



W. Travis McMaken, *The Sign of the Gospel: Toward an Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism after Karl Barth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2013.

McMaken's thesis is that

Barth's doctrine of baptism –and specifically, his rejection of infant baptism-has not received a fair hearing (p. 3).

With that in mind, M. seeks in this volume (his revised dissertation) to correct that. He does so by carefully discussing 1) Baptism and Infant Baptism from the New Testament Through Barth; 2) Election, Soteriology, and Barth's "No" to Sacramental Infant Baptism; 3) Election, Circumcision, and Barth's "No" to Covenantal Infant Baptism; 4) Barth's Doctrine of Baptism, "The Foundation of the Christian Life"; 5) "The Sign of the Gospel" – Toward a Post-Barthian Doctrine of Infant Baptism.

The book's outline itself demonstrates that M. will – and does–carefully and meticulously examine the issue with recourse primarily to Barth's own writings. M., unlike other Barth commentators, actually correctly perceives Barth's purpose and he understands Barth well enough to 'get him right'. M., in brief, doesn't do Barth the disservice of putting words into his mouth. Barth speaks with his own voice and M. interacts with the Basel theologian at every turn: not in an attempt to correct Barth, but to extend his views. As M. expresses it

Whereas Barth himself rejected infant baptism, I argue that such a rejection is not necessary on the basis of his mature theology's broader commitments (p. 4).

M. understands Barth's point, but wishes to show Barth (in a sense) where Barth's own thought could lead him to a different conclusion. It is this conclusion, this acceptance of infant baptism, which M. seeks so mightily to justify. M. observes

What is the payoff to all this? That payoff is a properly evangelical doctrine of baptism in general and of infant baptism in particular (p. 5).

Naturally the question any reviewer of the volume must answer is- does M. accomplish what he sets out to accomplish? Does M. apprehend Barth's views on infant baptism and his wider views on salvation well enough to allow him to critique Barth with Barth? Yes.

M. grasps quite well Barth's reasons for rejecting infant baptism. M's chapters on Barth's work (chapters 1-4) make it quite clear that he does. Barth rejected infant baptism more than justifiably. And chapter 5, which I see as the core of the volume, is M.'s attempt to critique Barth by means of Barth:

My primary thesis is that a doctrine of baptism as "the sign of the Gospel" –that is, as a nonverbal form of the church's gospel proclamation- is a viable option for contemporary theology despite and, indeed, precisely because of the rejections and affirmations made by Barth in his own doctrine of baptism (p. 209).

Infant baptism is gospel proclamation. So opines M. And this form of proclamation fits within Barth's own theological framework. In accordance with that belief, M. here strives to reconfigure Barth's doctrine of baptism.

At the end of the day, M. concedes the fact that

...infant baptism is not excluded, but neither is it required. ... it is for the church to discern how best to deploy this form of proclamation (p. 260).

So, M. asks, why did Barth object to infant baptism?

First, Barth worries about the danger of coerced or, at least, indiscriminate baptism. ... Second, Barth worries about the danger of what might be called a creeping sacerdotalism. ... Third, Barth worries about the danger of infant communion: "it is hard to see why, if this is a good reason for infant baptism, the admission of infants to the Lord's Supper may not be required too (pp. 266ff).

M.'s work is summarized in the conclusion (pp. 275ff). Readers may wish to read those pages first as they provide a fantastic overview of the work at hand and then read the book itself to see how M. fills in all the spaces.

The conclusion of the matter? This book is fantastically researched and brilliantly written. It's nice to read a young scholar who 'gets' Barth without making him say things he would never say. But is it persuasive? Would Karl Barth, sitting in his rocker with his secretary at his side at their Alpine retreat, smoking his pipe and listening to Mozart on the gramophone, change his mind about infant baptism if he read this book? Nein! But he would very much enjoy M.'s attempt to get him to. As will you.

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