

AT THE RIVER'S EDGE (A Review)

This small book is authored by Jeff Childers and Frederick Aquino of Abilene Christian University. It is sub-headed, "Meeting Jesus in Baptism." It might be better headed, "Theological speculations about baptism." The university mailed copies of this book to churches throughout the nation after the parade of liberal change agents, speaking on their 2004 lectureship, caused a firestorm of controversy with their extreme statements about salvation and baptism. One knowledgeable brother aptly described the mailing it as ACU's damage control project.

A major tenet of the change agenda is that salvation is by grace through faith and that baptism is only a declaration of one's salvation. This of course is not new, it is Baptist doctrine. This booklet attempts to restate their position, masking it and making it more palatable to members of the church who are not yet indoctrinated with the more extreme version of the change doctrine.

Like George Orwell's imaginary world of the future, this book is filled with *newspeak*, i.e., language meaning one thing to those on the inside of the change movement and something quite different to those on the outside. The uninitiated may read it and falsely conclude, "These brethren still believe in the necessity of baptism." Those of the change brotherhood will read it and say, "Yes! We are saved by grace through faith and baptism is a picture of our salvation." One need only ask them, "If a man truly believes in Jesus but is not baptized, will he be lost?" Be prepared for a large dose of *newspeak*.

Some Amazing Assertions: * "those who stress baptism's importance...are so tied to modern agendas that they never seem to talk about baptism the way the apostles do, or to delve into the full richness we find in Scripture" (p. 1). This is us (members of traditional churches of Christ) of whom they speak. Change agents imagine the rest of us have never understood Christ's teaching on baptism. Only they have discovered these mysteries.

* "In our churches, debates about the essentiality of baptism have been common—yet serious discussions of baptism's essence have been rare" (p. 5). In the 200 years of our existence here in America, our brethren have had only a few thousand debates. Only part of them on baptism. In the last 50 years there have been only a handful of such discussions. Yet every preacher among us and thousands of other soul-winners have studied and discussed baptism in hundreds of thousands of situations that led multitudes to the Savior. In those congregations pursuing change it may have been rare, but such is not the case with most of our churches.

* "Baptism is important because, in its essence, it connects the disciple to Jesus Christ" (p. 5). Here are men with their doctorates who evidently have just recently discovered what everyone else in the church has known from the beginning of our back to the Bible movement (Gal. 3:27).

* "More than any historical evidences or logical argumentation, the transformation of Jesus' misguided and bickering early disciples into a potent and unified force for carrying out God's ministry of reconciliation in the world was the most striking evidence for the truth of the resurrection" (p. 23). Strangely, the sacred writers did not grasp this profound truth. They wrote of an empty tomb, the stone rolled back, of grave cloths lying undisturbed, of seeing, hearing and touching the resurrected Lord, of eating with him and then seeing him ascend into heaven. They missed all the good stuff that modern theology teaches about Christian evidences.

* "Yet it is by the dynamic evidence of resurrection power at work in its midst that the church engenders faith in others" (p. 24). Poor Paul thought that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

Theobabble: The authors take a plainly stated and easily understood doctrine of Christ, mix it with their liberal theological insights, and bring forth ideas the average reader would never discover without their help. Even the inspired writers failed to grasp such meanings. Note the following:

* "Jesus' baptism...shows us what he is calling us to. He's inviting us to share with him in the whole life of God—Father, Son and Spirit" (p. 7). Just how does Christ's baptism do this?

* "Like the incarnation itself, baptism presents a full picture, holding together many diverse pieces that seem nearly incompatible yet are reconciled in Christ. The call to a holiness that makes us distinct from the world is here joined to a call to ministry that irrevocably connects us to it, all under the auspices of Christ's invitation to wade with him into the waters" (p. 8). Classic theobabble!

* "the person stepping down into the water for baptism was joining Jesus there. He or she was stepping into the gospel story, merging into the picture of the gospel that is unveiled in Christ" (p. 8). Most interesting, but where is such

expressed in Scripture.

* “Our baptism connects us to the birth of Jesus” (p. 9). Scripture please!

* “In the water, we’re also joining Jesus in the Jordan river. His presence in the water purified it, transforming it from a muddy stream into the cleansing waters that sanctify us...” (p. 9). This must be found in Theology 4:6, for it is not found in Scripture.

* “our baptism paints us into the central portrait of God’s salvation” (p. 10). I could not find it in the Bible, it must be Harvard 7:11.

* Baptism...should not be commandeered by agendas that reduce it to a simple rule or that focus solely on debates about its essentiality. Such agendas distract us from the essence of baptism...” (p. 10). Evidently these men think they understand baptism better than men such as Alexander Campbell, Gus Nichols, N. B. Hardeman and hundreds of others who not only preached baptism but also affirmed in it when others sought to denigrate or discredit its importance. Those who affirmed and defended Christ’s teaching on baptism won thousands to the Savior. I wonder how many souls these theologians have led to the Master?

* “It’s unlikely that total agreement on every baptismal issue can ever be achieved...” (p. 10). Until the rise of the change movement in schools such as Abilene and Pepperdine, our brethren had no difficulty agreeing on the meaning and purpose of baptism. In fact it was one thing on which we had unanimity.

* “We rise up out of the water to become God’s partners, not his puppets...” (p. 11). This must be found in Mankind 2:2.

* “Is baptism a human work or a divine one? The question itself pits humanity against God...It breaks the mystical union of divine and human that we see in Jesus” (p. 11). Notice that they are the ones raising this question that he says pits humanity against God. Can they explain how asking a Bible question breaks the mystical union of divine and human in Christ? You have to have a doctorate in theology to see that!

* They tell us that baptism “is not primarily an act of obedience that qualifies us for salvation. It is not like a lever we throw to receive the membership card that will gain us entry at the pearly gates” (p. 12). Did you ever hear any Christian anywhere ever make such a ridiculous statement? They imagine such distortions and then imply that such is our view. Such is dishonest and misleading.

* “The picture we get at the baptistry should (be) where the fragments of our humanity are being put back together under God...” (p. 12). Lovely thought, but not found in Scripture.

* “Churches of Christ have tended to look at salvation through the window of conversion, emphasizing salvation as an object we come to possess or a situation we enjoy—it is forgiveness of sins...Unfortunately...we’ve handicapped our ability to appreciate baptism’s power to shape all of life” (p. 12-13). It would be nice if they would point out specifically how our view of salvation is faulty. For theologians, that means contrary to God’s revealed will.

* “congregations should work...harder to explore creative ways of investing their ...practice of baptism with its full meaning and of amplifying the excitement surrounding this wonderful rite of passage” (p. 13). One of his suggestions is “Clothing the person baptized in a new outfit picked out for the occasion.” Many of our Pentecostal neighbors do this.

Some Serendipities: * In speaking of new disciples they write, “They know that not all change is growth, yet they also realize that there is no growth without change. The thought of adjusting their beliefs, accepting new practices, or correcting their understanding of some passage of Scripture does not frighten them” (p. 15). The first sentence, is a lesson the change agents have not yet learned. The second is a summary of what they are trying to sell to gullible Christians.

* “Over the centuries, many people—and even churches—have tried to re-mold Jesus into a shape easier to manage and more compatible with their own programs, hoping to pass off a poorly forged portrait of Jesus as the real thing. Wherever the teaching of Jesus becomes uncomfortable, they learn to ignore it, devising ways to sidestep his plain demands or substituting their own hobbies for the items he was truly passionate about. Not everyone claiming to follow Jesus really does so...Yet when enough people agree together on a counterfeit definition of discipleship, the image they present can be deceptively compelling. A whole church can buy into a forgery” (pp. 21-22). This is a perfect picture of the change movement and the deluded churches that have embraced its counterfeit message.

The authors state “their purpose is to draw each person more deeply into reflection and prayer about God’s work in our lives” (p. 27). While briskly walking away from Christ’s revealed will on a score of matters, change agents feign a greater devotion and piety than any of us poor folks who cling to the simple Biblical faith of our fathers and millions of other saints from the earliest days of Christianity.

This book is a perfect demonstration of the need for preachers and teachers to “speak where the Bible speaks and call Bible things by Bible names.” Change agents scoff at these ancient slogans, not realizing that they of all people need to heed their message. For those readers who really want to learn about Christian baptism, I highly recommend that they read their New Testaments. Its simplicity and beauty will be impressive. JHW