



Stander, Prof Hendrick F & Prof Johannes P Louw (2004) *Baptism in the Early Church*. UK: Carey Publications (for Reformation Today Trust and the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America)

The debate over the subjects of baptism has persisted for centuries. Often appeals are made to Early Church writers by both sides. This book was written by the authors to meet the need for a reference book that offers a readable, non-technical survey of these writers that can be used by anyone interested in the subjects of baptism in the early church. The book is written by two leading authorities of Patristic Studies with over 500 scholarly publications between them. As members of paedobaptist churches, they cannot be accused of carrying a Baptist bias or agenda.

Chapter 1: A Critique of faulty reasoning by recent authors

The authors review a number of modern writers who share a tendency to strain for inferential meanings in obscure passages to find support for infant baptism, while ignoring the explicit statements of these early church authors on their own baptismal practice and theology – which in most cases rules out such an inferential meaning. This in itself is a major objection to the paedobaptist argument for the antiquity of infant baptism.

Chapters 2-9 & 11-24: A systematic survey and commentary on the baptismal references in the Early Church writers

The earlier the writer – the louder and clearer is the testimony to believer baptism. Immersion is the near universal pattern, with alternate modes generally seen as questionable and last-resort. Tertullian is the first to mention child (but not infant) baptism and opposes it as a new innovation.

Chapter 10: Evidence from Christian tomb inscriptions

These show that the practice of baptism of children and infants immediately prior to premature death was becoming common from the end of the third century – later alongside a theology of cleansing from original sin. The authors point out that this theological justification is far removed from the covenantal theology behind evangelical paedobaptism.

Chapter 25: Weighing the evidence from Christian art

The authors demonstrate that early Christian art was highly stylistic and that images of pouring represent the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit rather than the mode of baptism. For this reason, such evidence cannot be used to override universal and extensive written accounts of baptismal practice, or the archaeological reality that their baptismal fonts were clearly designed for immersion.

Conclusion

Infant Baptism is a late innovation, arising from a belief in the baptismal waters to save leading to a desire to give this to children – and later infants – to seek salvation in the case of premature death. Believer baptism is universal for the first two centuries and the normative practice in the next two. Young child and later infant baptism began from the late third century due to the belief in the efficacy of the baptismal waters – a view diametrically opposed to a Reformed and Evangelical one.

This book is an essential book for those interested in this issue.

The growing strength of this evidence and opinion in scholarly circles can be seen in more recent writings¹, where paedobaptist scholars have been increasingly forced to abandon the 'universal historic church practice' argument². Instead they are increasingly having to explain why infant baptism was apparently lost in the post-Apostolic period for the first two centuries³.

Other reviews:

http://www.reformedbaptist.com/baptism_church_book.htm

<http://www.evangelical-times.org/ETReviews/Oct05/Oct05r01.htm>

1 For examples, see:

- Ferguson, Everett (1999) 'Baptism'. In *Encyclopedia of the Early Christianity*. 2nd ed. Edited by Everett Ferguson. London; New York: Grand Publishing
- Ferguson, Everet (2009) *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmanns. 953 pages.

This book is an exhaustive survey of the literature and scholarship on baptism in the early church. It covers the Jewish & pagan historical context, through the NT period and into the first five centuries. Ferguson's conclusions match that of Stander & Louw.

2 For example, see:

- Hinson, E Glenn (1999) 'Infant Baptism'. In *Encyclopedia of the Early Christianity*. 2nd ed. Edited by Everett Ferguson. London; New York: Grand Publishing

3 For example, see:

- Leithart, Peter J (2003) 'Infant Baptism in History: An Unfinished Tragi-Comedy'. In: *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. Edited by Gregg Strawbridge. Presbyterian & Reformed, p246-262.