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BOOK REVIEW

Bobby Jamieson. *Understanding Baptism*. Church Basics Series 2. Nashville: B&H, 2016. vi + 74 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-8887-4. \$7.99.

This short volume's intention is rather simple: to instruct Christians on the importance of believers' baptism and its on-going role in the life of the church today. It is a part of 9Marks's "Church Basics" series, which is a series of small books that were meant to take a shallow dive into central elements and practices of church life. As such, the author has three audiences in mind: first, Christians who have not yet been baptized; second, Christians who have been baptized but are looking to further understand the commitment they made; and third, church leaders (primarily pastors) who may be tasked with baptizing new believers.

Each chapter is comfortably organized around a single question: What is baptism? Who should be baptized? What about infant baptism? Why is baptism required for church membership? When is "baptism" not baptism? How should churches practice baptism? If one has a question about baptism, this simple, almost-catechistic approach makes it easy to identify which chapter might be most helpful.

The author defines believers' baptism as an act conducted by the church to unite the recipient with Christ, which is accomplished by immersing the believer in water as a sign of commitment to Christ and his body. Each chapter adds another layer to this definition. For example, he advocates the closed-membership view, which states that because believers' baptism functions as a public profession of faith, it is a necessary step before one can be accepted onto a church's membership roll. In his assessment he does not shy away from identifying what he believes

should or should not qualify as baptism. Most prominently, he engages those traditions that baptize infants and in response, generally rehearses those criticisms that have populated credo-baptism tracts for centuries (e.g., one cannot be truly united with Christ if he or she does not yet believe in Christ). The volume closes with a basic outline of baptism as: by immersion, conducted by someone authorized by the church, in the presence of one's Christian community, and only on the condition that the believer is aware of what it means.

As a primer on believers' baptism for the uninitiated or those insiders who would like a cursory and theologically conservative exploration of the topic, this book serves its purpose. To its credit, it raises a number of important questions that are worth addressing, such as whether or not a baptism "counts" if the recipient made the decision consciously but was unaware of what it truly meant. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the author's answers, these are valuable conversations to have. Yet, there are a host of other questions excluded from this volume that are worth addressing: What if someone received believers' baptism but not by immersion? Is there any merit to age restrictions? More substantially, the discussion does not engage with current conversations on sacramentalism, as recently given robust treatment by Stanley Fowler and Anthony Cross; although, admittedly, this topic may edge this volume outside of its intended purposes as an introductory text.

The absence of these questions aside, this book has a context issue; namely, its interaction with the past is virtually non-existent. There is a rich history on the debate surrounding baptism, but one would not get that impression from reading this book. Someone encountering this position for the first time, for example, might be left in confusion by one lingering question: If the answer is as straightforward as he suggests, why does *anyone* baptize infants? Frustratingly, a few well-placed historical insights would have benefited the volume significantly.

While these points may detract from this volume, it does what it sets out to do insofar as the author has put together an accessible beginner's guide to believers' baptism. Someone looking for a substantive analysis of the topic will not find it here but for one

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seeking a simple introduction, this volume will do just fine.

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