

Editorial: More on Baptism

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Baptism—Sign and Seal of the Covenant of Grace

Brian Russell

Grace Publications, paperback, 126 pp.

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*The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for
Credobaptism versus Paedobaptism*

Fred Malone

Founders Press, hardback, xxxv + 284 pp.

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The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism

Editor Gregg Strawbridge

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BUT THE BEST BOOK ON BAPTISM IS THE BIBLE!

Historically, theology was referred to, we believe correctly, as the “Queen of Sciences.” Other sciences (biology, geology, zoology, etc.) took the creation as their sphere of operation but theology took revelation. In *The Story of Theology*, Professor R. A. Finlayson shows how the “great doctrines of the faith” were secured: Tertullian and the doctrine of the Trinity, Athanasius and the Person of Christ, Augustine and the doctrine of man, Anselm on the atonement, Luther and justification, Calvin and authority.

All this took a good deal of time—some 1500 or more years—and a great deal of anguished argument. Men were persecuted, hounded into exile and in many cases consigned to execution by church or state. But the result is that there is now a good measure of agreement over theology proper; anthropology and soteriology but an ongoing debate in some aspects of ecclesiology and eschatology.

As regards baptism, the British Reformed Fellowship is committed to the Reformed position which is conveniently summarized in article 34 of the *Belgic Confession* and in Chapter 28 the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Part of the latter is quoted below:

Westminster Confession of Faith 28, "Of Baptism"

1. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.
2. The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, where-with the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.
3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.
4. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.

At this point it may be helpful to insert a bit of history. Initially, Anabaptists were concerned with re-baptizing those who had been baptized as infants (hence the name). When Grebel baptized Blaurock in 1525 and Blaurock then baptized others, *mode* was not apparently an issue. Paul Jewett writes,

The early Swiss and Dutch Anabaptists, for the most part, used pouring, and it was not till c. A.D. 1640 in England that Jessey promulgated the view that immersion was essential to baptism, a view which rapidly gained the ascendancy among English Baptists, though the Mennonites and other descendants of the original Anabaptists still practice believers' baptism by pouring.¹

Subsequent to the publication of the *Westminster Confession*, the congregationalists essentially adopted it, in the *Savoy Declaration*, and baptists in their *Baptist Confession*, modifying it only to reflect their own particular positions.

History moves on and at a time of widespread apostasy, particularly amongst many large Presbyterian and Reformed churches, it has also pleased God to raise up a renewed appreciation of the doctrines of grace both in the United Kingdom and the United States. A significant number of independent churches, holding these positions, also take a baptist position—some simply calling themselves evangelical and many others adopting the oxymoron of Reformed Baptist!

The writer has already contributed a number of articles to the *BRJ* on baptism and these have been re-published in booklet form as *Baptism: Meaning, Mode and Subjects*. I am happy to send complimentary copies to interested readers if they e-mail me. Also a slightly corrected version can be downloaded from <www.kandmbooks.co.uk>. However, in view of the continued debate it may be worth examining the volumes listed above to see what, if anything, they may add.

Before I do so, some reflection is called for. If the reader compares the dates, he will note that the *Belgic Confession* (1561) is simply concerned with Anabaptism. The *Westminster Confession* (1647) adds that “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary” (28:3), reflecting the additional baptist claim. So we have a tract by A. R. (1644) entitled *Dipping is Baptizing, and Baptizing is Dipping*, which is clear enough. The same year produced A. Barber, *His Treatise of Dipping*. Subsequently baptists modified dipping by adding “immersion.” Since then for a more than three centuries the debate has raged with singularly little resolution, though if one may judge numerically in England and Wales (the Scots are more hard headed!) it is increasingly tipping in the baptist direction!

We read in Scripture,

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (II Tim. 3:16-17).

¹Paul Jewett, “Baptism (Baptist View),” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (NFCE, 1964), p. 520.

The logic of that text is that this is a solvable problem! So what is going wrong? Why cannot Reformed and baptist sort the matter out? Let us reason together. I have spent most of my professional life in scientific pursuits—much of it at a fairly mundane level. However, there was some opportunity to pursue relevant research and certain points come up in this process.

In tackling any investigation we need, first, to define the problem.

Second, we need to know what is already known.

Third, to that end we must become familiar with the literature.

Fourth, it is helpful to contact others who have worked on the problem.

Fifth, we need to gather all the data together.

Sixth, we must be prepared to put aside preconceived ideas.

Seventh and finally, we need to reflect on the meaning of the data gathered.

This in turn may lead us to carry out further investigation to elucidate contestable or debatable points. We must try to be honest. And we must not suppress data we find inconvenient. We serve, or try to serve a God who is not only concerned about truth, but is the Truth.

Before we do so it is necessary to consider what precisely are the questions at issue. For convenience, I propose to consider, first, *the question of mode*. The Reformed hold that “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person” (*Westminster Confession* 28:3). Our reason for this blunt assertion is that the New Testament gives no details of how baptisms were carried out—everybody knew! But since the information has not been preserved we may safely assume mode was not important.

Unfortunately, there is a strain of legalism in most of us! We like to be told what to do and actually find it difficult to “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). So from the *Didache* downwards, we read varying accounts of how baptisms are to be and have been carried out: aspersion, affusion, dipping—single or trine, cold water, living, i.e. running water, etc. Basically the idea is of purification and the “how” may be left to our discretion. The practice of laying fully clothed recipients down on their backs in the water is relatively recent only occurring from the seventeenth century!

The second is *the question of persons*. Rather regularly this is misunderstood (or misrepresented) by baptists—as in the subtitle of Fred Malone’s book, *A*

Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism. Both parties practice believer's baptism. When God converts people to Christ inside the congregation under the ministry of the word or externally as a result of missionary activity or where for various reasons they have not been baptized, then we baptize them. Look again at the first two heads of the *Westminster Confession* 28 to see that is so. The issue is this: Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, *but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.*

Let me try to expand this point as it is of the first importance in any discussion that we see what is actually at issue. The New Testament gives clear examples of household baptisms. What do we do with the children of believing parents? That is the question! We get nowhere if we do not recognize the point at issue. Even one of the contributors to the third book above seems to be in a muddle on this point.

We turn now to the first of the above books. Brian Russell is a South African who has now moved to the U.S. where he is pastor of a Southern Baptist Convention Church. This book consists of his baptismal class lessons. He makes a number of positive points. He recognizes that baptism is "both an 'ordinance' and a 'sacrament.'" Even more importantly "in the New Testament baptism has replaced circumcision as 'the sign and seal of the righteousness of the faith' promised to Christians under the new covenant (Col. 2:11-12)." And he quotes approvingly most of the first paragraph of the *Westminster Confession* on baptism. Again he makes the very necessary point that after baptism, "Instruction in the apostles' doctrine is something that is to continue right through the years of our Christian discipleship. We are to go on learning the mind of Christ more perfectly every day."

I would question some of his points in chapter one, "The History of Baptism," but see little to quarrel with in succeeding chapters on "The Institution of Baptism," "The Requirements for Baptism," "The Necessity of Baptism," "The Subjects of Baptism," etc., including "The Importance of Church Membership" and "The Contradiction of Re-baptism." I found useful material in much of this book.

Where, inevitably, the book falls down is on "The Mode of Baptism." On page 81, Russell gives us what must surely be a bit of baptist apocrypha!

Why did the translators of the Authorised Version not translate the word *baptizo* as immerse instead of baptize? Well, when the Au-

thorised Version scholars were doing their great work of revision, they did translate the word *baptizo* by the word dip. But realising the far-reaching consequences, they decided eventually to transliterate and leave the Greek word in an anglicised form (*baptize*) so that every man could interpret it as he wanted to. Thus, through their indecision or reluctance to translate *baptizo* properly, the erroneous practice of sprinkling has been maintained.

Now I would be grateful to any of our readers who can throw light on this story, but let me put up some points for consideration.

1. The paragraph contains a basic ambiguity. What do the baptists want? Dip or immerse? They are not the same. We note that the *Westminster Confession* simply says, "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary." Clearly that reflects the historic position in the 1640s. But the problem is simply this. What baptists insist on is "dipping" but this corresponds to the Greek word *bapto*. But in the Greek *baptizo* is the word used. So by 1688-89, the *Baptist Confession* reads, "Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance" (29:4). We may reasonably ask which is it: dipping or immersion?

2. So, even if the story is true, which I doubt, the revisers could not use "dip" because they needed that word to translate the two or three uses of *bapto* in the Greek text.

3. Further they were revising earlier translations, of which Tyndale and Geneva were the principal. I have checked both. Mark 1:4 reads in Tyndale (1526), "Jhon did baptise in the wyldernes," and in Geneva (1602), "Iohn did baptize in the wilderneffe"—so clearly the word *baptizo* was already "Englished."

On page 82 we read, "The grammar of the New Testament allows only for immersion." We confess our mystification as to the point about the passive voice he makes in his first paragraph but we quote the beginning of his second:

Again in Mark 1:5 we read, 'Then all the land of Judea ... went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan river;' and in verse 8, 'I indeed baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In both these verses the preposition used is ... *en* which with the dative, can only mean 'in,' not 'with.'

The writer is no Grecian!—and rather suspects Pastor Russell is not either! But I submit that in the above *en* is being used in two different senses. In verse 5, as in verse 4, *en te eremo* (“in the wilderness”) indicates the place. But in verse 8, the use is instrumental!² That is presumably why our translators used the word “*with*” not “*in*.” There is some textual variation at verse 8—some texts including and some omitting the *en*. I would not deny that *ego men ebaptisa humas en hudati* can be translated “I baptized you in water,” as indeed is done by the ASV. But if the reader cares to look up Luke 3:16; Acts. 1:5; 11:16, he will find that Dr. Luke who writes a more Classical Greek omits *en* before *hudati* (“water”) in every case. The translation must therefore be “*with* water”—the precise opposite of Russell’s contention. Examples of the “instrumental dative” are quite common in New Testament Greek, as in Luke 22:49, *kurie ei pataxomen en machaira* (“Lord, shall we smite *with* the sword?”) or in I Corinthians 4:21, *ti thelete en rhabdo eltho pros humas e en agape pneumati te praotetos* (“What will ye? shall I come unto you *with* a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?”).

The logic is obvious. John the Baptist is telling us that he is applying the water to the person—either by affusion or aspersion—not the person to the water by dipping!³ But further, if we have the whole quotation before us (“I indeed baptize you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost;” Mark 1:8), we find that the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” (the reality), as contrasted with “the baptism with water” (the ritual), is spoken of in such terms as being “poured out.” So in the case of Cornelius and his household, where the procedure is reversed we read,

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost *fell* on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was *poured out* the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord (Acts 10:44-48).

²See Ward Powers, *Learn to Read the Greek New Testament* (Australia: SPCK, 1995); Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome, 1996).

³See further my discussion in *Baptism: Meaning, Mode and Subjects* on the impossibility of John “dipping” the multitudes who came to him for baptism in the time available.

Note that the Holy Spirit “fell” and was “poured out.” The natural implication of “forbid water” is that it was brought and presumably poured or sprinkled on “all them which heard.”

But there is a further consideration. It is perfectly logical to look at the baptism of our Lord and the Ethiopian eunuch and think they suggest dipping. But first impressions are often wrong. We need in this as in all cases to examine all the available data: the household of Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian gaoler, the three thousand on the day of Pentecost, etc. And crucially we must consider the use of *baptizo* in the New Testament at Mark 7:4, Luke 11:38, etc., which throws light on the use of the word.

In many ways, Brian Russell’s *Baptism—Sign and Seal of the Covenant of Grace* is an attractive little book—a superior American version of a number of small pamphlets circulating in the UK which are all flawed by similar inaccuracies. Had I met with it as a young Christian I might well have been persuaded to adopt the baptist position, but I would have done so on false premises. We disagree also with our author on the subject of household baptisms, but here it may be convenient to defer discussion to the next book in which it is the main issue.

But what is depressing about all this is the author seems unaware of or at any rate disinclined to interact with, any work putting the opposite viewpoint. Jay Adams, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*, has been circulating since 1975 and James Chaney’s winsome *William the Baptist* since 1877. What is more important? To win converts to a sectarian position? Or to seek the truth?

to be continued

Note: As indicated above the Editor thinks this is a solvable problem if only we will put aside presuppositions and apply ourselves to determining what the New Testament actually says. To that end he would welcome comments—and particularly corrections—from Reformed readers or any baptists who may come across this and who disagree. He intends to publish relevant information in “Letters to the Editor.”