*,' *Theology* 87 (1984), 330-36.
- 3 'The Origins of Infant Baptism – Child Believers' Baptism?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987), 1-23.
- 4 'How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism in the Early Church?' in James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (eds.), *Church, Word and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 45-63.
- 5 'Donatist Theologoumena in Augustine? Baptism, Reviviscence of Sins, and Unworthy Ministers' in *Congresso Internazionale su S. Agostino nel XVI Centenario della Conversione. Atti II*, *Studia Ephemerides "Augustinianum"* 25 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum", 1987), 213-24.
- 6 'One Baptism or Two? Reflections on the History of Christian Baptism,' *Vox Evangelica* 18 (1988), 7-23 [1987 Laing Lecture].
- 7 'The Meaning and Reference of "One Baptism for the Remission of Sins" in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed' in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica* 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 281-85 (Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies).
- 8 'George Cassander and the Appeal to the Fathers in Sixteenth-Century Debates about Infant Baptism' in L. Grane, A. Schindler and M. Wriedt (eds.),

- Auctoritas Patrum. Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the 15th and 16th Century*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung Religionsgeschichte 37 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993), 259-69.
- 9 'Baptism' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 56-58.
 - 10 'Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer' in D. F. Wright (ed.), *Martin Bucer, Reforming Church and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95-106.
 - 11 'Scripture and Evangelical Diversity with Special Reference to the Baptismal Divide' in D. F. Wright & P. E. Satterthwaite (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 257-75.
 - 12 'Recovering Baptism for a New Age of Mission' in Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (eds.), *Doing Theology for the People of God. Studies in Honor of J I Packer* (Downers Grove and Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 51-66.
 - 13 'Baptism at the Westminster Assembly' in J. H. Leith (ed.), *The Westminster Confession in Current Thought*, Calvin Studies 8 (Davidson: Davidson College, 1996), 76-90.
 - 14 'At What Ages were People Baptized in the Early Centuries? A Quest for Statistics', *Studia Patristica* 30 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 389-94 [Twelfth International Conference on Patristic Studies].
 - 15 'Monnica's Baptism, Augustine's Deferred Baptism, and Patricius', *Augustinian Studies* 29:2 (1998), 1-17.
 - 16 'The Donatists in the Sixteenth Century' in L. Grane, A. Schindler, M. Wriedt (eds.), *Auctoritas Patrum II. New Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung abendländische Religionsgeschichte (hrsg. G. May) Beiheft 44 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 281-93.
 - 17 'Infant Dedication in the Early Church' in S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross (eds.), *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 352-78.
 - 18 '1 Corinthians 7:14 in Fathers and Reformers' in D. C. Steinmetz (ed.), *Die Patristik in der Bibelexegese des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen Band 85 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 93-113.
 - 19 'Habitats of Infant Baptism' in Wallace M. Alston (ed.), *Theology in the Service of the Church. Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Gillespie* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 254-65.
 - 20 'Augustine and the Transformation of Baptism' in A. Kreider (ed.), *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh and New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 287-310.
 - 21 'Out, In, Out: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism' in S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross (eds.), *Dimensions of Baptism* (London: Sheffield Academic