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BOOK REVIEW

Stanley K. Fowler. *Rethinking Baptism: Some Baptist Reflections*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015. 62 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 978-1-49820-967-0. \$9.36.

Stanley K. Fowler has been thinking and rethinking about baptism for some time, and it is about time he shared it. This small but succinct book summarizes decades of judicious thinking on the topic. The beginning chapter chronicles his journey of reflection that culminates with this realization: “I became more convinced than ever that baptism in biblical terms is conversion-baptism, and thus a meeting place of grace and faith, the sacramental seal of the experience of union with Christ. I recognize, of course, that such language was atypical in my circles” (5–6).

Originally, Baptists were sacramentalists in how they think about baptism. Much of the historical work on this topic assumes Fowler’s prior work in *More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (2002). So, anyone who would contest this language and its place in Baptist identity has to realize that Fowler has done his homework, as he expresses in a footnote, noting, “I have provided extensive evidence for this claim in *More than a Symbol*” (46 n. 6). Thus, the present book is in many ways a condensed and popularized version of his doctoral work. There he surveyed the historical trajectory of Baptist theology over the centuries, showing that Baptists were indeed originally sacramentalists with their doctrine of baptism, but later rejected that category for lighter terms like “ordinance” or “symbol,” under the assumption that sacramentalism was part and parcel of “works righteousness.” This softening of language was done implicitly for polemical purposes, distinguishing Baptists from the more liturgically-oriented Roman Catholics and Anglicans. The result, ironically, is that Baptists now tend to

have a very lax view of the doctrine that forms their namesake. However, the connection between grace (expressed in several dimensions) and baptism is all too scriptural, and thus the language of “sacrament” is warranted.

In *Rethinking Baptism*, Fowler offers a case for a sacramental view of baptism, moving through the biblical texts and then on to answering practical issues at a rate that any busy pastor can appreciate. He demonstrates that forgiveness of sins (as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit and union with Christ) is normatively linked with baptism in the New Testament. He offers the helpful analogy that likens baptism to an “enacted prayer” (31), by which Christians can formally respond to the Gospel.

He continues on to answer practical questions: Does this undermine salvation by grace and faith alone? Are the unbaptized Christians unsaved? What does this mean for baptism classes, evangelism, communion, and, more controversially, the possibility of membership of non-immersed believers in Baptist churches? As he explains, Baptist sacramentalism, properly understood, does not undermine grace or discipleship, nor should it be understood in a way that sees non-baptized Christians as unsaved; just because grace happens normatively *through* baptism does not mean the Spirit might not act *apart from* baptism. He also recommends that believers from other traditions that seek membership in Baptist churches should not be expected to be re-baptized. He also recommends open-communion to all believers, whether or not they are baptized.

Fowler’s treatise did, however, raise the following ecclesial and soteriological questions. It raises these questions simply because no doctrine of baptism stands alone, but is rather linked to and effected by other aspects of one’s theology. The first question is this: What does he mean by baptism being “sacramental”? The reason for the question is that the term “sacrament” is a loaded and misunderstood term especially for Baptists. Fowler certainly does *not* mean that baptism brings about salvation regardless of the faith of the person, nor does he mean that, if one is not baptized, he or she cannot be saved as well as take communion or be a member of a Baptist church. Fowler’s description should not be conflated with, for instance,

the Roman Catholic sacrament of infant baptism, conferring salvation from original sin.

In order to nuance these distinctions, Fowler uses a set of terms that flesh out baptism's multifaceted nature. He notes that Scripture seems to speak about baptism as a provided *means*. Baptism (for John) is the "the divinely provided *means* to be forgiven for one's sins . . . a way of experiencing the salvation of the kingdom of God" (13); baptism is according to Matt 28:18–20 "a *means* by which we enter into communion with God, not as a mere symbol pointing to the reality" (15). Yet, that is not all. Fowler notes that 1 Pet 3:21 clarifies that, while the water saves, it does so as "pledge of clean conscience" (26), not as removal of dirt. It is also an "expression of repentance" (32), a "sign and seal" (33); it "ratifies" faith experience (33); it is a "formalization" of true confession (36); and it has a "confirming function" (39). Thus, while there is the language of provided "means" of forgiveness, Fowler reassures that "The act has no power in itself of course" (13) and that "There is no value in the act of baptism as such" (32). All of this together demonstrates that baptism is the normative means by which forgiveness is sought and expressed, but salvation is not caused by the act nor is it bound to it (34). While it is a "foundational identity marker" (24), it should not be used to implore rebaptism on mature believers from other traditions. The unbaptized can be saved, and the improperly baptized can still be church members.

While Fowler's recommendation against rebaptism of mature believers from other traditions, and he is agreeable to salvation being found among the non-baptized, within this work it requires further reflection. Does one admit to membership a mature Christian baptized as an infant and confirmed in another tradition in the same way a believer baptized by sprinkling might be admitted? Some Baptists might be open to believer's baptism by another mode but not to infant baptism, or they might show partiality to Protestant traditions, as opposed to the Roman Catholic tradition, that baptize infants. Could a devout Roman Catholic, who has found a new spiritual home at a Baptist church, be admitted to membership? This is not as hypothetical as it sounds. Fowler makes the point that, since baptism is reserved

for the initiation into faith, imploring non-immersed believers to be re-baptized to get the “mode right” often gets the “function wrong” (40). This still presupposes that the non-immersed are discernably obedient believers. The question then is this: If baptism by immersion is the means by which one understands conversion, how does one discern conversion otherwise? The answer seems obvious—faith in Jesus, Christ-like character, evidence of the Spirit working in their lives, etc. Admitting who fits these criteria, however, requires an ecumenical awareness that some Baptists might not have thought about:

“Salvation” in the New Testament terms is not just a momentary thing. There is a sense in which we have been saved (Eph. 2:8-9), and a sense in which salvation is a future experience at the return of Christ (Rom. 13:11), and apparently a sense in which we are being saved progressively (1 Cor. 1:18). The point is that salvation is a comprehensive reality, and it is not all experienced at one point in time. (35)

Essentially, this sounds like a person can experience salvation (or a form of it) at baptism, and yet, if they do not continue to be obedient, they will not be ultimately saved in the future. This is a distinction that is not made well in popular preaching of “once saved always saved,” where “saved” reductively means a non-refundable ticket to heaven upon saying the Sinner’s Prayer, and it seems to suggest that Fowler’s account of sacramentalism presupposes a more complex soteriology than what is commonly espoused. Calvinists tend to deny the possibility of losing one’s salvation either by defending the notion that the person was never saved to begin with or by placing true knowledge of the elect with God to be disclosed eschatologically. However, these *ad hoc* clarifications undermine the notion of present assurance of eternal security that is often a hallmark of Calvinist preaching. This point is a bit teased out, but that is only because Fowler’s short answer on p. 35 suggests so much. Salvation implicitly seems multifaceted, as baptism is, and pastors reading this book will perhaps be challenged to think through more than just their doctrine of baptism in order to fully integrate what is being presented.

Next, Fowler points out that Reformation thought, whether Lutheran or Calvinist, does not see a contradiction between justification by faith and sacramentalism. Believers *do* something in order to *be* believers, and this means something very different than what the apostle Paul objects to as “works righteousness.” This also perhaps suggests a more complementary relationship between obedience and salvation (properly understood) that is often underappreciated in popular preaching. This may sound similar to the Anabaptist’s insistence that there is “no faith without following,” but for Fowler, discipleship is simply doing the work of responsible evangelism. Baptism after all is the normative response to the command, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt 3:2).

Baptism in the New Testament is also a re-appropriation of the *mikveh* commands in the Old Testament, which were done for cleansing impurity and commissioning priests (see William Jones, *Jewish Ritual Washing and Christian Baptism*, 2010]). This is often missed, as it does not comport with the perceived distinction between ceremonial laws and moral laws, with baptism being some kind of ceremonial law whose function was not abrogated in Paul’s thinking (the various thinkers of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” might be helpful on this point). Fowler states that neither “ordinance” nor “sacrament” is found explicitly in the Bible. However, if baptism were a re-appropriation of the *mikveh* laws/ordinances, that is, a response to the repentance command coupled with gospel proclamation, then the original audience would have understood ordinance as the basic category of the act. The opportunity to live rightly before God was not seen as antithetical to God’s unmerited grace. This is not a criticism so much as a supplement, as Fowler states that these terms are not mutually exclusive. Such a distinction is technical, but very applicable today; far from the often individualistic and antinomian undercurrent in some popular preaching, the call to repentance, obedience, discipleship, and even membership in a church—all expressed or initiated in baptism—should be understood as a part of God’s gracious invitation to take up new life.

Fowler’s little book offers much to reflect on. Given its size

and succinctness, it is perfect for pastors and laypeople. Any church board thinking about baptism practices should read this book. The book displays wisdom from years of pastoring and knowledge from years of research, and he thus brings precision to exegetical truth and grace to application.

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