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# **A Baptist perspective on David Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the end of Christendom***

**Derek Tidball**

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**KEY WORDS:** David Wright, baptism, infant baptism.

At long last a responsible scholar outside the Baptist tradition has had the courage to say what many have thought: 'When it comes to Infant Baptism, the Emperor has no clothes.' On both theological and historical grounds the case for infant baptism is flimsy in the extreme, making its practice detrimental to the work of the gospel and the health of the church. Moreover, the contortions liturgists have undertaken to give it some form of meaning have been on occasions 'bizarre'. When parents have been made to answer for their children who are not yet old enough to speak for themselves, it has required them to engage in a 'form of ventriloquism'. It is all a long way, as David Wright repeatedly states, from the New Testament.

Writing in a personal capacity and as a Baptist, I would like to comment in four areas, namely those of infant baptism's historical foundations; its missiological consequences, and its ecumenical implications, before turning to the comments Wright addresses to those of the believer's baptist tradition.

## **The historical basis**

The myth is often perpetuated by evangelical paedobaptists that infant baptism quickly became the norm after the New Testament time and soon replaced the baptism of believers wholesale. David Wright's research now shows how distorted this picture is and calls into question the historical reconstruction of Jeremias on which many have based their arguments. Contrary to Jeremias, it was not the case that the baptism of children born to Christian parents was all but universal by the time of Augustine (42-43). On the contrary, no service is traceable which was developed for infants, and infant baptism seems to have been a minority practice. Where children were baptised they were baptised as believers, even if their faith was expressed verbally by parents. This explains why I have heard otherwise good scholars embarrassingly glossing over centuries of early history to prove their dogmatic point about the validity of infant baptism. History does not support the case.

These lectures pay considerable attention to the way in which infant baptism gained a firmer grip in the Reformation era as a reaction to the Anabaptists (19-20). They also review the way in which different traditions have engaged in

liturgical gymnastics to pretend that an infant, not yet old enough to believe or even think for themselves, can affirm their faith in Christ so as to make their baptism 'meaningful'.

Some evangelical paedobaptists criticized those of the believer's baptist tradition for wishing to go back to a pristine New Testament era as if there has been no development in church history in the intervening centuries and as if tradition could be ignored. It is sometimes a justified criticism. But as evangelicals the New Testament must surely judge history rather than *vice versa*. Is it not conceivable that history, even the history of the church, might take a wrong turn at points and stand in need of correction? Added to this point of principle, Wright now adds a point of substance: history does not provide an unequivocal basis for the accepted view of the development of infant baptism, at least as early as is often claimed.

### Missiological consequences

A recurring theme of Wright's lectures is that the practice of infant baptism has not had a neutral impact on the Christian faith but a detrimental one (e.g., 17). A review of the liturgical texts suggests confusion as to the meaning of the rite, leaving people unsure as to what, if anything, has happened in the ceremony. To believe that those baptised are 'made members of Christ's church' in any meaningful sense is to live in fantasy land as vast numbers never go near the church again (101-102). Many, however, are deluded into thinking they are spiritually secure because the act has been performed. Those who wish to guard it are in danger, as Wright suggests, of arguing that nothing really happens in it. So, why perform it in the first place? Furthermore, infant baptism is too often in danger of becoming a sentimental family event rather than a church event, more to do with baby worship than faith in Christ (82). Accommodating the family's wishes and trying to ensure that they are not participating in an obvious farce has in some cases reduced the substance of the service to almost nothing. It is a sign of the secularisation of the church from within (61).

Infant baptism confuses the picture missiologically and we would be saved from confusion if it were removed from the scene. This verdict seems to me irrefutable.

However, the same might equally be true of some 'dedication services' which many Baptist churches have developed (only I believe since the Second World War) where the same pressures of sentimentality rather than spirituality are at work. The Baptist house is by no means absolved from a bad conscience in this area in practice even if it is clearer in theory about the meaning of the rituals undertaken.

### Ecumenical implications

Baptists have often been made to feel guilty in ecumenical relationships as if it is our practice of baptism for which an apology needs to be expressed. The ac-

cusation of 'rebaptising' is quickly flung into the conversation. I have been on the receiving end of it a couple of times personally from those who seem to think they have some establishment privileges in the Kingdom of God, as well as the earthly kingdom. Wright draws attention to the way in which *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*<sup>1</sup> can only say, at most, that 'the possibility of infant baptism' being 'practised in the apostolic age cannot be excluded' (clause 11) while that of believers' baptism is firmly established. But then, it seems to me, *BEM* lacks the courage of its convictions (as it does with regard to the Ministry section of the report) and ends by saying 'Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as "rebaptism" must be avoided' – wrong-footing many practitioners of Believer's Baptism (clause 13). Would it not be more honest of the ecumenical movement to come clean and advocate the practice of believers' baptism as the norm? Churches of all traditions in the UK today are discovering that it is *de facto* becoming the norm again because a new generation of converts are coming to faith who were neither baptised as infants nor nurtured in the faith.

The question that has to be asked is what is valid baptism? Wright alludes to the practice of some infant baptisers, where baptism may not have been administered properly, of 'conditional rebaptism' (27). Here baptism is readministered with the qualification that if the original act was properly administered then this further act is not rebaptism. So, if paedobaptists can adopt such a casuistic stance, and place themselves in danger of 'rebaptism', why is there not more understanding of the believers' baptist position? Since Baptists reject baptismal regeneration, most of us would not accept as valid a rite where a baby was brought to church by unbelieving parents and then was neither nurtured in the Christian faith nor had consciously and personally confessed their own faith at confirmation. Since no valid baptism had taken place why should not the believer be baptised (not rebaptised) when they have come to faith in Christ?

Pastorally, I believe the administration of baptism to infants robs a believer of a profound gift that Christ intended to seal his relationship with his disciples and, at a crucial moment, leaves an aching void which of necessity has been filled by the invention of other rites.

What one does, in the absence of any explicit New Testament direction, to recognise the place of children of believers in the church, something akin to the Old Testament rite of circumcision, seems to be handled quite adequately by a form of infant presentation and dedication.

### **Baptismal practice among the Believers' Baptist tradition**

If the practice of infant baptism is weighed in the scales and found wanting, the practice of believers' baptism is also found wanting in Wright's judgement. Here, I believe, those of us who stand within a believer's baptism tradition must take his strictures seriously. It was not his intention to provide a critique of the vari-

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1 Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.

ous ways in which believers' baptism is practised today (as the title of the book makes clear) and therefore the comments directed to those who do not baptise infants are necessarily more brief and oblique. Perhaps he should be encouraged to develop these thoughts more seriously, together with a more thorough New Testament theology of baptism.

The criticisms of the believers' baptists are twofold. First, our theology is superficial and insufficiently sacramental, reducing baptism to a mere act of human witness (28). Secondly, the paucity of Baptist theology on baptism means we have not been taken seriously in discussions around the ecumenical table.

Wright underscores his first criticism in a number of ways. The primacy of the baptismal candidate rather than the living Lord is seen in the 'testimony culture' in which many Baptist churches engage which, he says, has no basis in the New Testament. The subjective personal experience dominates to the exclusion of the objective administration of the grace of God. Furthermore, the way in which baptism and church membership are often disconnected is, he says, 'lax'.

These charges may be partly rebutted (but only partly) by several comments. There is perhaps more diversity among Baptists than Wright allows. There has certainly been a move among Baptist theologians to inject sacramental meaning into baptism without losing the element of personal faith as essential. Many Baptists preach it as an 'effective sign' not 'merely symbolic', though perhaps the popular culture of Baptist churches means the latter often wins out over the former in the minds of the congregation. The books and discussions on this are legion, starting in the recent era even before George Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament*<sup>2</sup> in 1962. The debate is fully (exhaustively?) documented in Anthony Cross's *Baptism and the Baptists*.<sup>3</sup> The charismatic movement, which has had a major impact on many Baptist churches, has also had the beneficial effect of causing many to relate baptism in water and the baptism of the Spirit much more closely together than hitherto, along the lines of Acts 2:28.

I agree that there is a danger that the 'testimony culture' might put all the focus on the person being baptised. I have always stressed to candidates that it is baptism, not giving one's testimony, that is the primary call of Christ. Yet, surely the New Testament is full of testimonies, even if there is no example of one being given at the point of baptism. Confession of faith is required in all traditions. The 'testimony culture' makes the confession personal rather than general and has the potential of it carrying more significance and meaning than a predetermined liturgical response. I know that for many it is the testimonies of ordinary believers in a baptismal service that are often far more powerful proclamations of the gospel than anything the professional preacher is going to deliver, or that the act of immersion in water, dramatic though that is, is itself going to communicate. I remain unrepentant in wanting to give people the opportunity to

2 London: Macmillan 1962; paperback edition, Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1972.

3 The book is subtitled *Theology and Practice in Twentieth Century Britain*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001.

testify to Christ in their own words rather than merely affirming their faith in some liturgical response.

Allied to this is the implied charge about the distance between conversion and baptism, and baptism and church membership. This charge may be legitimate. Baptism does need to be seen as both the natural step to be taken at the beginning of the Christian life and indispensably connected with initiation into the church. This means that baptism should not be delayed, that age is not a factor and membership in the church's body should follow immediately. Having said that, consideration ought to be given, as Wright does, for the reasons why the catechumenate developed and how one can distinguish unthinking professions of faith that have no real substance from those which are genuine commitments to Christ. Wright does not say clearly what he thinks the place of such instruction is in relation to believers' baptism. Perhaps the resolution lies in the Puritan concept of 'improving one's baptism' to which he refers.

Similarly, the matter of church membership is not quite as straightforward as theological logic might dictate. The unfortunate fact is that churches today are legal bodies governed by law, trust deeds and constitutions. Congregational churches involve questions of financial accounts, employment, property as well as matters of faith and practice and so they have to be responsibly led. Here age and maturity (and they are not coterminous) may be a factor. Consequently many restrict church membership, or at least voting rights and leadership responsibilities, to those of a certain age, just as one has to be 18 to vote in a British General Election. Many do encourage those who are baptised to become members of the church immediately, even if they have limited 'rights' in the church for a time. But this question opens up a wider one. The whole nature of 'church membership' which in its present form owes so much to the voluntarism of the nineteenth century is currently being called into question. People are often keen to be baptised but not join the church simply because they do not want to join anything. Membership of societies is in decline in our culture and this has an impact on our understanding of church membership. But that is another question and beyond the remit of this response.

I am less convinced that Baptists lack a decent theology of baptism. The work done in this area, a little of which is referred to above, has been immense. I would consider rather than others have been less than willing to listen because of their own desire to preserve their own practices.

To conclude, I welcome David Wright's robust exposure of the fictions often paraded as historical and theological facts about baptism. But I do not read his work with a 'told you I was right attitude' since, as Tony Lane warns in his Introduction, he mounts some robust challenges to Baptists as well. Would it be too much to ask David Wright, unless he has already done so in writing with which I am not familiar, to move beyond analysis and critique and set forth an equally robust New Testament theology of baptism and show us how it ought to be practised in the contemporary world? Or is that not the task of the historian?

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