

***The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*** by Jay E. Adams. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975. Pp. 56. Reviewed by Christopher K. Lensch.

*The Meaning and Mode of Baptism* by Jay E. Adams is a biblical and exegetical response to the proponents of baptism by immersion. As such, this concise work answers the charges of immersionists against non-immersionist Christians, and, without answering “proof-texting” with “proof-texting,” it sets forth the biblical case for sprinkling or pouring in baptism.

While baptism is the initiatory sign of the new covenant, Dr. Adams probes beyond the NT texts marshaled by Baptists to show that there were antecedent baptisms (Heb 9:10) in the Old Testament economy that pre-figured the promised fullness (Ezek 36:25-28; Isa 52:15ff.) of NT baptism. He argues that baptism must be defined biblically and explains that NT baptism was not a brand new innovation (John 1:25), but was a known ritual. This known ritual was not proselyte immersion, of which the Bible reveals nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the meaning of baptism, Adams takes care in first exegeting Romans 6:4. This reference to being “buried with [Christ] through baptism into death” is the Baptist’s cardinal text for the symbol of baptism. Dr. Adams concludes that the immediate context and parallel passages are stressing the believer’s identification with Christ and the benefits of his death rather than teaching a reenactment of the process of his attaining those benefits. The larger thrust of the NT message of baptism is purification (negative aspect) and union/identification (positive aspect).<sup>2</sup>

One of the most compelling chapters in the book is “The Baptism of Christ.” In five short pages Adams develops Christ’s explanation why John must baptize him: it is in order “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). Working from the thesis that the “righteousness” in view is an OT ceremonial righteousness that involves an OT ritual, Adams denies that Christ’s baptism was a normal Johannine baptism of purification. Rather, it was an anointing in his messianic role, particularly to his priestly office. Only after his baptism could Jesus be called the Anointed One.<sup>3</sup>

While the matter of the objects of baptism (believers and their children) is outside the scope of the book’s title, Reformed pastors should keep several copies of this inexpensive apology on hand to loan to Baptist skeptics who are willing to let the Scripture speak on a subject of importance. This masterful work is engaging because it argues biblically, and digestible because of its succinctness.

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<sup>1</sup> What the Bible does say about proselyte initiation is that male converts were circumcised.

<sup>2</sup> Were Dr. Adams to revise this book, he might further develop the meaning of baptism as a rite of covenant initiation that conveys promise of blessing as well as threat of malediction. In 1975, when the book was published, there was not much literature on this important dimension that Baptist theologians are reluctant to face because of the implications of the idea of covenant.

<sup>3</sup> Both the Hebrew “Messiah” and Greek “Christ” mean “anointed.”