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David Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the end of Christendom:*
A response by an English Anglican Evangelical

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Tony Lane acknowledges in his Foreword that David Wright 'writes as one from within the paedobaptist tradition' (having had C/E roots, he has belonged for some decades to the Church of Scotland). He delivered the four lectures which compose this book in England, though admittedly to the Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, which may not be quite *urbi et orbi*. He has an English publisher and appears to want to address an English clientele, a point to which I return below. But he writes in the first instance as the 'Emeritus Professor of Patristic and Reformed Christianity' that he is – that is, with a strong patristic weighting, and a strong interest in how baptism has developed (or degenerated) in the country of Scotland, where a 'reformed' Church has been the church of the nation.

His treatment of the New Testament, extensive though it is over the four lectures, rather skirts around the question of infant baptism. The only mention of household baptism I could find was of Acts 16 (page 36) and there he quotes the text so clipped that 'and your household' disappears from verse 31 and you would never know Luke had written alongside 'he rejoiced, having believed…' the adverb *panoikei*, 'wholehouseholdwise'. There are questions to discuss, but he has excluded evidence which I would have thought prerequisite to the discussion. He begins his next paragraph by saying 'Early Christianity… knew nothing of an unbaptized believer.' This is a hundred times more true of the New Testament than of the succeeding centuries (which he is including); but its implications for baptizing infants are both strong and largely ignored. If a child can reach the age of two without baptism in a believing household, and then lisp 'I love the Lord Jesus', then already we may have an unbaptized believer on our hands. If we give baptism to this child on the grounds of his or her profession of faith, then we are putting enormous weight on an untested profession, but if we delay baptism we compound the problem of having unbaptized believers around. The issue for Christian parents is, I submit: are we going to treat our own offspring as (a) unbelievers to be converted (and not share in our prayers until they are converted), or (b) believers (in which case marking them as such might not be a bad idea), or (c) in some imprecisely defined earthly waiting place, a child's limbo?

Answer (b) fits closely with the New Testament, and I suspect that some other issues, with which David Wright wishes to engage, like grace-preceding-response or how-can-an-infant-profess-faith are induced by later rationales rather than by the New Testament. The broad New Testament picture is of households being baptized, of the children being one with their parents in the life of the church, and of no-one to whom the apostolic letters are read in church being unbaptized – which is taken as a given in every letter that mentions baptism. I am unsure whether David Wright sufficiently covers that ground.

When he comes to the patristic era, he seems on page 64 to have moved a little from his dictum quoted above that his 'early Christianity' included 'the next four centuries'. Now he states 'speedy baptism was a thing of the apostolic past, being attested in the patristic era only in an emergency...' Indeed, he goes on on page 75 to cite Tertullian as the arch-delayer, the first-recorded opponent of infant baptism. But he rather short-changes us about Tertullian's problem. Along with Tertullian's *prima facie* assertion of original innocence in children (which David Wright quotes) there is a neighbouring paragraph (which David Wright does not quote) where Tertullian reflects on the sponsoring practice of his time, in which, it seems, the sponsors 'went bail' for the children they sponsored, and if the children lapsed and went corrupt, they had in effect 'skipped bail', and the sponsors had to answer to God for it. It is on these grounds that Tertullian advocates not letting adults in for this perilous bail procedure. It is a contemporary rationale of infant baptism which Tertullian is rejecting, and we would too (and David Wright is good at exposing false rationales). But seeing off inadequate rationales is insufficient for a healthy approach to the principle of infant baptism, and, if we would not wish to stake the baptism of infants on the credit, so to speak, of the sponsors, then Tertullian's rejection of infant baptism is almost irrelevant. Tertullian also misses a further trick – he fails to say (what would have surely been nearly determinative?) 'the apostles never baptized infants, and it is not a practice known to earlier generations before me.' Was it that he did not possess that card, and therefore inevitably lost that trick?

Another question is whether there is or can be a common sacramental theology for infant and 'believer's' baptisms. David Wright exposes 'this massive baptismal reductionism which the long reign of infant baptism has inflicted on baptism' (87). By this he means indiscriminate baptismal practice; and this development, where there seems no call for credible discipleship in parents to qualify infants for baptism, has left the rite empty where it ought to be proclaiming truth the loudest. The upshot in history has been a perfunctory infant baptism set alongside a highly significant adult (yes, or believer's) rite. So how can they have the same theologies?

My own answer would be that, unless there is a common theology, there cannot be infant baptism at all. 'One baptism in common' (Eph. 4:4), while it has problems as between Baptists and paedobaptists, also has problems for paedobaptists if they split their theology. All Paul's appeals to baptism in his Epistles have three things in common which bear upon this:

(a) The appeals clearly embrace *all* the hearers or readers – all were baptized

and the appeals therefore catch them all, and there seems to be no category of hearers or catechumens;

(b) The hearers included young children (Eph. 6; Col. 4) – and the force of the appeal lay in the fact of the recipients being (here and now) baptized people; in no sense was it a call to remember in detail (or even in sensation) what the original had 'felt' like or how it had been experienced;

(c) The appeals have no distinction to be made in respect of the age at which or the conditions under which the recipients had received baptism. The baptized are the baptized are the baptized.

If I am right about this, then not only should paedobaptists strive for a common theology of baptism, but also liturgiographers should seek the least possible divergence between rites for adults and those for infants – ideally writing their texts for household baptism, true missionary baptism. (I write here having participated in the writing of all Church of England rites from Series 2 in 1968 to Common Worship (CW) in 1998.)

If David Wright's starting point is the early church, his end-point, loudly advertised in his subtitle, is the here and now, the 'End of Christendom'. He has Scotland strongly in view in this. I asked myself how I would see this if I lived and ministered in Scotland, and I would have reckoned he knew the landscape fairly well. Nevertheless, the subtitle may still offer a trifle more than the lectures deliver. There is here quite a raking over of the reformed stream of theologians from Calvin to Barth and Torrance; Church of Scotland liturgies and reports come within the purview; the book virtually ends with some detailed Scottish statistics; the bibliography has general and specialized church histories of Scotland; and the ten entries of David Wright's own in the bibliography include several with a Scottish orientation. But the weight of the actual chapters tends to push us back towards the patristic and Reformation eras, and the present has neither a full diagnosis, nor a credible prognosis, nor a coherent prescription to match that subtitle.

So what of England 'at the End of Christendom'? To an English reader it does not appear that we have received more than a passing glance. I comment as one who writes extensively on baptism, debates with both Baptists and indiscriminate paedobaptists, has worked closely on those baptismal liturgies for over 30 years – and actually baptizes both adults and infants. So I quickly went to the five pages of bibliography with between 80 and 100 entries in all. These include *no* Anglicans writing about current Anglicanism. Bradshaw, Cuming and Whitaker are Anglicans indeed, but are there for their patristic studies. The Alternative Service Book (ASB) and CW texts are examined (fairly unsympathetically), but they stand alone in the chapter – yet in England there have been many commentaries, reports and wider discussions available in print. There is a great history in England (stemming from the Gorham controversy in 1847-50) about the effects of infant baptism; and this is in general the theme of the fourth lecture – but the lecture has little more than a passing reference to the Church of England. I gently submit that there is a superb overview of the whole set of baptismal questions in Gordon Kuhrt's *Believing in Baptism* (Mowbray, 1987), and there is a smaller

handbook kind of treatment in Michael Green's *Baptism: Purpose, Practice and Power* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1987). I would have hoped my own efforts might have been noticed (my fairly substantial *Infant Baptism and the Gospel* [DLT, 1993] covers 40 years of Anglican history concerning exactly the questions David Wright is raising), He is also silent about the advocates of indiscriminate baptism (eg, the Ely Report in 1971, R. R.Osborn, the Knapp-Fisher Report in 1977 and Mark Dalby), silent about the various anti-paedobaptist authors (as, e. g., Pawson, Murray, Carson), incorrect about Canon law, innocent of any baptismal statistics, and lacking any knowledge of the International Anglican 'Toronto Statement'. His wobbly brief glimpses of the ASB and CW texts seem to be all he has seen.

David Wright attacks what I have discussed above, a common rite for adults and infants. We achieved this goal in the Church of England in the 1979 'Series 3' services, and the ASB (1980) and CW rites (1998) sustain it well. This has meant the vows (or expressions of repentance and faith) have been identical for adults and infants, and the infants make the profession by proxy. This tendency Wright denounces – it is 'vicarious unreality' on page 59, a 'ventriloquist charade' on page 62. So, against these cartoons, I offer here two fall-back considerations in defence of proxy vows, to be weighed before the concept is prematurely rejected. Vows identical to the adult ones help sustain the commonality of the one baptism.

(a) In formal terms (and baptism does have a formal character to it) the person who is to be baptized expresses his or her baptismal faith, and that is the formal basis for the baptism. A counter-argument to Wright's pejorative words like 'ventriloquism' would be that there is something highly odd in having one person profess faith and having a different person baptized – and, if that is what is done, the infant baptism carries no obligations on the candidate to live as a disciple, for the only obligations have been laid on the presenting parents.

(b) This in turn means that at confirmation or other similar occasions it is useless or misleading to expect a 'Renewal of Baptismal Vows'. Why? Well, because there have been no baptismal vows to renew. It would have to be the 'imposition of Baptismal Vows', which would itself signal that there was a baptism with vows and a baptism without vows, a fairly significant split in the common baptism.

Of course we need to keep the parents in the baptismal loop; prior questions to them, before the actual baptismal vows, qualify or undergird the children as candidates for baptism. Infants then follow through the formal structure of baptism alongside the adults (or 'believers') in a common baptismal pattern. This again may not determine the issue, but it deserves better of David Wright than the cartoon dismissal of it he provides.

I would like to slip in also one word on behalf of the English Reformers. On pages 45-47 Wright complains that, while practising only infant baptism, they used 'an awkward adaptation of a rite formulated for the baptism of responding believers'. I, in reply, would say:

(a) Holding onto a rite for baptism *tout simple*, minimally adapted for infants, is exactly the right process in view of the 'commonality' principle above;
(b) Although the English Reformers may never ever have witnessed the baptism of an adult, their discussion of baptism, eg in Article XXVII or in the 1604 Catechism, begins with the general nature of baptism, and is actually at its weakest in justifying infant baptism by a mere one-liner as 'most agreeable with the institution of Christ';
(c) Similarly, the 1552 infant baptism rite is at its weakest in reading from Mark 10, and from that passage justifying infant baptism (the weakness is twofold – both in trying to provide a special justification of infant baptism at all in under 200 words, and in trying to do it from that text);
(d) But, whatever else was happening, the Reformers were not just reproducing an old tradition – at each stage they revised the text (and the choreography) and obviously thought through carefully how to clarify and improve it.

A word too about the law of the Church of England. It is an error often made in England to think that in the established Church of England parents have a 'right' to baptism for their child (page 13). A careful reading of Canons B21 and B22 will show that parish clergy are correct to 'delay' baptism for the sake of preparation. 'Preparation' (if it were for exams!) would include some evidence that something of what had been taught had in fact been learned – and in this case parents are to learn discipleship themselves. Then, if parents think they are unduly delayed, they can appeal to the bishop – but his decision is then final; it is a churchly decision of a sort quite appropriate in an episcopal church; there is no statutory right to which parents could appeal, no going to court with a 'right', seeking an injunction that a reluctant vicar should baptize their child. I know – I was once, when I was a vicar, upheld by my bishop in precisely that situation.

I was slightly surprised also to find Wright saying (32): 'It is something of a commonplace nowadays to talk about baptism as the ordination of the laity'. It must be a Scottish commonplace, I would think – I never hear it. Wright is saying it is difficult to make the point stick with infant baptism (my students once ran a comic 'Movement for Infant Ordination', but it was self-evidently comic). I say it is difficult to make the point stick in any circumstance, for the 'commonplace' is a total *husteronproteron* – an inverted logic. Baptism is prior to ordination in theological and ecclesiological logic, and it cannot possibly be interpreted as though something derivative from it (ordination) stood somehow behind it and prior to it. Baptism is itself already a call and commissioning for 'witness and service', and that has to be taken as a given before we consider how anyone may be ordained for specific fields of 'witness and service'. If a Christian is supposed to require ordination in order to live a life of ordinary Christian service, then we have ruined the existing meanings of both baptism and ordination.

Another place at which he has read Scottish practice into an English situation is where he says (73) that fonts were moved from the church door to the front of the congregation ('symbolic significance... yielded to the didactic value of... full view'). He is moving on immediately to the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books, i.e. to the Church of England, but this description does not fit the English case. Enter-

ing through the church door during the service did cease in 1552, but the font itself was not moved near the west door, and the Canons of 1604 order it to stand in the ancient place – and many are still there today. Indeed the Puritans at the Savoy Conference in 1661complained about them not being moved!

So what *has* infant baptism done to baptism? Certainly indiscriminate baptism has not only devalued the sacrament, but also caused a reaction into anti-paedobaptist ways. Certainly an insistence that infant baptism invariably bestows spiritual regeneration has not only done infant baptism a disservice, but has also by reaction taken much of the 'performative' or 'realist' character out of 'believer's' baptism, which is left as simply an occasion for personal testimony. The Lima text (quoted on page 102) has certainly a true word to address to us in England. A few lines on page 86 are as far as Wright goes into the actual English scene, and comment on the liturgical rites does not of itself indicate how the Church of England is handling actual applications for baptism. I looked in vain for any reference to what parents to have to undertake in the CW services; and I looked in vain for any reference to the (dry) thanksgiving for the gift of a child, a genuinely frontier provision. I write as the honorary president of Baptismal Integrity (previously the Movement for the Reform of Infant Baptism) – so I hope I will be read as truly seeking some authenticity in the administration of baptism. We have a pressing need for infant baptism to be so administered that its character as New Testament baptism appears.