

## Review Articles

### Minimalistic Baptism - Disapproved

"The immersion of believers as the only scriptural form of baptism." So declares Article 6 of the Baptist Union Doctrinal Basis. That means we cannot approve baptism by sprinkling as adequate, even of those who have come to faith.

Yet sometimes we hear a Baptist say, "It's the faith that matters, not the form" or "The quantities of water is not the important thing."

Now a publication by (Anglican) Grove Books of England lights up the question, "How much water?" The author, S. Anita Stauffer of the Lutheran World Federation, entitles her work, *On Baptismal Fonts: Ancient and Modern*. (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1994) By "fonts" she means any artificial baptismal pool. She uses "submersion" for total immersion. Her study is confined to Western Christendom where she sees that baptismal practice has become "minimalistic", the Eastern Churches, of course, have never defected from total immersion.

Stauffer has researched the remains of early "fonts" in Italy, France, Switzerland and Tunisia. She affirms that originally adult immersion was the norm, and was conducted in streams, ponds, lakes and seas. In the 4th Century with advent of church buildings special baptismal pools were constructed. They varied greatly, being rectangular, hexagonal, circular, uniform and other shapes, but they were all deep enough for the immersion of adults. They were normally below ground level, like graves,

By the 8th Century infant baptism had largely replaced that of adults and fonts no longer needed to be large. "Thus began a decline in baptismal theology and practice" (p 13). New pools were constructed above ground level. By the 12th & 13th Centuries they were set on bases or pedestals. By the late 16th Century pouring and sprinkling were replacing immersion. "Fonts" became minimal. They resembled bird baths, then salad bowls and finally teacups. The rich biblical and patristic understandings of baptism as birth, burial and bath had been lost. One cannot bathe, not to speak of drown, in a finger-bowl" (14).

Stauffer sees the task of liturgical renewal today as providing fonts that make the many meanings of baptism evident, "submersion is a fuller ritual enactment of baptism's meanings than any other mode" (45).

"The experience of being sprinkled with a few drops of water does not communicate any of the layers of baptism's meanings - not cleansing, not birth, certainly not death and burial. Is God's grace so minimal that Christians can be satisfied with sprinkling?" (46) She notes the growing number of adult baptisms, and claims, "It is a ritual and symbolic contradiction of the meaning of baptism to require an adult to bend over a font which looks like a bird bath." (47)

Stauffer's last chapter has interesting descriptions and pictures of large submersion pools set prominently in some modern Anglican & Lutheran churches in England and America. They could give us some ideas for the design of our own baptisteries.

More importantly the whole study might be of help to persons who have been baptized by sprinkling. The sincerity of such a person is not in question, but the form of that baptism certainly is. The sprinkled believer may be able to say "I took a step with Jesus and I was blessed by Him", but he or she cannot say, "I was demonstrating that being a Christian means a total cleansing of my whole self, a death to the old life and a rising to the new." Only total immersion demonstrates that.

So the inadequate symbol needs to be superseded by the adequate one. Then if the minimalistic ceremony has brought blessing, how much more an act of obedience with full biblical meaning. This raises the re-baptism bogey. But it is hard to see what biblical principle is offended by following up an inadequate baptism with an adequate one. The disciples at Ephesus and Paul saw no impediment to doing so (Acts 19:5).

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## **Resurrection and Discipleship**

For Thorwald Lorenzen, formerly professor of Biblical studies at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, and now pastor of the Canberra Baptist Church, the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not in question. For any who accept the authority of the Biblical message the resurrection is not only there, it is centrally there, the very nature and ground of Christian faith. The question for Lorenzen therefore is how can we best understand, grasp and respond to the resurrection.

### **Interpreting the unprecedented**

First then, understanding. How can we interpret this