

Review of *Down in the River to Pray*

Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God's Transforming Work, by JOHN MARK HICKS AND GREG TAYLOR. Siloam Springs, Ark.: Leafwood Publishers, 2004. 280 pp. \$14.99. Ashby L. Camp, Tempe, Arizona.

John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor have made a valuable contribution to the literature on baptism. They view baptism as one part of a process by which God transforms fallen humanity into the image of his Son for the purpose of eternal fellowship. They criticize Churches of Christ for missing this broader perspective and reducing baptism to a technical divider between the saved and lost. They criticize other traditions for missing the significance of baptism in the process of transformation and reducing it to a symbol or sign of a past work that lacks any present power or reality.

Chapters 2 through 4 offer an analysis of the biblical texts relating to baptism. Chapter 2 nicely sets the New Testament practice in the context of first-century Judaism and provides insights into the typology of the Flood (1 Pet. 3:18-21) and the Exodus (1 Cor. 10:1-5). Chapter 3 focuses on baptism in Luke-Acts. It includes good, brief discussions of John's baptism, the baptism of Jesus, and various conversion narratives. The authors reject reading the household baptisms as including infants and small children. They recognize the normal link between baptism and receipt of the Spirit, but deduce from the anomalies that God has not bound himself invariably to that link.

Chapter 4 focuses on baptism in Paul's letters. The authors argue cogently that, for Paul, baptism is not merely a symbol but a sign through which one actually is connected to the Christ-event and receives all that is related to that connection. Through it, we enter into a new identity, a new life, a new state, and a new hope.

Chapters 5 through 7 summarize baptismal theology and practice from the second through the fifth centuries, in the Reformation, and in the Stone-Campbell Movement. The discussions are skillful and, as is often the case with historical theology, humbling.

Chapter 8 explains why baptism does not belong in the category of "work" but in the category of "faith." It is the faith-based moment in which we share as beggars in Christ's atoning work and receive the gift of justification. Chapter 9 explores the link between baptism and sanctification. The Spirit we receive in baptism empowers us to produce spiritual fruit and transforms us into the image of Christ.

Chapter 10 addresses whether those who believe faith-based immersion is a part of conversion should receive as Christians those who have not been immersed in faith. It will be the most controversial chapter for those in Churches of Christ and therefore deserves extended comment. The authors claim that, since baptism is a means to God's end of transforming fallen humanity into the image of Christ and not an end itself, if God is transforming the life of an unbaptized believer (working toward the end), the church should accept that transformation as proof that God has accepted the believer (bestowed his grace) on the basis of his faith despite his non-rebellious failure to be baptized. To

think otherwise is to miss the big picture of Scripture that God is a seeker who, because he is good, accepts hearts that seek him.

This claim appears to involve the following separate arguments:

Argument 1

- Receiving baptismal grace (the blessings normally received in baptism) results in transformation toward the image of Christ (it being a means to that end).
- Some unbaptized believers are being transformed toward the image of Christ.
- Therefore, some unbaptized believers have received baptismal grace.
- Since some unbaptized believers have received baptismal grace, they should be received into the fellowship of the church.

Argument 2

- God bestows on those who earnestly seek him the grace (blessings) normally associated with a ritual despite their failure to observe the ritual.
- Baptism is a ritual.
- Therefore, God bestows on those who earnestly seek him the grace normally associated with baptism despite their failure to be baptized.
- Since some unbaptized believers have received baptismal grace, they should be received into the fellowship of the church.

Argument 1 contains the fallacy of affirming the consequent (if A then B; B therefore A). The fact transformation follows baptismal grace does not mean that transformation proves the presence of baptismal grace. There are devout members of heretical groups whose lives have been transformed toward the image of Christ, yet none would take that transformation as sufficient to establish their acceptance by God. If transformation is an unreliable indicator of baptismal grace in the case of heretics, could it not also be unreliable in the case of the unbaptized orthodox?

The authors concede the point implicitly. They declare that "while the form, subject, and meaning of baptism is debated among professing Christians, in the light of Scripture and historic Christian tradition none should be considered disciples of Christ who refuse to be baptized and reject baptism as God's command." In other words, they accept that a line is to be drawn between all who agree that baptism is God's command (whatever their differences regarding its form, subjects, and meaning) and all who deny that baptism is part of the Christian faith. As the authors point out in an endnote, the latter includes Quakers, the Salvation Army, and some extreme dispensational theologians. They thus recognize that those believers should not be considered disciples of Christ despite their transformation toward his image.

In addition, reducing forgiveness, which is part of baptismal grace, to a means of transforming the believer's life undervalues its significance in present reconciliation. The transformation produced by baptismal grace is a process that follows a moment of

reconciliation through forgiveness. The life that is lived from the point of forgiveness is lived in a state of reconciliation, however far one may be from the image of Christ. It is true that salvation is not simply about forgiveness, but neither is it simply about transformation.

Argument 2 is supported first by appeal to Hezekiah's Passover in 2 Chronicles 30. The authors conclude that God extended Passover-mercy to those who participated in Hezekiah's Passover despite the fact it was held on a month other than the one prescribed and despite the fact many of the participants violated the Law by sharing in the meal while ritually unclean. Because the people were seeking him with their hearts, God, in response to Hezekiah's prayer, graciously forgave their sins in observing the ritual (Passover) and extended his Passover-mercy as though no violations of the Law had occurred.

The authors have squeezed more out of this text than is there. First, there is no indication there was anything to forgive regarding the date on which this particular Passover was celebrated. Though the Law specified that the Passover be celebrated in the first month, the fact it allowed those excluded from the ritual to celebrate it in the second month established a principle that the second month was acceptable when circumstances precluded celebration in the first month. This almost certainly was how the leadership read the Law (2 Chron. 30:2-4). Unlike participating in the meal while ritually unclean, which is specifically noted to be contrary to the Law, there is no hint in the text that celebrating the Passover in the second month was, under the circumstances, contrary to God's will.

Second, vv. 18-22 indicate that God healed the uncleanness of the people in response to Hezekiah's prayer *prior to* their sharing in the Passover. They ate *because* Hezekiah *had prayed* for the Lord to permit them to eat (to pardon their eating) despite their uncleanness (see, e.g., ESV). As people who sought God with their hearts, they did not presume on the Lord's mercy; they did not break the Law on the assumption that their hearts would render their disobedience acceptable. They ate only after the Lord said "yes" to Hezekiah's prayer, after he revealed he would make them fit to eat without their going through the prescribed means of purification.

The worshipers in that case were *unable* to observe the purification ritual in time to share in the Passover. They did not *refuse* to observe it because they were deceived into thinking they already had done so. Since the two cases may reflect a difference of heart (as the authors apparently recognize regarding those who believe baptism is God's command and those who do not), the fact God extended his mercy in the former case does not establish that he would do so in the latter. Applied to baptism, one cannot assume on the basis of Hezekiah's Passover that God bestows baptismal grace on those who refuse to submit to baptism because they are deceived into thinking they already did so when they were sprinkled as an infant.

From another angle, imagine that on a subsequent Passover some early-arriving worshipers claimed a right to share in the Passover on the basis that the sweat of their

journey made them ritually clean. When urged to undergo the prescribed purification ritual, they refused on the grounds that their mode of purification was sufficient according to their understanding of the Law. Would the community be wrong to exclude them from sharing in the Passover? Nothing in the account of Hezekiah's Passover suggests that it would.

The authors also appeal to the Sabbath controversy in Matthew 12. The lesson they draw from the account is that, assuming *arguendo* the validity of the oral law on which the Pharisees relied, the Sabbath command did not forbid doing what was necessary to meet human need. The Pharisees misinterpreted the command by not recognizing that exception and thus wrongly condemned the innocent disciples. They should have realized from the Scriptures cited by the Lord that, when meeting human need conflicts with proper observance of a ritual, the former must take priority.

The problem here is not with the authors' understanding of the account but with their application of it to baptism. What human need conflicts with the proper observance of baptism so that one must alter observance of the ritual to meet the need? Certainly the need for divine mercy does not conflict with the observance of baptism, except in some extreme situation where it cannot be administered, as baptism is the very place where mercy is bestowed. The authors have jumped from the principle that meeting human need must take priority over ritual when the two are in conflict to the assertion that a refusal to observe a ritual because of a false belief will not exclude one from the blessings associated with the ritual.

It is one thing to accept the possibility of baptismal grace being conferred without baptism; it is another thing to urge the church, on the basis of 2 Chronicles 30 and Matthew 12, to view it as typical and receive the unimmersed into its fellowship. I think F. D. Srygley offered a better perspective more than a century ago:

As I understand the N.T., the "pious unimmersed" ought to be immersed. And in case they are not immersed, I know of no promise in the N.T. that they will be saved. But, as to whether God will make allowance for honest mistakes, and save those who think they are obeying him when in reality they are doing something he has not commanded in lieu of what he has commanded, is a question for God to settle, and I decline to take any part of it.

Chapter 11 moves from the truth that in the waters of baptism all kinds of people are united with Christ, the Spirit, and the Father to the church's obligation to bring all kinds of people into that union. The authors discuss that responsibility in terms of our call to make disciples against cultural resistance, across cultural lines, and within our own families.

In Chapter 12 the authors offer suggestions on how communities of faith might make baptism more meaningful. In addition to the thoughtful suggestions, the chapter is

valuable simply for raising the issue, for causing us to think in terms of how we can change some of our practices for the better.

Chapter 13, the final chapter, is a call for baptism to be viewed as a conversion-initiation rite that serves God's ultimate goal of transformation, as a divine means of actually effecting that transformation, and as a normative but not an absolutely essential means of grace. Regarding the last of these, they write, "In the case of someone not baptized because of ignorance, error, or for any other reason God deems acceptable, we leave these in the hands of God, where we believe these matters belong." This is in keeping with Srygley's perspective quoted above, which is a more modest claim than is made in Chapter 10. The chapter concludes with thoughtful discussions of eight questions and reflections on the future of baptism.

In sum, except for what I judge to be overreaching in Chapter 10, this is a very good book.