IT TAKES A *CHURCH* TO BAPTIZE

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT *INFANT* BAPTISM

SCOT McKNIGHT

BrazosPress
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: McKnight, Scot, author.
Title: It takes a church to baptize : what the Bible says about infant baptism / Scot McKnight.
Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Publishing Group, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017052471 | ISBN 9781587434167 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Infant baptism.
Classification: LCC BV813.3 .M39 2018 | DDC 234/.1612—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017052471

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To those who, like the Bereans of Paul's mission,
with "noble character" open their Bibles
and "examine the Scriptures every day
to see if what . . . is said is true.
As a result, many of them believe."
(based on Acts 17:11–12)

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Foreword

In 1979 I was a young church planter in a city that seemed full of young, lapsed Catholics. I can't remember exactly what the young girl had done (premarital sex? underage drinking? experimenting with drugs?), but I'll never forget her ethnic Catholic mom, tears running down her face, screaming at her through a cry-choked voice: *How could you do that? You were baptized!*

That moment played right into and vindicated my then-existing bias that infant baptism was a dead, or at best rote, religious ceremony that accomplished nothing—similar to marriage vows that commonly end in divorce. It also reinforced my fear that infant baptism did not normally lead to personal and real salvation.

Setting aside Catholics and mainline Protestants for a moment, it is true that mid-twentieth-century evangelicals also deserve criticism for their own faults regarding salvation and discipleship. But even so, who could blame us, looking at the state of the mainline churches in the 1960s and 1970s that practiced infant baptism, for wondering what good it did? It seemed one could more easily draw a correlation between infant

baptism and unfaithfulness—between infant baptism and millions of crying, yelling parents!

Into this picture comes the valuable voice of my friend and colleague Scot. He offers a corrective by saying *it takes a church community* and a family—sponsors, godparents, and a praying congregation—to baptize well.

But as a young evangelical, I strongly believed the opposite: baptism was a sign of a previous moment of salvation, and furthermore, it was precisely a *personal* decision to follow the command of Jesus and the biblical norm to be baptized. Baptism, in its essence, had only to do with me and God. We "went forward" down the aisle to get saved as *individuals*, not as families, not even as groups of friends. We were unapologetically dissing the (usually mainline) church of our families! There were people standing around the pool when I was rebaptized as an adult, but they were bystanders (loving as they might have been), peripheral to what was centrally happening between me and God. Or so I thought . . .

Coming forward to today, I am often asked about my journey from the Jesus Movement (Calvary Chapel) and the charismatic stream of evangelicalism (the Vineyard) to the sacramental part of the church—specifically, the Anglican Church in North America. Inevitably, as part of that conversation, a person will ask: How, given your background with infant dedication and adult baptism, did you come to believe in and practice infant baptism? I must confess that, as I considered entering the Anglican community and surveyed the theological landscape of Anglicanism, I had only one big theological issue to process, and it was that precise subject: infant baptism.

For me, the other, more visible aspects of Anglican worship such as styles of liturgy, churchmanship, vestments, or other outward practices were not make-or-break issues. I could

warmly accept and celebrate any approach to church that helped people come to and grow in Christ. But I was still left, to cite the election of 2000, with that theological "hanging chad" of infant baptism.

Fortunately, my reexamination of infant baptism occurred in the context of a long experience that demonstrated to me that Anglican theology is right-down-the-middle historic orthodoxy—beautifully so, in many cases. As a young Jesus Movement evangelical in the 1970s, my favorite authors included Anglicans such as C. S. Lewis, J. I. Packer, and John Stott—pillars of everything intelligent, loving, solid, and godly, right? Later I discovered other trusted and revered Anglican scholars such as Tom Wright and Scot McKnight, who *spoke my language* and thus made great sense to me.

These infant baptizers convinced me of several things:

1. **Theologically:** When viewed in the context of covenant theology and community rather than twentieth-century individualistic reductions of soteriology, infant baptism makes sense.
2. **Biblically:** The relevant Bible texts (with which Scot deals so well) at least allow for, surely suggest, and maybe even insist on infant baptism.
3. **Historically:** The largest part of the Christian church over all times and places has practiced infant baptism.
4. **Personally:** As part of a culturally Christian family, I was baptized as a child in a United Methodist Church. Later, at rebaptism, I was definitely saying something public: *this is my first step in following Jesus*. I saw it as initiation, obedience, and identification with Jesus, his people, and the movement he gave birth to and was bringing to its fulfillment. I now see infant baptism, when practiced

in the manner Scot articulates, to be capable of carrying that same freight.

That's my story—and I hope it helps you get ready to read *It Takes a Church to Baptize*.

Scot McKnight is a careful thinker and a lover of God, church, and Scripture. The vision he casts for the practice of baptism comes from and is wrapped up in those loves. His work in this book has the potential to have next-generation parents joyfully testifying: *Of course you followed Jesus—you were baptized!*

Todd D. Hunter
Anglican bishop, Churches for the Sake of Others

Preface

A LETTER

I get letters like the one below from Matt often. If it is not a letter, it is a question addressed to me by students, friends, pastors, or those who approach me after speaking somewhere. Those who believe baptism is for believers only upon profession of personal faith struggle with those who believe in baptizing infants.* This letter expresses the heart of the question.

Dear Scot,

Greetings!

By way of introduction my name is Matt and I am an Anglican Priest in the ACNA. I have been a fan of your blog and podcast for some time. I had a question that I thought perhaps you might have some insight into. As someone who became Anglican yourself and as a New

* Some call those who believe in baptism upon profession of faith "credo-baptists," while infant baptizers are sometimes called "paedo-baptists," with "paedo" meaning child or infant.

Testament scholar, how do you explain infant baptism to someone who comes from a tradition that baptizes adults only?

When I try to explain it to others, I approach it from the belief that it can be logically inferred based on a canonical reading of scripture as a whole, but that doesn't always fare well with the "show me from the Bible crowd." Related to that, how do you explain what happens at infant baptism?

As an Anglican obviously you know our baptismal liturgy is heavy with the language of regeneration and being born again through the waters of baptism. How do you put to ease, if you will, people who are worried such language excludes a person from having to profess personal faith?

I know that's quite a question to answer via email. If you have any articles or blog posts you can point me to that would be fine as well. God's continual blessing on your ministry. It has certainly helped me!

Matt[1]

This book seeks to answer the question Matt asks, as well as some of the questions behind his question. I have my eye especially on the many today who are attracted to the Anglican Church, to *The Book of Common Prayer* and its beautiful prayers or "collects," to the lectionary approach to Sunday worship, and to the liturgical ordering of the church calendar, but who *deep in their hearts* are not convinced the Bible teaches infant baptism and who worry that baptizing infants may diminish the importance of personal conversion. Many of them will join in chorus those whom Michael Green, a New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop, had in mind when he wrote these words about what

concerned them about infant baptism: "The answer of the Baptists, the Open Brethren, and many of the House Churches in Britain and fast-growing independent churches overseas is that there is no adequate ground for baptizing infants. It is a scandal. It makes for gross nominalism. It inoculates people against the gospel by making them think that they are Christians when they may be nothing of the kind."[2]

What Michael Green says about concerns in the United Kingdom is even more true in the United States. As the mainline continues its decline, those words may be even more true today than when Green wrote them. Many of us know those baptized as infants who don't follow Christ, many know others who came to Christ later and eschewed their infant baptism and were baptized by immersion, and many want to know how one can with a straight face believe that the Bible actually teaches infant baptism.

It's the right time to say, "Don't throw out the baby with the baptismal waters."

I am grateful to a number of fellow Anglicans who read *It Takes a Church to Baptize* in its various versions, including my pastor, Jay Greener, as well as Ethan McCarthy, Gerald McDermott, Todd Hunter, Dennis Okholm, John Armstrong, Garwood Anderson, and Mike Bird. I am grateful for their feedback, corrections, criticisms, and suggestions, many of which have found their way into this book. In the process of putting these thoughts into a book, I discovered more emphatically that there is considerable variety in the Anglican Communion, with some leaning toward evangelicalism (as I do) and others leaning toward Anglo-Catholicism, and with plenty at various locations along that spectrum.

1

Our Baptism

FIRST SIX WORDS

Perhaps you are like me. I grew up Baptist and have been baptistic in my view of baptism for most of my life. To be baptistic is to believe that only believers should be baptized, by full immersion into a pool of water, and that baptizing infants by sprinkling or pouring is wrong. Strange as it may seem, reading the Bible led me on a long and winding road to embrace infant baptism as the view most consistent with the Bible. Many have gone before me on this path, and perhaps you are wondering whether this is the path for you. This book, I hope, approaches this topic in the spirit of civility as it offers a biblical case for infant baptism surrounded by both family and church. I write this book for you and your children and for our church. Infant baptism is the first public step in nurturing our children into the faith.[1]

You may be surprised by that statement. Perhaps you have heard, as I did as a child, that liberal churches baptize infants—and

look at their numbers. Their churches are dwindling annually. You may have heard that children who grow up with baptism behind them have not genuinely experienced their baptism, and you may have heard that infant baptism automatically places a child in the church and that child then never has to respond to the gospel. Every one of those concerns is of value to me because I held each one of them and changed my mind. *It Takes a Church to Baptize* will provide reasons from the Bible for infant baptism. So if you are doubtful or wondering, I invite you to reconsider infant baptism for its power to nurture your children into the faith.

First Word: Family

The nucleus of a church is the family, and "family" includes a single-person family as well as families with bundles of little children running around. Pastors and leaders in churches are vital, but the health of the church is shaped by healthy families. Nurturing children into the faith, therefore—whether by family instruction, Sunday school formation, preaching, teaching, or catechism—is the lifeblood of spiritual formation. Children do not grow into the faith by accident. It has been said that more is "caught than taught," but what is "caught" has no value without the "taught." The location of infant baptism in the church is the family because it is families—moms and dads—who bring their children to the church's leaders for baptism.

This matters to me because, now in my sixties, I walk with my grandson, Aksel, and my granddaughter, Finley, together with Kris and those grandchildren's parents, Lukas and Annika, forward to the Communion table on most Sundays. I think about them often when I am listening to and watching our priest, Jay Greener, or our curate, Amanda Holm Rosengren, as they are saying what they say and doing what they do. Each

action in our service *embodies* something valuable in the gospel we preach and seek to live. As they are doing pastoral duties up front, Jay and Susan Greener's grandsons are often watching, and Amanda and Erik's daughter, Ruthie, is almost at the age where she will be watching her mom. What is the best way to form our children into the faith? What is the deepest way to nurture them into the faith? The family, beginning with their entrance into the church through baptism.

Infant baptism is one of those acts Jay and Amanda perform among us, and to our delight, we have many little kids in our church. We have participated in the baptism of most of them. As I watch Jay and Amanda perform a baptism, all kinds of theological wheels turn in my head, and I wanted to put them all down in a book to help people like me—those who grew up believing only in baptism upon confession of faith—to see why it is that we baptize our babies.

It Takes a Church to Baptize will walk us through what we are doing and the commitments we as a church are making. I hope this book will show you that infant baptism is the deepest, wisest, and most historic Christian way of forming our children into the faith. Infant baptism begins with the family and extends to the spiritual family, the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his stunningly influential *Discipleship*, brought baptism's deepest meaning to the surface when he said, "With regard to infant baptism this means that the sacrament should be administered *only where it is certain that the act of salvation already accomplished once and for all will be repeatedly remembered in faith*. And that can only be the case *in a living church-community*. Infant baptism *without the church-community* is not only an abuse of the sacrament. It also betrays a reprehensible thoughtlessness in dealing with the children's spiritual welfare, for baptism can never be repeated."[2] *It Takes a Church to Baptize* affirms

these words by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and seeks to show why: to baptize an infant apart from family spiritual formation and apart from a church that nurtures and educates its youth into spiritual maturity violates what baptism means.

So important is the family to baptism that I toyed with titling this book *It Takes a Family to Baptize*. If readers would immediately think by "family" I mean both the birth family and the spiritual family (the church in a local setting) as well as singles, who are too often excluded in churches and for whom the word "family" is experienced as a form of exclusion, that title would say all that needs to be said.

Second Word: Bible

I am a Bible guy who agrees with what Presbyterian theologian and church leader Bryan Chapell once wrote in his booklet on infant baptism: "Biblically minded Christians rightly want to see scriptural confirmation of their churches' practices."[3] More often than not when the subject of infant baptism comes up I am asked, "Does the Bible teach infant baptism?" I agree that we must begin with the Bible, and I too want to see scriptural confirmations, but that means at least one honest admission. Right up front I admit there is no text in the New Testament that explicitly reveals the *practice* of infant baptism in the apostolic church.[4] No text in the New Testament ever says explicitly, "So Paul baptized Publius's three-day-old daughter Junia." Honest admission given, but if you stick with me you will see that the early church did baptize infants and that the New Testament witnesses to that practice. Infant baptism may not be explicit, but it is implicit, and it is implicit far more often than some think.

It is also to be admitted that the New Testament's evidence, from the Gospels on into the apostolic writings, witnesses to

adults repenting and being baptized in the name of Jesus and in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To be admitted, too, is that those baptisms were most likely by way of immersion.[5] Where does that leave the baptism of infants for the one who is constrained by Scripture? I will devote chapter 5 to answering this question, but at this point this must be said: there may be no explicit account of an infant being baptized, but infant baptism *is* implicit in household baptisms that occurred in the context of early house churches.[6] Even more, if the explicit practice of infant baptism may not be present in the New Testament, a *theology* for infant baptism is to be found already in the new covenant, as baptism correlates with the role of circumcision in the old covenant. That theology is profoundly based in the Bible itself.

I want to mention some of the big ideas from the Bible at work in this theology that leads us to infant baptism. We will take a look later in this book at specific Bible verses used to defend infant baptism, verses such as Colossians 2:11–12 along with 1 Corinthians 7:14.[7] Before we get to those verses, however, I want say a bit more about a theology of infant baptism. Infant baptism makes sense because of big ideas in the Bible. The Bible's big ideas include covenant, sin, and ritual, as well as forgiveness and salvation.

Two of the Bible's big ideas can be discussed here very briefly, beginning with ritual. The word "ritual" may make many of us nervous, but ritual has played an important role in human history.[8] We mark transitions in life by rituals—births and deaths, marriages and divorces, graduations from schools, initiations into a new career, celebrations for accomplishments, and one sports event after another with rituals from trophy ceremonies to commemorations of great athletic feats. I could go on but won't. What needs to be said is that there is something

profoundly human about marking major transition events and life accomplishments with some kind of ritual. Ritual and religion go hand in hand because ritual and life go hand in hand. In the Bible itself, ancient Israelites marked the birth of a male child with circumcision, they marked the glory of liberation at the exodus with an annual feast with a variety of rituals, and they created a calendar so no one would ever forget the redemption of God in their midst. How did they celebrate those events of redemption? With rituals. Infant baptism, like circumcision among Jews, fits in the common rituals of life. It is no surprise then that the Bible itself affirms rituals.

Now the second big idea in a theology of infant baptism. The Bible verses that connect the ritual of baptism with *redemption* itself are sometimes ignored, but the apostles could not have imagined salvation apart from the ritual of baptism. Only those of us who have diminished the importance of religious rituals, while preserving them everywhere else in culture, wonder why verses such as Acts 2:38, Galatians 3:27, and 1 Peter 3:21 connect the ritual of baptism so tightly with salvation itself.[9] To get us all thinking about how the Bible connects the ritual of baptism and salvation, here are the texts of those verses:

> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

> For all of you who were baptized into Christ *have clothed yourselves with Christ*. (Gal. 3:27)

> And this water symbolizes *baptism that now saves you also*—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 3:21)

These big ideas at work in a theology of infant baptism have led the majority of the church through almost its entire history to embrace infant baptism. We learn these big ideas in the Bible.

Third Word: Gospel

We need to avoid misunderstanding baptism, cheapening it by thinking it is magical or demeaning it by not letting the Bible say what it really does say about baptism. The priority of Paul's words that "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17) should be our priority too: first the gospel, with baptism as the enactment of the gospel. Baptism is not the gospel, but the gospel is presented in baptism, and the gospel is embodied in baptism. Baptism is a public act that pronounces to the world something God has done for us.

What is the gospel?[10] The gospel is the announcement of the good news that God has sent his Son, King Jesus, to rule the world. His Son was sent to become like us—a human—so he could usher us into the presence of God as fully accepted. The apostle Paul explicitly defines the gospel in his first letter to the Corinthians when he says, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve" (15:3–5).

The gospel then is to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that it fulfills the story of Israel in the Old Testament. It tells that story in such a way that Jesus is Israel's long-awaited and promised Messiah. At the heart of the story of Jesus, however, two earth-shattering events come to the fore: his death and his resurrection. Messiahs, so it was thought, do not die; they rule. But Jesus died, and the astounding fact is that he was raised

from the dead, that he ascended into heaven to sit on the throne and so become the world's true ruler.

Baptism is the *passive* act of being plunged into the story of Jesus, with those two prominent events taking front stage. We are baptized into his death and into his resurrection. We die with Jesus and we are raised with Jesus. "Gospel" then is the operative word to explain what baptism is all about: it is about being dipped into the life of Jesus. We are plunged into his life by our baptism. It is about what God has done, not what we are qualified to do.

Baptism is one of the purest moments of declaring, enacting, embodying, and understanding the gospel itself. In baptism the gospel is put into motion.

Fourth Word: Conversion

While the gospel itself is the announcement about Jesus—about who he is and what he has accomplished—there is also a proper response to that announcement. What is the proper response to the gospel? The proper and necessary response to the gospel is expressed in two terms. We let Paul define the gospel, so we can now let his fellow apostle Peter begin to define the response. The first term of response is found in the first gospel sermon Peter preached, and it occurred on another earth-shattering day, the day of Pentecost: "*Repent* and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38–39).

The second term of response can be found in the aftermath of Pentecost: "But many who heard the message *believed*" (Acts 4:4). Some time later when the evangelist Philip preached, it

is said, "when they *believed* Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12).

Those two terms—"repent" and "believe"—are the proper and necessary response to the gospel itself. At baptism we declare who Jesus is, and who Jesus is determines the proper response, and the response is to surrender ourselves to him, it is to trust him, it is to turn from who we were to who he is, it is to declare our allegiance to Jesus.[11] These terms together are what we mean by the word "conversion."

Many will now ask how this can possibly apply to an infant at baptism, and the answer to that requires a brief discussion of conversion.[12] For many, conversion is a sudden act, something along the line of the experience of the apostle Paul. Sudden conversions are far more often the experience of those who were not nurtured in a Christian family. But then there's Peter. We know Paul suddenly surrendered his life even if we suspect he had experiences with Christians that were at work in his soul prior to this Damascus Road experience. But what about Peter? When was he converted? Let's look at Peter.[13] When do you date his conversion? In John 1, when Andrew informs Simon (Peter) that he has found the Messiah? Or is it in Luke 5, when Peter, after fishing all night long without trapping a single tilapia, is told by Jesus to fish on the side, which he does, and when he has hauled a mighty catch falls before Jesus and confesses his sins? Or is it in Mark 8, when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah? Or is it in John 21, when after denying Jesus, Peter gets back on the journey of faith? Or is it in Acts 2, when he receives the empowerment of the Holy Spirit? Or is it in Acts 10–11, when Peter realizes finally that the gospel is for all? Here's the answer: Yes. Peter responded over and over to fresh illuminations of the gospel, and one can say for Peter—and

for nearly every Christian who has ever lived (and I can't think of any exceptions)—that conversion is a lifelong process and journey of surrenderings and taking-backs and surrenderings. Furthermore, behind Peter's response to Jesus—whichever event you choose—was a life that prepared him for those responses. Peter, like Paul, was circumcised as an infant and nurtured into the covenant and law and faithfulness as an Israelite by his family and by his rabbi teachers and by his friends.

Paul shows one kind of conversion and Peter another. In the history of the church there have been three basic approaches to conversion.[14] Those approaches create and establish distinct cultures in the church, and those cultures are, to put it mildly, allergic to one another. For some, conversion is a sudden event—like Paul's and Martin Luther's and Chuck Colson's. There is a moment when a person surrenders, believes, confesses, repents, and gets baptized. Call this the personal-decision approach to conversion. For others, conversion is a sociological process that ties a person's personal, psychological, intellectual, and social development to a person's spiritual development and formation. Call this the social approach to conversion. A third approach is more liturgical or sacramental. Conversion occurs (most often) during the first two decades of a person's life as that person is baptized, catechized, and confirmed. In some traditions there is a "first Communion." Call this the liturgical approach to conversion. It is clear that the social and the liturgical approaches overlap in important ways, though the liturgical has more emphasis on sacramental moments in the church. These approaches to conversion are not only allergic to one another at times—ask someone who converted from a personal-decision approach to a Roman Catholic church or an Anglican church, or someone from the Orthodox Church who becomes either strongly Reformed or a Willow Creek–baptized convert

fully devoted to Christ—but they are also shapers of how the gospel is preached and how the Christian life is understood in a local church.

There is a way to bring all three of these emphases into one church and into one culture, but it requires that a local church not only shape conversion through the liturgical events and social developments but hold firmly as well—through both of those processes—to the necessity of personal faith.

Infant baptism fits in this eclectic understanding of conversion. As the Israelites initiated their children into the faith of Israel by circumcision (for boys) and by the spiritually formative practices of rituals and instruction and prayers and synagogue attendance, so the early church "fulfilled" circumcision with infant baptism *as the first step in the journey into the Christian faith*. As circumcision without growing into heart trust and obedience does not bring circumcision to the goal of spiritual maturity, so infant baptism without growing into heart trust and obedience does not accomplish spiritual maturity. If we think of infant baptism as a "seed" of grace and faith planted in the heart of the child, then without water and sun and nurturing the seed sadly dies. The necessity of continuing response to Christ is why article 25 in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion says the sacraments are to be received "worthily." Thus, "in such only as *worthily receive* the same, they have a wholesome effect or operation: but they that receive them *unworthily*, purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith."[15] Article 26 clarifies what "worthily" means: it means faith. Thus, "as by faith, and rightly, do receive the Sacraments." In article 28, with respect to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the terms are all brought together: "insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same."[16] The terms "rightly," "worthily," and "with faith" each speak to the

necessity of those baptized growing into faith for the seed of redemption planted at baptism to grow into spiritual maturity and final salvation. Apart from repentance and faith, two major elements of the journey of conversion, there is no salvation. But let this be an emphasis to keep in mind: we do not by our faith make ourselves worthy of baptism. Baptism is an act of God's grace in us that we simply receive. Faith is the proper response to that grace.

Baptism, whether infant or adult, needs to be seen for what the Bible says it is: the beginning of a journey that God initiates. Wisdom prompts us to treat infant baptism as a seed planted in the heart of a child, but it is a seed in need of care, water, and sun. Conversion is a process, and it begins when the infant is baptized.

Fifth Word: Debate

There are some big debates about baptism, and sometimes you'd think by how people talk that if you get baptism wrong your salvation is in jeopardy—or at least you are close to being a heretic. Karl Barth has a word for all of us about civility when it comes to discussing baptism. This powerful Swiss theologian was nurtured into his faith through infant baptism but switched sides later in his life. Turning baptistic surely brought him into many heated debates. His response drew from experience: "An important sign that a defender of infant [or adult] baptism is certain that his cause has a sound theological basis ought surely to be . . . that he is able to present and support it calmly."[17]

Long ago I read a book called *The Water That Divides*, and on my desk as I write this paragraph is a book called *Baptism: Three Views* and another one called *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*.[18] Are there three or four? Oddly enough,

the three-views book includes a view not even covered in the four-views book! The three-views book discusses believer's baptism, infant baptism, and dual baptism (performing both infant and adult-profession baptism in the same church). What are the four views? The Baptist view understands baptism as a (mere) symbol of Christ's saving work, and adult believer's baptism as only for the one who professes faith in Christ. The Reformed view is that baptism is a sacrament of the covenant; the Reformed are known for baptizing infants whose parents are believers, but they also practice adult baptism for new adult believers. The Lutheran view is that God's act in baptism is regenerative; Lutherans, too, baptize both infants and adult converts. Finally, the stronger side of the Restorationist churches view a believer's (adult's) baptism as the biblical *occasion* of salvation.[19] Four views seem enough, except that these books ignore the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic views! These two very large church bodies, each of which sees itself as the true successor to the apostles(!), perceive more redemptive work of God in the act of baptism than do the above three or four.[20] Baptism can indeed be "the water that divides." How important is that division?

One of the saddest stories in the history of the church has to do with this baptism division. In the sixteenth century some of the Anabaptists, who got their name because they were baptized "again" (or rebaptized), were thrown into a river in Zurich for what their executioners-in-the-name-of-Christ called their "third baptism." Such persons often had their hands tied and then tucked behind their knees, a pole placed between hands and legs to prevent a Houdini-like escape, and were then tossed into the water to drown because they were against infant baptism and affirmed believer's baptism. Capital punishment for believer's baptism is a disgrace to Christ and his body. Believer's

baptism cost thousands of serious Christians their lives. This history is to be regretted and repudiated. All churches today that baptize infants need to take a stand on behalf of their Christian brothers and sisters who believe exclusively in adult baptism, not by agreeing with them but by supporting religious liberty and freedom of conscience. We can be grateful that today we live with such liberty, but we ought not to ignore the history of the Anabaptists who helped pave the way for such liberties by giving their lives.[21] Our baptisms today may divide us, but the division is mild compared to the days of the earliest Anabaptists. This division between us should never exceed debate and should never lead to death.

This book is written from the angle of the Anglican Communion, which is made up of Anglicans of all stripes who are involved and take sides in this debate. So where does the Anglican Communion stand in this debate about baptism? Here is the (seemingly) official position in the Anglican statement of faith, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Because the older style sentence structure makes it difficult to read, I have reformatted it and added numbers to better facilitate our discussion:

> Baptism is (1) not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian [persons] are discerned from others that be not christened,
>
> (2) but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth,
>
> (3) whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church;
>
> (4) the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the [children] of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.[22]

Baptism, then, is (1) a "sign" and "mark of difference" that distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. It marks a difference because (2) it is a "sign" of our redemption. Those who are so baptized and so marked (3) enter into the church. Baptism leads a person into (4) various blessings. But notice the order in the journey into a baptismal faith: promised forgiveness and adoption as well as confirmation of that person's faith and the increase of grace in a person's life through an ongoing relation with God in prayer. Baptism for Anglicans thus *accomplishes* something real. (I will examine what infant baptism *does* below.) This is where we stand in this debate about baptism.

It is not likely that Baptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and the Orthodox are going to come to a common statement of faith on baptism any time soon. Nor am I waiting for that moment to write this book. *It Takes a Church to Baptize* is for those who are considering infant baptism in the Anglican Communion, though it will be of use to any who are considering infant baptism.

Sixth Word: Heritage

Some of the finest Christians I have known and some of my favorite theologians were baptized as infants, never got rebaptized, and teach and practice infant baptism. I date myself, but I think of John Stott and Tim Keller and J. I. Packer and Michael Green, of Martin Luther and John Calvin, of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, of Dorothy Sayers and Morna Hooker and Fleming Rutledge and G. K. Chesterton and Desmond Tutu . . . and the list could grow for years and years. Of course, I know plenty of good folks on the other side too, but my point is that infant baptism is owned by lots of wonderful thinkers and leaders in the church. I recall during college being with a

missions group and encountering a German Lutheran young man whose piety was extraordinary, his prayer life very deep, his grasp of the Bible far beyond mine, his passion for evangelism palpable—and then I learned he was a Lutheran who had been baptized as a child, and it got me, an unyielding Baptist, wondering how piety that rich was possible.

But this book is not about me; it's about you, your child, and our church. It's about what the Bible says about baptism and how many great thinkers in the church have understood it.

The Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, my favorite theologian, entered into a discussion about baptism with some Lutherans who, contrary to a tradition of more than four hundred years, were questioning infant baptism and advocating for baptism only upon profession of faith.[23] His opening statement in his discussion gets right to the point: "The practice of infant baptism cannot be directly proven in the New Testament." But, he continues, it "can nevertheless be seen as probable there."[24] Bonhoeffer thinks the practice of infant baptism may not be in the New Testament, but its theology is to be anchored in the Bible securely. *It Takes a Church to Baptize* will continue and expand this line of thinking.

On top of these individual theologians, we have to deal with the biggest "thinker" of all: the comprehensive witness of the church throughout the sweep of Christian history.[25] The quotations that follow are from some of the great thinkers of Christian orthodoxy in church history, people who are the creators of the Christian heritage on infant baptism.[26]

Irenaeus: "He came to save all through means of Himself—all, I say, who through him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys and youths, and old men" (*Against Heresies* 2.22.4).

Hippolytus: "The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family" (*Apostolic Tradition* 21.4).

Origen: "On this account also the church had a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to infants. For they to whom the secrets of the divine mysteries were given knew that there is in all persons the natural stains of sin which must be washed away by the water and the Spirit. On account of these stains the body itself is called the 'body of sin'" (*Commentary on Romans* 5.9.11, on Rom. 6:5–6).[27]

Gregory of Nazianzus: Gregory of Nazianzus offers a mild rebuke to a mother who fears a son being baptized: "Have you an infant child? Do not let sin get any opportunity, but let him [the child] be sanctified from his childhood; from his very tenderest age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Fearest thou the Seal [of baptism] on account of the weakness of his nature. O what a small-souled mother, and how little faith!" (*Oration on Holy Baptism* 17).

John Chrysostom: "You see how many are the benefits of baptism, and some think its heavenly grace consists only in the remission of sins, but we have enumerated ten honors [it bestows]! For this reason we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be his [Christ's] members" (*Against Julian* 1.6.21).

Augustine: "By this grace baptized infants too are ingrafted into his [Christ's] body, infants who certainly are not yet able to imitate anyone. Christ, in whom all are made alive . . . gives also the most hidden grace of his Spirit to believers, grace which

he secretly infuses even into infants. . . . It is an excellent thing that the Punic [North African] Christians call baptism salvation and the sacrament of Christ's Body nothing else than life. Whence does this derive, except from an ancient and, as I suppose, apostolic tradition, by which the churches of Christ hold inherently that without baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal? This is the witness of Scripture, too. . . . If anyone wonders why children born of the baptized should themselves be baptized, let him attend briefly to this. . . . The sacrament of baptism is most assuredly the sacrament of regeneration" (*Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1.9.10; 1.24.34; 2.27.43).

As in this text, Augustine thought infant baptism was apostolic: "The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic" (*Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 10.23.39).

It might be important to read these quotations again with the knowledge that these theologians formed what you and I—Anglican or not—believe as Christian orthodoxy. Each was as "evangelical" in personal faith as we are, and each was as committed to the baptism of infants. This simply can't be dismissed as some kind of breach of contract with the apostles. Though the church could be wrong on this point, at least by the second century the church practiced baptism of infants. The biggest "thinker" of them all, then, is the church as a tradition, and one ought to observe that for three-quarters of the history of the church there is remarkably a *total absence of baptism*

for professing believers alone. That is, for three-quarters of church history baptism was for infants.[28] Professing-faith baptism, which had its revival among the Swiss Anabaptists and then was part of a strong and respectable Baptist movement, has often been understood as a recovery of apostolic conviction. Not so fast, I will argue. For to come to that conclusion one must also believe the church simply got this wrong for a long, long time. I am prepared to draw such conclusions myself if the evidence establishes such a conviction, but I am no longer convinced the evidence must be interpreted in that manner. There is then nothing less than a powerful history of noble theologians who affirmed infant baptism.

What concerns many, however, is not the heritage of the church but the Bible, so I want to show that the church's practice developed straight from the Bible.