

BAPTIST BOOK REVIEW:

IT TAKES A CHURCH TO BAPTIZE:

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

ABOUT INFANT BAPTISM

BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

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Scot McKnight (Ph.D. University of Nottingham) is the author of over fifty books, most notably the commentaries on Colossians, Philemon, and James in the Eerdmans series The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Other than these three scholarly commentaries, I don't recommend any of his other books, and especially his newest one: *It Takes a Church to Baptize: What the Bible Says about Infant Baptism* (hereafter *It Takes a Church to Baptize*).

McKnight is Professor of New Testament Studies and holder of the Julius R. Mantey Chair in New Testament at Northern Seminary in Illinois. Before coming to Northern Seminary in 2012, McKnight was professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and then Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University.

Northern Seminary was founded in 1913 as Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. Although the school still maintains

a “partnership” with the American Baptist Churches USA (the old Northern Baptist Convention [1907-1950] and American Baptist Convention [1950-1972]), the name “Baptist” is hard to find on the school’s website. Instead, the seminary claims to be “evangelical, culturally and socially engaged, and racially diverse.” It “offers an educational context that is international, interracial, and intercultural for the preparation of women and men.” The seminary is, in fact, “unrelenting in its support of women in ministry.” Nevertheless, the seminary’s doctrinal statement, which “Northern’s full-time faculty, administrators, and trustees have affirmed” (but which students do not have to sign), says regarding baptism: “Baptism is the immersion of the believer in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, following his confession of faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior; baptism symbolizes the death of the old life and the rising of the new.”

Julius R. Mantey (1890-1981) taught at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1925-1960. He is the author, with H. E. Dana (1888-1945), of the formerly widely used *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (1927). Mantey is also the author of *Shall Baptists Abandon Baptism: A Searching Study of Open Membership* (c.1928).

Why all the background on Northern Seminary and Julius Mantey?

Although he “grew up Baptist” and was “baptistic” in his “view of baptism for most of” his life (p. 1), in April of 2014, McKnight

announced that he had joined the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). Two years later, he was ordained into Anglican Holy Orders as a Deacon at the Church of the Redeemer in Highwood, Illinois, where he still serves as the Rev. Canon Dr. Scot McKnight.

The ACNA, like the Episcopal Church from which it was formed, looks to the 39 Articles of the Church of England in addition to the Bible. According to Article XXVII, the “sacrament” of baptism is “not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed, Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.” And furthermore: “The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.”

Why would a Baptist seminary employ a paedo-Baptist—and even worse, an Anglican—as a professor of New Testament and make him the Julius R. Mantey chair in New Testament? Could Mantey have ever imagined such a thing?

It Takes a Church to Baptize has a foreword by an Anglican bishop—who, like McKnight, used to hold to believers’ baptism—and recommendations on the back cover by an Anglican priest (who also

used to be a Baptist) and an Episcopal priest who admits to previously suffering from severe depression and bi-polar disorder—both of whom are women. A blurb in the front of the book calls it “the most compelling case for infant baptism available today.” The book also has an afterword by another former Baptist, Gerald McDermott, who recently retired as the Anglican Chair of Divinity at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School in Alabama.

McKnight begins his preface by printing the text of a letter he received from an Anglican priest in the ACNA asking how he would “explain infant baptism to someone who comes from a tradition that baptizes adults only” (p. xiv). Since the Anglican baptismal liturgy “is heavy with the language of regeneration and being born again through the waters of baptism,” the priest wanted to know how to deal with “people who are worried such language excludes a person from having to profess personal faith” (xiv). McKnight says that his book “seeks to answer the question” asked by the priest, “as well as some of the questions behind his questions” (p. xiv). McKnight also has his eye on “the many today who are attracted to the Anglican Church, to *The Book of Common Prayer* and its beautiful prayers or ‘collects,’ to the lectionary approach to Sunday worship, and to the liturgical ordering of the church calendar, but who *deep in their hearts* are not convinced the Bible teaches infant baptism and who worry that baptizing infants may diminish the importance of personal conversion” (p. xiv). In other

words, to the many today who are not attracted to a New Testament church but hold to believers' baptism.

In addition to the foreword, preface, and afterword, *It Takes a Church to Baptize* contains seven chapters, endnotes, and indexes of subjects and Scripture and Ancient Writings. Chapter one is introductory. Chapter two first informs the reader that the book "will be structured by the liturgy for Holy Baptism in The Book of Common Prayer" (p. 22) and then presents the beginning of the Anglican baptismal service. Chapter three is the continuation of the Anglican baptismal service. Chapters four and five are digressions on "The Three Great Themes of Our Baptism" and "The Bible and Infant Baptism." Chapter six is the conclusion of the Anglican baptismal service. Chapter seven is McKnight's personal testimony of how he came to reject believers' baptism and embrace infant baptism. Chapters two, three, and six can be ignored completely, as can the foreword and afterword.

Although McKnight concedes in his first chapter that "there is no text in the New Testament that explicitly reveals the practice of infant baptism in the apostolic church" (p. 4), he maintains that "reading the Bible" is what led him "on a long and winding road to embrace infant baptism as the view most consistent with the Bible" (p. 1). Infant baptism may not be "explicit" in the Bible, but it is "implicit" (p. 4). Therefore, "Infant baptism is the first public step in nurturing our children into the faith" (p. 1). It is "the deepest, wisest,

and most historic Christian way of forming our children into the faith” (p. 3). McKnight sees “the biggest challenge to infant baptism” as coming, “not from the Bible so much as from rampant individualism” (p. 27). It is no wonder, then, that McKnight says that his book is about both “what the Bible says about baptism and how many great thinkers in the church have understood it” (p. 16). Infant baptism “is owned by lots of wonderful thinkers and leaders in the church” (p. 15). After all, “For three-quarters of church history baptism was for infants” (p. 19). And regarding the mode of baptism, McKnight acknowledges that “the baptism of Jesus was by immersion, and probably most adult baptisms were immersions,” but “already in the late first or early second century Christians were given options on the method or mode of baptism” (p. 91). *It Takes a Church to Baptize* “will continue and expand” the line of thinking of McKnight’s “favorite theologian,” the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, even though he admitted that “the practice of infant baptism cannot be directly proven in the New Testament,” it “can nevertheless be seen as probable there” (p. 16). So, even though “the practice of infant baptism may not be in the New Testament,” its “theology is to be anchored in the Bible securely” (p. 16).

McKnight defines baptism as “a physical act (or rite) in water in which God mediates multiple blessings of grace to the one being baptized (in the context of family-centered church fellowship as a pledge to nurture the baptized into spiritual formation)” (p. 61). He sees

BAPTIST BOOK REVIEW

three themes of baptism: “(1) union with Christ, (2) Spirit and church reception, and (3) forgiveness and redemption” (p. 48). Thus:

Baptism is an act in which God brings us into union with Christ and all the blessings Christ has accomplished (p. 53).

The one baptism of water and Spirit ushers us into the family of God, the church (p. 55).

Baptism is a church event, and redemption and faith are announced and promised as the church assembles around the person being baptized (p. 56).

Baptism is not just a symbol, it is “a sign, seal, symbol, sacrament, and seed” (p. 58).

McKnight’s two biblical proofs for infant baptism are household baptisms and the (supposed) connection between Christian baptism and Jewish circumcision.

After quoting four verses from the New Testament that mention a “household” (only two of which mention a household being baptized), McKnight “firmly” says that it is “impossible for this many households to be baptized and for there not to be any children or infants in the household” (p. 66). Since when are two “this many”? Twice the Bible records a whole house believing. The “certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum” (John 4:46) “himself believed, and his whole house” (John 4:53). And “Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house” (Acts 18:8). Obviously, infants are incapable of believing. But what of the households of Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16) who were baptized? The answer is

found in the context of the salvation of the Philippian jailor:

And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house. (Acts 16:31)

Before his house could be saved, the word of the Lord had to be spoken to them. Surely paedobaptists don't believe that the jailor's house was saved vicariously by his individual faith. Note further that "all that were in his house" who were baptized believed in God. This would necessarily exclude infants. And regarding the household of Stephanus, we are told that his house "addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints" (1 Cor. 16:15). McKnight would do well to heed the words of a fellow paedobaptist, Ben Witherington, who concluded in *Troubled Waters: Rethinking the Theology of Baptism* (Baylor, 2007) that "those who are searching for hints of infant baptism in the New Testament would do well to look elsewhere than among the household texts" (p. 65).

McKnight holds that "circumcision is fulfilled in baptism" (p. 76), and that "the New Testament explicitly connects Christian baptism with Jewish circumcision" (p. 71). This is something that was championed by Augustine and Calvin, although it has no basis in Scripture, and certainly not in Colossians 2:11-12. For more on the non-connection between circumcision and baptism, see Paul Jewett,

Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace (Eerdmans, 1978). McKnight believes that the children of believers are “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14) because of “the faith of their parents and the ritual of infant baptism” (p. 83). This text “seals confidence that the early church baptized infants” (p. 81).

The belief in infant baptism leads to other heresies as well. McKnight postulates three types of conversion experiences: personal-decision, sociological process, and liturgical or sacramental (p. 10). He reads water into mentions of baptism and reads baptism into mentions of water, and both into mentions of washing. He looks to the Church Fathers, history, and tradition in addition to the Bible. “Two arguments from silence have also confirmed” McKnight’s “conviction that the early church did in fact baptize infants” (p. 99). Since “there is no record that Jesus or the apostles opposed the incorporation of children into the faith of the church,” their silence “is an eloquent support of infant baptism” (p. 99). I have many books on my bookshelves written by Protestants in defense of infant baptism. Compared to them, *It Takes a Church to Baptize* is one of the worst ones I have ever come across.

*It Takes a Church to Baptize:
What the Bible Says about Infant Baptism*
Scot McKnight
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143 pages. Paperback, \$16.99.

