

# BAPTISM

THREE VIEWS

EDITED BY David F. Wright

CONTRIBUTIONS BY Sinclair B. Ferguson,  
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# CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i> . . . . .	9
INTRODUCTION	
<i>Daniel G. Reid</i> . . . . .	11
1 BELIEVERS' BAPTISM VIEW	
<i>Bruce A. Ware</i> . . . . .	19
Infant Baptism Response . . . . .	51
Dual-Practice Baptism Response . . . . .	61
Believers' Baptism Concluding Response . . . . .	70
2 INFANT BAPTISM VIEW	
<i>Sinclair B. Ferguson</i> . . . . .	77
Believers' Baptism Response . . . . .	113
Dual-Practice Baptism Response . . . . .	121
Infant Baptism Concluding Response. . . . .	130
3 DUAL-PRACTICE BAPTISM VIEW	
<i>Anthony N. S. Lane.</i> . . . . .	139
Believers' Baptism Response . . . . .	172
Infant Baptism Response . . . . .	177
Dual-Practice Baptism Concluding Response. . . . .	187
<i>Contributors.</i> . . . . .	193
<i>A Bibliography of David F. Wright's</i> <i>Publications on Baptism</i> . . . . .	194
<i>Scripture Index</i> . . . . .	197

# INTRODUCTION

*Daniel G. Reid*

AS I PREPARED TO WRITE THIS INTRODUCTION, I came across a news story about the dedication of a new baptismal font. The font is described and pictured as an object of stunning beauty, cruciform in shape, oriented on the four cardinal points of the compass, with its “living” water quietly gliding over the font’s dark surface, reflecting the arched ceiling of the church. And it is large enough to accommodate baptism by immersion.

This font, located in the Anglican Cathedral in Salisbury, England, is the first permanent font to be installed in that cathedral in over a century. Its capacity for immersion might surprise some Baptists or even Presbyterians. Those who know their church history will recall that baptismal fonts of this size have an ancient history in the church, as evidenced in archaeological remains going back to the baptistery in the house church at Dura-Europas of the early third century. The Salisbury font, installed in this centuries-old cathedral, is a reminder of the sacred place of baptism in Christian practice, the beauty that it can inspire, the complexity of its history and, for some, the conflicted practice of baptism in the Anglican Church of post-Christendom.

While the Salisbury baptismal font evokes tranquility, baptismal waters are not always so! They have also inspired controversy and debate, and even some regrettable chapters in church history. We

have all heard the advice not to bring up religion or politics at dinner parties. Too often these conversations do not end well. For those who are accustomed to discussing religion or theology among the mixed company of the faithful, perhaps the advice should be, “No discussing *baptism* or politics!” Baptism—its subjects, its relation to faith, its meaning and its mode of application—is a topic that the experienced have learned to sidestep to preserve the peace, certainly within the context of evangelical nondenominational parachurch movements.

The fact that in this book we have three theologians representing three different views gathered around the table to talk about baptism should be an attraction in itself. That we did not feel the need to remove any sharp cutlery from the table and that no fight erupts over these divisive waters is a tribute to their deeper recognition of the “one baptism” of which Paul spoke (Eph 4:5), even if that baptism is refracted through different forms and practices.

Karl Barth, who during his theological career changed his allegiance from paedobaptism to believers’ baptism, knew life on both sides of the fence. He commented:

An important sign that a defender of infant baptism is certain that his cause has a sound theological basis ought surely to be . . . that he is able to present and support it calmly. . . . But he cannot become irritated in debating with his opponents. If anyone does become irritated, it is a sign that he feels he has been hit at a vulnerable and unprotected point in his position, that he does not have a good conscience in relation to his cause, that consequently he cannot have a good and quiet conscience in relation to his opponents, and that he has to lay about him all the more violently for this reason.<sup>1</sup>

This, of course, was Barth’s warning to his opponents (now paedobaptists) who might take up cudgels against him! The advice surely applies to parties on any side of the question, and it is a testi-

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* 4/4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), p. 170.

mony to the “good conscience” and the good arguments of each of the contributors to this book that they commend themselves dispositionally.

If we would rather avoid disagreeable arguments about baptism on the one hand, a good case can be made that we do not take baptism seriously enough. An Asian theologian recently related to me how some Chinese non-Christians view baptism, telling their sons and daughters that it’s okay to worship or study the Bible with those Christians, but just don’t get baptized! As nonbelievers, they recognize that to be baptized is to cross a river of no return. This perception is strikingly biblical and instructive. Baptism is a serious proposition.

Nothing neutralizes the best theological arguments for the baptism of infants quite like a congregation’s impulse to focus on the cute antics of the young babies as they are being baptized. On the other hand, sometimes solemnity is improvised and arrives through the liturgical back door. Perhaps the most arresting baptism I have ever witnessed was in a Baptist church where a young man was being baptized. As the boy came up from the water, his father stood up in the congregation and in a loud voice declared, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased!” He was obviously proud of his son, and he was taking the event with utter seriousness; but I was overcome by the dissonance between this echo of the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan and this commonplace baptism in the Chicago suburbs.

More recently, I heard a testimony from a middle-aged woman who had been raised in a nonreligious Jewish family but had married a Christian. She had, with her husband, attended an evangelical Presbyterian church for a decade before she was baptized. Her conversion was a very gradual journey. Over the years, when asked if she had considered baptism, she always responded that she would know when she was ready. Finally, she was ready (coinciding, not incidentally, with the planned baptism of her child). Reflecting on her experience of baptism, she commented that she sensed God’s love poured out on her in the moment of her baptism. I was struck by the

seriousness and thoughtfulness with which she took this step of baptism. Baptism was for her a decisive and demarcating event. Despite its Presbyterian setting, it carried Baptist overtones. Where the rite touches actual lives, surprises sometimes ensue.

Many, if not most, of the churches in the West operate now in increasingly post-Christian societies. David Wright has argued that our situation is becoming far more like the pre-Constantinian world of the early church.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, in addition to the perennial questions this book explores, the time seems ripe for a thoughtful reconsideration of the meaning of this “one baptism” that we profess as Christians in the midst of increasingly non-Christian Western societies. Alert readers will find this theme surfacing from time to time in this book.

Like so many theological issues, on the surface the practice and meaning of baptism looks like a straightforward question, at least for the Bible-believing evangelical Christian. What does the Scripture say? Well, Scripture says X. Okay then, that settles it.

In actual fact one’s view of baptism is bound up with other theological and hermeneutical considerations. As David Wright pointed out in a 1994 essay,<sup>3</sup> the fact of Christian disagreement over baptism raises unsettling questions about the perspicuity, or clarity, of Scripture. As you follow the arguments set out in this book, take note of what each of these advocates counts as persuasive evidence for his view. Is it strictly a matter of what the New Testament teaches? Or is there a larger context—biblical, theological, historical—that comes into play? And what theology of baptism informs the practice that each advocates?

The believers’ baptism view, sometimes called credobaptism (*credo* being Latin for “I believe”) view, is represented by Bruce Ware, a

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<sup>2</sup>David F. Wright, “Recovering Baptism for a New Age of Mission,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 51-66.

<sup>3</sup>David F. Wright, “Scripture and Evangelical Diversity with Special Reference to the Baptismal Divide,” in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. D. F. Wright and Philip E. Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 257-75.

Baptist theologian. He argues that only those who have already become believers in Christ should be baptized and that this baptism should be by immersion in water.

The infant baptism view, often called paedobaptism (*paídos* being Greek for “child”), is represented by Sinclair Ferguson, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian. He argues that baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant work of Christ and is analogous to circumcision, which was the sign of the old covenant of Israel. The biblical continuity between the covenants demands that infants of believers be baptized in addition to those who come to Christ at any age. The mode of baptism is not at issue.

The dual-practice view is argued by Anthony Lane, who in his essay describes something of his personal story of baptismal experience, a biography that has put him on both sides of the issue. His own assessment of the biblical and historical evidence has finally led him to affirm both adult, or convert, baptism and either paedobaptism or adult baptism as legitimate options for those born into a Christian home.

These three views do not represent the full range of Christian views on baptism. For example, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Roman Catholic and Orthodox views are not represented. Even for the three viewpoints that are presented, other advocates of these views would have framed the arguments somewhat differently. But there is a good reason for the three views we have chosen. This book assumes that most of its readers will come from mainstream evangelicalism, and the three views represented make up the most common ones encountered in this broad tradition. Quite obviously, this book assumes that the biggest question on its readers’ minds has to do with two significant alternatives: believers’ baptism or infant baptism? It is worth noting, too, that our essayists do agree on the fundamental premise that Scripture is the final authority for informing our view of baptism. So each of these contributors is “on the same page” when it comes to appealing to biblical evidence, and this in turn assures a certain level of coherence in the discussion.

Admittedly, we face a hazard in presenting the three views of this book. Readers might judge that, at least so far as they are concerned, the argument arrives at a stalemate between infant and believers' baptism. With a third view available, one that incorporates elements of both of the other views, some readers might naturally gravitate toward the middle road, or "Middle-Lane" (p. 181; cf. p. 188) as Sinclair Ferguson wittily labels it! But this view is not posed as a theological and practical compromise. It is a view that stands foursquare on its own biblical, theological and historical basis. I will leave Bruce Ware and Sinclair Ferguson to bring forth their best arguments against this third option—and Tony Lane to respond in kind.

This is a book that should work well in a variety of classroom settings, particularly in evangelical colleges and seminaries where many of the students come from churches that proclaim and practice one of these three baptismal views. Students will want to know the best arguments for the practice of their own church tradition, but they will also want to know why other Christians—often including their fellow students—practice baptism differently. This book will do a fine job of introducing them to robust arguments for each view. The critiques by fellow essayists will bring out weaknesses and strengths that are not always apparent. In addition to students of theology, inquiring laypeople will also find this book an attractive introduction to the baptismal practice of their own church as well as that of others.

Finally, I need to comment on why I, the InterVarsity Press editor responsible to shepherd this project to publication, am writing this introduction. It is not something I ever planned or aspired to write. On this topic I feel like a Suzuki violin student filling in for Itzhak Perlman. These pages belonged to David Wright, who died before this task was completed. David F. Wright (1937-2008) was born in London and educated at Cambridge in classics and theology. In 1964 he began as a lecturer in the department of ecclesiastical history at New College, University of Edinburgh, and in 1973 was promoted to senior lecturer. In 1999 he was awarded a personal chair in Patristic



and Reformed Christianity, reflecting his research, which ranged from the Fathers to the Reformation, including Martin Bucer, John Calvin, John Knox and Peter Martyr Vermigli. He also thought long, researched deeply and wrote much on the topic of baptism.

I think David Wright would have treated us to an introduction that would have been a small classic in itself (“worth the price of the book,” as some like to say), and I was looking forward to it. An experienced and exacting editor, Wright completed his work on the essays and responses in this book prior to his death in February 2008 after a protracted bout with prostate cancer. As far as we can determine, he had not found the energy to tackle the introduction.

In the essays that follow, you will find references to David Wright’s research and writings on baptism. As a tribute to his work and as a faint outline of the introduction that might have been, it seemed fitting to provide the bibliography (compiled by Anthony Lane) of his work on baptism, which may be found at the back of this book.

In one of his last communications with me (January 14, 2008) he wrote, “I have never yet in all my numerous writings on baptism set myself to consider on a four-square basis how one tackles the disagreements, and the fact of disagreement itself. It should make for a useful introduction, except that I know my mind is no longer working as sharply as it should.” I would love to hear his perspective now on “how one tackles the disagreements, and the fact of the disagreement itself”! But perhaps one way to do so is through a thoughtful reading and consideration of this book.