

Nicholas Taylor. *Paul on Baptism: Theology, Mission and Ministry in Context*. London: SCM Press, 2016. 180 pages. \$32.

Every minister is familiar with the disjunction between the slow-moving and reflective quality of their life in seminary and the fast-paced nature of their ministry “in the trenches.” Pastors face a never-ending stream of practical pastoral issues that raise questions concerning the community’s practices and inherited traditions and must respond to them while living out their sense of vocation in ways that are theologically responsible. Yet while in seminary these ministers had access to libraries and other resources for doing this reflection well, when they are “in the field” these tools are not always readily available. Whether because academic books are increasingly inaccessible to non-specialists or because the aims of those books make them remote from any specific pastoral situation, the result is the same: pastors often lack resources that integrate recent scholarship and contemporary pastoral issues for the purpose of enhancing the theological practice of ministry.

Nicholas Taylor, a Research Fellow in Theology and Religion and honorary Professor at the University of Zululand, addresses this lacuna in *Paul on Baptism* by bringing the newest scholarship on the apostle Paul’s understanding of baptism to bear on the contemporary practices of the minister. To this end, Taylor seeks to provide a resource to “others in pastoral ministry who seek to be true to Christian doctrine and the discipline of their particular denomination regarding baptism, and at the same time to administer the sacrament in a manner that is pastorally responsible, so it can be an effective vehicle of God’s love and saving power in a broken world” (xiv).

The book possesses a fairly straightforward outline. Following an introduction, chapter one provides a historical reconstruction of the world in which Paul wrote. In particular, Taylor emphasizes three aspects of the ancient world vital for our understanding of baptism in that context: communal identity, the significance attached to rites and ceremonies, and the activity of spiritual forces. These three aspects of the ancient world come together in the rite of baptism to mark it as one’s entrance into the Christian community and the harnessing of the supernatural being to whom the community offered its prayer and worship. Chapter two turns to the Pauline letters and offers a systematic account of every pericope in which Paul (or those writing in Paul’s name) refers to the Christian rite of baptism. As a substitute for Paul’s physical presence in the community, his letters draw upon that community’s experience and understanding of baptism to speak to other issues and allows us, according to Taylor, to derive some understanding of Paul’s teaching on baptism. Chapter three examines the practice of baptism as depicted in the “Pauline tradition.” Specifically, Taylor explores the baptism accounts in the book of Acts to understand how those to whom Paul preached came to be converted and baptized. Chapter four draws together the insights of the previous three and ventures several suggestions for how what has been said about baptism can be made relevant to contemporary pastoral situations.

Reading through this book, I found myself wishing Taylor had devoted more pages to the final chapter that reflects on the contemporary implications for Paul’s understanding of baptism. For example, if baptism is an identity marker that initiates one into a particular community and forms one into a way of life, how might contemporary congregations manage this claim in the face of globalization trends that require people be more mobile than ever before? How should we understand the “communal” aspect of baptism when people do not stay with a single congregation (or faith tradition) for their entire life? Furthermore, given the role of baptism as the initiation into a new community, would not this new rite call into question the idolizing of the

traditional family? Taylor largely ignores these kinds of questions in favor of discussing the “traditional” debates over baptism. Yet, Taylor’s aim in writing was to provide a resource for the pastor in the trenches that makes accessible the fruits of scholarship. In that sense, this book is certainly a success as it provides a thorough evaluation of those passages of the Pauline corpus that make reference to baptism. Taylor explores the larger context of each book, making this a valuable reference for understanding both the rite of baptism as depicted in Paul’s letters and the larger theological themes of the letters themselves. What results is a valuable book on the Pauline literature that any preacher will welcome.

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