

An Interview with Tom Schreiner on Baptism

Here's an interview I conducted with Tom Schreiner about the new book on baptism that he has co-edited.

Tom, first of all, can you tell us a bit about yourself--your family, where you teach, etc.?

I grew up as a Roman Catholic and was saved at the age of 17, mainly through the witness of a girl named Diane who is now my wife! We have 4 children (3 boys and one girl from the ages of 24-15). I have been teaching since 1983 and since 1997 have taught New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. I am also the preaching pastor at Clifton Baptist Church.

What's the title of your new book, and who are the contributors?

The title is: Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ. Shawn Wright and I edited the book and both wrote a chapter. We are thrilled with the other scholars who contributed, including Andreas Köstenberger, Bob Stein, Steve Wellum, Steve McKinion, Jonathan Rainbow, Duane Garrett, Ardel Caneday, and Mark Dever.

How would you define "baptism" biblically?

I think the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 defines baptism beautifully. "We believe that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer, into the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost; to show forth, in a solemn and beautiful emblem, our faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, with its effect in our death to sin and resurrection to a new life."

Is baptism necessary for salvation?

The mere mechanical act of baptism doesn't save. Cornelius and his friends received the Spirit before baptism (Acts 10:44-48), showing that they were saved before baptism. Paul makes it clear in 1 Cor. 1:14-17 that baptism must be understood in light of the gospel of grace, not vice-versa. On the other hand, Bob Stein argues convincingly in his chapter that baptism is part of the complex of saving events. {JT note: cf. this SBJT article by Stein.} So, if someone understands that God commands baptism and then refuses to do it, one has to wonder if such a person is saved.

If you don't need to be baptized as a believer in order to be saved, why is it so important? If this is a non-essential doctrine, is it really worth debating and dividing over?

I would refer readers here to my answer above. Baptism is important because it is associated in the NT with the saving events of Christ's death and resurrection. It is "the" initiation rite into the Christian church, and hence it is not "optional" or "insignificant." I

don't believe that baptism in and of itself saves, and someone may be a Christian and not undergo baptism because he or she misunderstands what Christ requires. In any case, believer's baptism is important because it relates to our understanding of the nature of the church. The church is composed of regenerate church members (or at least it should be). Those who baptize infants compromise the purity of the church because they allow into the church those who are unregenerate, for baptism in the NT always follows faith.

Assuming that paedobaptism didn't exist in the NT, when did it first arise historically onto the scene? What caused it?

Scholars differ as to when infant baptism began. Most agree that it probably started sporadically in the 2nd century, and Steve McKinion argues that it was not common until the 4th or 5th centuries. The "why" is hard to answer. It certainly seems to have been at least partly because of pastoral and parental concern about babies dying in infancy. Baptizing them was a means of assuring their salvation in case of their deaths. According to Augustine it was crucial for removing original sin and entrance into heaven. I also encourage everyone to read Jonathan Rainbow's chapter, for he shows that Zwingli introduced an innovation in the doctrine of baptism. No one before Zwingli claimed that one could be baptized without being a believer. Zwingli diverged from all preceding him by separating baptism from faith and regeneration.

You argue that Reformed evangelicals who baptize their babies are inconsistent--how so?

We love fellow believers from Reformed churches with whom we share so many precious truths, especially in terms of the doctrines of grace. The Reformed are inconsistent, however, in that they require adults who are baptized to be believers, while they baptize infants who are unbelievers. Steve Wellum and Shawn Wright demonstrate that to do this they have to redefine what they previously said about the doctrine of baptism and use the theological (but, in the way they use it to support infant baptism, biblically unjustifiable) construct of the "covenant of grace" as proof of their position.

You also argue that several negative consequences follow from a paedobaptistic view--what are they?

I will list several negative consequences briefly. (1) Unregenerate people become members of the church, which violates the New Testament's teaching that the church is to be made up of regenerate church members. (2) Church discipline becomes a problem, for how can a church discipline anyone when it has many unbelieving members? (3) The Reformed face a problem with the Lord's Supper. Either they forbid the Lord's Supper from those who are baptized (a foreign idea in the NT), or they allow infants to partake of the Lord's Supper. In this latter case, some are taking of the Supper unworthily since they are unbelievers. (4) The meaning of baptism differs from what we read in the NT, for in the NT those who are baptized enjoy the gift of the Spirit, have died and risen with Christ, and are clothed with Christ. None of these truths, however, are true of infants.

Some suggest that the already (inaugurated, but) not-yet (consummated) nature of the kingdom means that some people are members of the new covenant community but are not true believers.

I think this is a serious misunderstanding of the new covenant, for Hebrews 8-10 and 2 Corinthians 3 make it clear that the blessings of the new covenant are forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is the sign that one is a believer in the NT (Gal. 3:1-5; Acts 15:7-11). No one who enjoys forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit is a false believer, and these are the blessings secured in the new covenant.

In your view, can the new covenant be broken by a covenant member?

The NT clearly teaches in 2 Corinthians 2 and Hebrews 8-10 that members of the new covenant enjoy the forgiveness of their sins, the law written on the heart, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. No one who truly enjoys these blessings can ever lose them. The Spirit who indwells us guards and keeps us, so that we can never break the new covenant. Indeed, the very point of the new covenant promises in Ezek. 36:26-27 and Jer. 31:31-34 is that they are irrevocable.

What is the biblical relationship between baptism and circumcision?

This is a crucial question, and I encourage all your readers to read Steve Wellum's very important chapter in our book. Reformed believers defend infant baptism by arguing that baptism replaces circumcision. Just as circumcision was applied to infants, so too should baptism be applied to covenant children. It is crucial to see in the NT when false teachers argued that circumcision was required for salvation, neither Paul nor the other apostles refuted the argument by saying that baptism had replaced circumcision (Galatians; Acts 15). That would be a very simple argument to make to show circumcision was not required, so the silence here is telling. Further, the NT does not draw a connection between physical circumcision and baptism, but spiritual circumcision and baptism (Col. 2:11-12). There is not complete continuity between the Sinai covenant and the new covenant. Israel was in covenant with the Lord as a nation and a church, so that one could be circumcised in the flesh but not be circumcised in heart. But all the members of the new covenant are circumcised in heart, so that every member of the new covenant is regenerate. The argument here demands further attention, and so I close by encouraging someone to read our entire book, and especially Wellum's chapter.

It seems to me that in the NT, baptism followed almost immediately after a profession of faith--with little time for instruction, confirmation that their faith was genuine, etc. Yet it also seems to me that those churches that practice instant baptisms upon initial professions of faith also seem to produce a lot of nominal Christians. What are your thoughts?

That's a great question and it doesn't have an easy answer. I think we have to consider the difference between the NT era and our culture in the United States. In the NT the Christian faith was clearly distinct from the culture, and hence baptism was a dramatic

indication that one had given his life to the one true God and to Jesus Christ. Baptism was not culturally acceptable but distinguished someone remarkably from their culture. When we think of our culture today, we know that it is more and more post-Christian. Still, baptism is part of the cultural landscape. Many people in our culture mistakenly identify being an American with being a Christian. Therefore, I think it is wise to instruct converts in our context before immediately baptizing them. In that way we can discern better whether someone's profession of faith is genuine. I would advise, therefore, that a new convert be introduced in new member's classes (our church has five) to the essential doctrines of the church and the Christian faith. In addition, we have two elders interview each candidate for membership to ensure they understand the gospel before they are baptized and join the church.

I know you and your co-authors believe that baptism is biblical. What positive benefits or implications flow to a church that follows this biblical pattern?

In our view baptism in the Bible always follows faith. It is confusing to someone who reads the Bible to see infants baptized when they don't have faith. In the NT those who are baptized are said to be dead to sin and risen with Christ. But infants aren't dead to sin, nor are they risen with Christ. Even more important, perhaps, is what happens in the church. Now infants are considered to be members of the church, even though they are unregenerate. Hence, the purity of the church is compromised severely by allowing unbaptized and unconverted members into the church. The church is to be a body of believers over against the world, but this is lost when unbaptized infants are allowed to be members.

In your view, is there hope for unity on such an issue that has long divided the church?

We never know what it might please God to do. So we should always remain optimistic that more light will dawn on the church. Probably no one living in the 1400s imagined that a Reformation would occur in the 1500s! It is also possible that a difference of opinion will persist until Jesus comes. On the one hand, we need to love our fellow-believers who differ with us. On the other hand, we need to teach that any deviation from biblical truth has significant consequences.