

Reviews

Stanley E Porter and Anthony R Cross (eds) *Dimensions of baptism: Biblical and theological studies* (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) pp. 401.

Following their 1999 volume *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church* editors Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross have now produced this second collection of studies on the subject of baptism. As they note in the introduction there is little sign that interest in baptism and the broader discussion of Christian initiation is abating. *Dimensions* consists of 19 essays arranged in three sections: baptism in the New Testament (9 essays), baptism in the early Church (3 essays), and baptism in contemporary theology (7 essays).

While the New Testament and early church material is interesting, the most helpful essays are those on baptism in the contemporary scene. Two of these deal with the vexed question of how infant baptism and believer's are to be related. Citing the practice of early church fathers Chrysostom, Basil and Augustine, Stephen Holmes argues that while believer's baptism is definitive, and thus infant baptism strictly speaking improper, the latter can still, in the interests of charity and unity, be regarded as valid.

In an essay entitled 'Baptism and the process of Christian initiation' Paul Fiddes begins by noting that the most recent WCC Faith and Order paper on the topic (no. 184, 1997) speaks of all Christians being brought into Christ by 'our common baptism'. Against this claim of baptismal equivalence, Fiddes proposes instead an equivalence of Christian initiation. What Christians share, he suggests, is not a common baptism, but an equivalent process of initiation - in the one case infant baptism plus personal faith at confirmation, and in the other, infant presentation and baptism as personal faith.

One of the essays in particular contains a timely reminder for Baptists in this part of the world. Discussing the significance of baptism as memory, Philip Thompson accuses the baptismal practice of Southern Baptists of not only failing to remember the right things (*amnesia*), but of remembering the wrong things (*paramnesia*). Instead of the object of memory in baptism being the triune life of God, says Thompson, the focus becomes the faith of the individual being baptised. Rather than the traditional interrogation along the contours of the Apostles' Creed, the candidate is led by the minister to declare, 'I take God as *my* Father, Jesus as *my* Savior.'

At the heart of this distortion, Thompson believes, is the question of the relation of baptism to conversion. The answer, he thinks, is to see conversion more firmly connected to a vision of formation within the Christian community. Along with this, however, would it not be well to consider why western culture has introduced into Christian initiation the non-scriptural category of 'conversion'? Making conversion the point at which one comes to faith or 'is saved', means that whatever baptism is, it is not essentially about salvation. The 'real thing' is in the past. Inevitably baptism is relegated to secondary, and strangely for Baptists, even optional status.

Historically, Baptists have been very sure of the Who of baptism (believers) and the How (immersion). They have not been nearly so hot on the Why? It is pleasing therefore to see Baptist scholars in volumes like this coming to grips with the theology of the ordinance (or is it the sacrament?)

Dimensions is a work of scholarship. The arguments are detailed and erudite, the footnotes and referencing extensive. While the book is academic, it is far from an academic book. The constructive thinking in this volume will undoubtedly contribute much to the on-going discussion. I have one small, but rather curious grumble. Reading the final essay in which

Christopher Ellis argues for baptism to be understood in the context of ecclesiology as 'an instrumental act of meaning', I found my heart strangely warmed. However, not knowing who Ellis was, I turned to the list of contributors at the front. Alas, he was not.

Brian K. Smith

D.W. Bebbington (ed.), *The Gospel in the World: International Baptist Studies* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002) pp. 361.

This book is a compilation of papers delivered at the first International Conference on Baptist Studies, held at Regents Park, Oxford, in 1997. A book of this nature is almost inevitably a 'mixed bag', but there is a high percentage of excellent essays in this volume.

Some of the essays, while of quality, may not hold much interest to 'down-under' people like me. One example of this is a chapter on the Gaelic hymns of Peter Grant, a nineteenth-century Baptist pastor among the Gaelic-speaking Scots.

More disappointing was an insufficiently researched chapter on 'Patterns of Developments among Baptists in Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea in the First Fifty Years since their Respective Beginnings'. I was struck by the fact that the material on New Zealand seemed to go little further than a drawing from the *Handful of Grain* series of small books. Perhaps that highlights the inadequacy of good major historical writing on New Zealand Baptist history.

Paolo Spanu's paper on Italian Baptists since World War Two, however, was fascinating. There were two aspects that particularly intrigued me. One was the way the weak Italian church, though desperately needing American missionaries, then had to cope with an excessive flood of those missionaries,