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# WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM AND MISSIONARY BAPTISM

## J. CAMERON FRASER

Kenneth J. (Ken) Stewart's *In Search of Ancient Roots* includes a provocative chapter on 'Early Church Baptism in the Hands of Evangelical Protestants.' It is based on the independent research of Everett F. Ferguson and the late David F. Wright (1937-2008) into the practice of baptism in the early church. Ferguson is an emeritus professor of Abilene Christian University (Texas). He has 'long been associated with the Christian Churches, one distinctive tenet of which is that forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit is tied to the administration of baptism – that is, baptism upon profession.'<sup>1</sup> It might be fair to say that he would have been predisposed to draw conclusions consistent with his own doctrinal beliefs. Wright, on the other hand, presents a different picture. He grew up in the Anglican communion and was for several years an elder in the paedobaptist Church of Scotland, while teaching in the Church History department of New College, University of Edinburgh. He took the unusual position that paedobaptism was doctrinally defensible but historically questionable. As Stewart notes, 'It may be fairly said that Wright wrote as one *not* motivated to see the baptism of infants uprooted and removed but reformed and practiced on a principled basis in a setting in which indiscriminant (*sic*) infant baptism was and is rife.'<sup>2</sup>

Among several points Stewart makes summarizing the research of both Wright and Ferguson are the following:

- Infants suffering from life-threatening conditions probably provided the occasion that made baptism seem appropriate for the very young. (However, implicit in this practice was a notion that most Protestant Christians do not endorse: the absolute necessity of the reception of this sacrament for salvation)....
- Under all normal circumstances, early Christian baptism followed extensive catechetical training ensuring that the baptismal questions were answered by instructed persons. As it was practiced and

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth J. Stewart, 'Early Church Baptism in the Hands of Evangelical Protestants', in *In Search of Ancient Roots* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), p. 128. Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

spread, infant baptism employed the same questions as previously, yet directed these questions to parents or sponsors of the infants.<sup>3</sup>

Stewart next summarizes some traditional arguments for infant baptism, admitting to 'a sense of chagrin that standard authors writing to advocate infant baptism have found so little to discourage them in the meagreness of such historical materials.'<sup>4</sup> There seem to be three possible responses: **'Disregard the problem of patchy historical evidence.** To date this seems to be the prevailing (though not exclusive) response from the conservative Protestant community that still upholds infant baptism.... **Abandon infant baptism altogether.... Modify infant baptism.'** Under this last point, which Stewart favours, there are three possibilities:

- *Make it an option for the children of those who request it.* 'This is the line taken by the highly regarded A.N.S. (Tony) Lane in the recent volume *Baptism: Three Views*.'<sup>5</sup> There is arguably supporting evidence for this in the early church. Lane also references a group of Baptist churches in seventeenth century England 'which began to accept either practice, and the church at Bedford, now named after Bunyan, has maintained this approach down to the present day.'<sup>6</sup> There are also modern denominations that at least in theory, if not in practice, take this view.
- *Defend infant baptism on grounds that hitherto have not been used* (an unlikely prospect).
- *Defend the baptism of infants by a renewed attention to the household baptisms of Acts 16 and 1 Corinthians 1:16.* Here Stewart references the work of the German scholar Joachim Jeremias in *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (1962).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 131. Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 355-57; David F. Wright, *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism?* (Carlisle UK: Paternoster, 2005), chaps. 1 & 2.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart, 'Early Church Baptism', p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony. N.S. Lane, 'The Dual Practice View', in David F. Wright, ed., *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), pp. 139-71.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 165. Cf. Meic Pearse, *The Great Restoration: The Religious Radicals of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 212-13.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart, 'Early Church Baptism', p. 135ff. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, trans. David Cairns (London: SCM Press, 1962). This is 'a further study' in reply to Kurt Aland's *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* Trans. G.K. Beasley-Murray (London: SCM Press, 1961). Jeremias's first work

In drawing his argument to a close, Stewart challenges his fellow paedobaptists with the question, 'What would it require of us to see infant baptism occupy this more modest place in our churches today?' The answer is 'We would need to commit ourselves to reversing the proportions of those baptized in infancy (the vast majority in today's paedobaptist churches) and those baptized out of the world (the clear minority today). Does not the very frequency with which infant baptism is practiced in our churches practically obscure our failure to evangelize and baptize from the world?'<sup>8</sup> The position here advocated is sometimes called *missionary baptism*.<sup>9</sup>

Stewart goes on to quote with approval the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian James Bannerman who wrote:

The true type of Baptism, from examining which we are to draw our notions as to its nature and efficacy, is to be drawn from the adult Baptisms in the early days of Christianity and not in the only Baptism now commonly performed in the professing church, the Baptism of infants... Both among the enemies and friends of infant baptism the neglect of this distinction has been the occasion of numberless errors in regard to the import and effects of the sacrament. It is abundantly obvious that adult Baptism is the rule and infant Baptism the exceptional case...<sup>10</sup>

Bannerman was by no means alone among Scottish theologians in taking this position. Another (among several) was 'Scotland's greatest theologian',<sup>11</sup> William Cunningham (1805-1861), who was successively Professor of Theology, Professor of Ecclesiastical History, and Principal of New College, Edinburgh. Cunningham nowhere uses the term *missionary baptism*, but he does point out that missionaries generally experi-

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on the subject was *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Dorothy M. Barton (London: SCM Press, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Stewart, 'Early Church Baptism', p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. David F. Wright, 'Recovering Baptism for a New Age of Mission' in Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath, eds., *Doing Theology for the People of God. Studies in Honor of J I Packer* (Downers Grove and Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), pp. 51-66.

<sup>10</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols. (1869; repr. London: Banner of Truth 1960), 2:108-9. Quoted in Stewart, *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>11</sup> The title of 'Scotland's greatest theologian' is given to Cunningham by Donald Macleod, principal emeritus of what is now the Edinburgh Theological Seminary (formerly the Free Church College). (See 'Scotland's Greatest Theologian' in *The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, March 1990, pp. 51-53. Cf. Iain D. Campbell & Malcolm Maclean, eds., *The People's Theologian: Writings in Honour of Donald Macleod* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2011), p. 65.

ence more adult baptisms than those in more established churches that practice infant baptism.<sup>12</sup> In the nature of the case, this is missionary baptism. (The baptism of new believers is not necessarily synonymous with *adult baptism*, but Cunningham consistently speaks of adults and so will this article in expounding his views.)

### CUNNINGHAM'S DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM

As Michael W. Honeycutt observes in 'William Cunningham and the Doctrine of the Sacraments,' Cunningham's approach to church history (or perhaps more accurately, historical theology) was to 'hold past theological discussions up to the "lamp of divine truth" to determine the extent to which they concurred with the "unerring standard of the Word of God."' <sup>13</sup> Thus, Cunningham was unashamedly polemical in his approach. This becomes apparent in his study of the sacraments, where much of his polemic is directed against the Roman Catholic doctrine and that of the Tractarians (or Oxford Movement) of his day. However, there is much of abiding relevance in Cunningham's approach to the subject, precisely because his principal concern was as Honeycutt describes it.

Volume II, Chapter XXII of Cunningham's *Historical Theology* is on 'The Sacramental Principle.' It moves from a discussion of sacramental grace in general to baptismal regeneration, to infant baptism in particular. In the first section, Cunningham notes that:

The essential idea of (the) Popish and Tractarian doctrine of the sacraments is this: that God has established an invariable connection between these external ordinances, and the communication of Himself, - the possession by men of spiritual blessings, pardon and holiness; with this further notion, which naturally arises from it, that He has endowed these outward ordinances with some sort of power or capacity of conveying or conferring the blessings with which they are respectively connected.<sup>14</sup>

This leads to a study of baptismal regeneration, understood as the idea that water baptism has an intrinsic power *ex opere operato* to effect justi-

<sup>12</sup> William Cunningham, 'Zwingli and the Doctrine of the Sacraments', in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866), p. 246. Originally published in *the British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, October 1860.

<sup>13</sup> Michael W Honeycutt, 'William Cunningham and the Doctrine of the Sacraments', in *The People's Theologian*, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol II, second edition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1864), p. 124.

fication and regeneration.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to this, ‘Protestants in general... regard the sacraments as signs and seals of the covenant of grace, signifying and representing in themselves, as symbols appointed by God, Christ and his benefits...operating beneficially only in those in whom faith already exists.’<sup>16</sup>

In other words, both baptism as the sacrament of initiation into the covenant of grace and the Lord’s Supper as the sacrament of spiritual nurture presuppose the existence of faith in those who receive them. If this is the case, then how is one to understand the practice of infant baptism, when the infant is psychologically and developmentally incapable of a previous reception of Christ and his benefits by faith? It is to this and related questions that Cunningham devotes the remainder of the chapter.

Cunningham held that the New Testament model is adult baptism and that infant baptism, defensible in its own right on biblical grounds, is a modification of adult baptism. He also argued that the Westminster divines who gave us the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms had adult baptism in mind when they formulated their definitions of the sacraments in general and baptism in particular. He writes:

If we were in the habit of witnessing adult baptism, and if we formed our primary and full conceptions of the import and effects of the ordinance from the baptism of adults, the one sacrament would be as easily understood, and as definitely apprehended, as the other; and we would have no difficulty in seeing how the general definition of the sacraments in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms applied equally to both. But as this general definition of the sacraments, and the corresponding general description given of the objects and effects of baptism, *do not apply fully and without some modification* to the

<sup>15</sup> More recent ecumenical discussions of *ex opere operato* (‘from the work worked’) suggest that it means only that the sacraments derive their power from Christ’s work rather than from humans. This is reflected in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states that the sacraments are effective ‘by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all...independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them’ (New York: Image Books, published by Doubleday, 1995, para. 1128). However, the Council of Trent, to which Cunningham was responding, stated in Session VII, Canon VIII, ‘If anyone saith that by the said sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of divine grace: let him be anathema’ (<http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch7.htm>). Accessed July 22, 2019. In the Roman Catholic understanding, regeneration and justification can be lost by mortal sin.

<sup>16</sup> Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol II, p. 134.

form in which we usually see baptism administered, men commonly, instead of considering distinctly what are the necessary modifications of it, and what are the grounds on which these modifications rest, leave the whole subject in a very obscure and confused condition in their minds.<sup>17</sup>

In a wide-ranging essay on 'Zwingli and the Sacraments', Cunningham credits Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) with having thrown off 'the huge mass of extravagant absurdity and unintelligible mysticism, which from a very early period had been gathering round the subject of the sacraments, and which had reached its full height in the authorized doctrine of the Church of Rome'.<sup>18</sup> According to Cunningham, 'The Reformed confessions and Protestant divines, in general, have agreed very much in the definition or description of the sacraments, though there is a considerable diversity in the clearness and distinctness with which their doctrine is unfolded'.<sup>19</sup> Zwingli's views were a reaction to Rome's, but other Reformers reacted against Zwingli with phrases that 'approximate somewhat in phraseology to the Roman position'.<sup>20</sup>

Coming more particularly to the subject of baptism, Cunningham first quotes the Westminster Shorter Catechism's general definition of a sacrament as 'a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers'.<sup>21</sup> He then notes that 'It is of fundamental importance to remember, that the Catechism does apply this whole description of a sacrament to baptism, and to realize what this involves'.<sup>22</sup> The Catechism's definition of baptism is 'Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, our partaking of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's'.<sup>23</sup> Cunningham observes:

Now the only ground for alleging that this teaches baptismal regeneration, must be the notion, that it applies in point of fact to all who have been baptized, and that all who have received the outward ordinance of baptism are warranted to adopt this language and apply it to themselves. But the true principle of interpretation is, that this description of baptism fully and in all

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 145. Italics in original.

<sup>18</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', p. 228.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 239-40.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 242. Cf. Shorter Catechism Q & A 92.

<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', pp. 242-43.

<sup>23</sup> Shorter Catechism, Q & A 94.

its extent applies only to those who are possessed of the necessary qualifications or preparations for baptism and are able to ascertain this.... Much evidently depends on the use and application of the pronoun *our* here.... The *our*, of course, suggests a *we*...and the question is, Who are the *we*?...<sup>24</sup>

This question, Cunningham says, 'is similar to that which is often suggested in the interpretation of the apostolic epistles, where the use of the words *we*, *us* and *our*, raises the question, Who are the *we*...?'<sup>25</sup> The answer lies in taking the entire context into account. When this is applied to the Westminster standards, it becomes clear that the sacraments are for the benefit of believers. Understanding this brings clarity to the issue and it becomes apparent that the statement that 'Baptism signifies and seals our ingrafting into Christ etc.' must refer to 'THOSE OF US who have been ingrafted into Christ by faith.' This 'removes all appearance of the Catechism teaching baptismal regeneration.'<sup>26</sup>

This mode of contemplating the ordinance of baptism is so different from what we are accustomed to, that we are apt to be startled when it is presented to us and find it somewhat difficult to enter into. It tends greatly to introduce obscurity and confusion into our whole conceptions on the subject of baptism, that we see it ordinarily administered to infants, and very seldom to adults....

Adult baptism, then, exhibits the original and fundamental idea of the ordinance, as it is usually brought before us, and as it is directly and formally spoken about in the New Testament.<sup>27</sup>

This is not to say that for Cunningham there is no biblical warrant for infant baptism. In his *Historical Theology*, he summarizes the evidence in typical paedobaptist fashion: noting the continuity and expansion of God's gracious dealings with children from the old covenant into the new, the federal holiness of the children of believing parents (1 Cor. 7:14), and the history of how the apostles carried out the Great Commission which favours the conclusion, 'that they admitted the children of believers along with their parents, and because of their relation to their parents, into the communion of the church by baptism.'<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', p. 243.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-46.

<sup>28</sup> Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. II, p. 149. Curiously, Cunningham makes no mention of the circumcision-baptism analogy of Col. 2:11-12 etc. that lies at the heart of the covenant-continuity argument that, since Zwingli, has become a staple of the Reformed position. Reformed Baptists who sub-



Cunningham observes that:

Men have often striven hard in their speculations to lay down something precise and definite, in the way of general principle or standard, as to the bearing and effect of baptism in relation to the great blessings of justification and regeneration in the case of infants individually. But Scripture really affords no adequate materials for doing this; for we have no warrant for asserting even in regards to infants, to whom it is God's purpose to give at some time justification and regeneration, that He uniformly or ordinarily gives it to them before or at their baptism. The discomfort of this state of uncertainty, the difficulty of laying down any definite doctrine upon this subject, has often led men to adopt one or other of two opposite extremes, which have the appearance of greater simplicity and definiteness—that is, either to deny the lawfulness of infant baptism altogether, or to embrace the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and to represent all baptized infants, or at least all the baptized infants of believing parents, as receiving these great blessings in and with the external ordinance, or as certainly and infallibly to receive them at some future time. But this is manifestly unreasonable.<sup>29</sup>

Cunningham does not go into any great detail regarding the arguments for and against infant baptism. He believed that the line of argument he alluded to 'though in some measure inferential', was sufficient *in cumulo* to establish the conclusion 'that the children of believing parents are to be baptized.'<sup>30</sup> He does, however, seek to counter those who hold that 'it is inconsistent with the nature of baptism, as set before us in Scripture, that it should be administered to any, except upon the ground of a previous possession of faith by the person receiving it.'<sup>31</sup>

According to Cunningham, justification and regeneration (the washing away of guilt, and the washing away of depravity), and these alone, are 'the spiritual blessings which the washing with water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, directly signifies and represents. Faith does not stand in the same relation to baptism as these blessings do, and for this obvious and conclusive reason, that it is not directly and

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scribe to the 1689 London Confession of Faith accept this analogy as valid, but apply it, not to those who have been born physically, but to those who have been born again as Abraham's spiritual seed. See e.g. Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 92; David Kingdon, *Children of Abraham* (Hayward Heath, Sussex: Carey Publications, 1973), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol II, pp. 150-151.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

expressly signified or represented in the external ordinance itself, as they are.<sup>32</sup>

Faith, says Cunningham, is the ordinary means by which those capable of it receive the blessings of justification and regeneration.

It is universally admitted that infants, though incapable of faith, are capable of salvation, and are actually saved; and they cannot be saved unless they be justified and regenerated. And since it is thus certain that infants actually receive the very blessings which baptism signifies and represents, without the presence of the faith which is necessary to the possession of these blessings in adults...there can be no serious difficulty in the idea of their admissibility to the outward sign and seal of these blessings, without a previous profession of faith.<sup>33</sup>

Baptism, it should be said, also represents union with Christ and the Baptism of the Spirit, or more properly, the benefits of justification and regeneration that result from union with Christ and the Baptism of the Spirit. Cunningham consistently mentions only justification and regeneration, in that order, stating that they must both be received by faith in the case of adults. This is curious for a Reformed theologian, since Reformed theology generally teaches that regeneration precedes both faith and justification. It could be that Cunningham is using *regeneration* in the broader sense Calvin did to represent the entire process of spiritual renewal.

Returning to the earlier discussion of 'Zwingli and the Doctrine of the Sacraments', Cunningham continues to develop his argument by examining statements in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism. He also references numerous Reformed authorities whom he claims to be in general agreement with him. He observes that those who 'have not attended to and estimated aright this topic of the peculiar and subordinate place held by the subject of infant baptism are very apt to run into one or other of two extremes.' These are that of 'lowering the true sacramental principle, as brought out in the general definition of a sacrament, and as exhibited fully in the case of adult baptism and the Lord's Supper, to the level of what suits the special case of infant baptism' or that of 'raising the explanation propounded of the bearing and effect of infant baptism, up to a measure of clearness and fulness which really attaches only to adult baptism and the Lord's Supper.'<sup>34</sup>

Cunningham was insistent that no sharp distinction should be made between the qualifications for baptism and the Lord's Supper. In this, he

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', p. 253.

was opposing a view common in the Scottish Highlands and championed by its most noted minister John Kennedy, that saw infant baptism as no more than a 'door' into the visible church. (A similar position was expressed in the 'Half-Way Covenant' in New England in the seventeenth century). A distinction was made between an *uncontradicted* profession (sufficient for securing baptism for one's children) and an *accredited* profession (evidence of regeneration required for admission to the Lord's Table). The practical effect of this was that a further distinction was made between members in full communion and those who were merely baptized adherents. As Kennedy noted (and defended), 'The result of carrying this view into practice is well known; the numbers of members in full communion is comparatively small, and parents who have never communicated, receive baptism for their children.'<sup>35</sup>

This debate was not central to Cunningham's view of baptism, but it is mentioned here because, in coming to sum up his argument, one of the points he makes is that baptism should only be administered to believers and their children, and those who receive baptism for their children should also be qualified to sit at the Lord's Table. This is the second of three points. The first is that 'Scripture, while furnishing sufficient materials to establish the lawfulness and obligation of infant baptism, does not give us much direct information concerning it,' and therefore 'men should be particularly careful to abstain from deductions, probabilities or conjectures, beyond what Scripture clearly sanctions.' The third point is that 'while believers are warranted to improve the baptism of their children...neither parents nor children should regard the fact that they have been baptized, as affording of itself even the slightest presumption that they have been regenerated' without 'the appropriate proofs of an actual renovation of the moral nature, exhibited in each case individually; and that, until such proof appear, every one, whether baptized or not, should be treated and dealt with in all respects as if he were unregenerate, and still needed to be born again of the word of God through the belief of the truth.'<sup>36</sup>

## SUPPORT FOR CUNNINGHAM

As noted, Cunningham cites several sources he claims to be in agreement with him. For instance, he quotes Martin Vitringa<sup>37</sup> at some length to the

<sup>35</sup> John Kennedy, *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire* (Edinburgh: Norman Macleod, the Mound, 1897), p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', pp. 290-91.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Vitringa was a nephew of the elder Campegius Vitringa (1643-1723) and a cousin of the younger Campegius Vitringa (1693-1731). Martin Vit-

effect that 'the sacraments have been instituted only for those who have received the grace of God.'<sup>38</sup> Vitringa 'gives extracts from eight to ten of the confessions of the Reformed period, and from above fifty of the most eminent divines of that and the succeeding century.' The names of forty-nine (not 'above fifty') divines are then listed, to which Cunningham adds 'in short, all the greatest divines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.'<sup>39</sup>

It is questionable whether all of the authorities cited by Cunningham would have agreed with him on the narrower point that adult baptism is the primary mode both biblically and confessionally. However, on the specific argument that the Westminster divines had adult baptism in mind when formulating their definition of the sacrament, Cunningham offers the names of fellow-Scots Samuel Rutherford (1600-61) in his *Due Right of Presbyteries* and George Gillespie (1613-48) in *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*. Rutherford and Gillespie are both quoted at length and Cunningham offers the opinion that 'Rutherford and Gillespie are, literally and without any exception, just the two very highest authorities that could be brought to bear upon a question of this kind, at once from their learning and ability as theologians, and from the place they held and the influence they exerted in the actual preparation of the documents under consideration.'<sup>40</sup>

Cunningham continues, 'We think it of some importance to show, that these views of the sacramental principle, or of the doctrines of the sacraments, which though so clearly and fully set forth in the Westminster standards, have been so much lost sight of amongst us, were openly maintained by the leading divines of the Church of Scotland during last century.'<sup>41</sup> The names of Principal (James) Hadow (1667-1747) and Thomas Boston (1678-1732), 'the heads of two different schools of theology in Scotland in the early part of last century,'<sup>42</sup> are offered as in agreement on the point in question. Then there is a quotation from Dr. John

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ringa edited the sixth edition of one of his uncle's works, *Doctrina Christianae Religionis* and it was published from 1761-76. See William Omre, *Bibliotheca Biblica: A Select List of Books of Sacred Literature with Notices Biographical, Critical and Bibliographical* (Edinburgh: Adam Black and London: Longman, Hurst, Reese, More, Brown and Green, 1824), p. 450. Martin Vitringa's exact dates could not be found.

<sup>38</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', pp. 264-65.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 281-82.

Erskine (1721-1803), 'probably the greatest divine in the Church of Scotland in the latter part of last century.'<sup>43</sup>

The various divines Cunningham quotes or refers to all lived before his time. His contemporary James Bannerman (1807-68), who was one of two editors of Cunningham's posthumously published works, also expressed himself much to the same effect, as quoted earlier. One who lived later into the 20th century was another noted Scottish theologian John Macleod (1872-1948), one-time principal of the Free Church College, Edinburgh (1929-43). Towards the end of his *Scottish Theology* (a series of lectures delivered at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia), he deals with developments subsequent to Cunningham's time and notes how the High Church party in the Church of Scotland advocated baptismal regeneration and 'sought to make out that the Reformed standards teach a doctrine of baptismal grace which issues in the actual regeneration of the baptised through the sacrament as an instrument.'<sup>44</sup> In response, Macleod states that they did this 'oblivious of the two-fold fact that the statements of those standards deal primarily with what baptism is in the normal instance of its administration, that is, in the case of believers who are baptised on their own profession; and that the baptism of children as members of Christian households, though thoroughly warranted on its own grounds, is not the normal and regulative example of the administration of the sacrament.'<sup>45</sup> Whether directly or not, there could be no clearer evidence of the continuing influence of the position advocated by Cunningham.

## CRITICISMS OF CUNNINGHAM

Although Cunningham could point to fellow-Scots in the past as supporting his view, also agreed to by his contemporary Bannerman, and John Macleod represented the same view in the early part of the twentieth century, another noted twentieth century Scot, John Murray (1898-1975), disagreed. Murray does not speculate as to what was in the minds of the Westminster divines when they formulated their multiple definitions of baptism, but in a footnote in his *Christian Baptism*, he notes, 'William Cunningham and James Bannerman...maintained that a line of discrimination must be drawn...between the baptism of infants and the baptism of adults....It may be quite correct to say with Cunningham that adult baptism is "that from which mainly and principally we should form our

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>44</sup> John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in relation to Church History* (Edinburgh: Knox Press and Banner of Truth reprint 1974), p. 303.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 303-4.

conception of what baptism is and means and was intended to accomplish.” But when Cunningham says that “it is adult baptism alone which embodies and brings out the full idea of the ordinance”...there does not appear to be good warrant for such discrimination.<sup>46</sup>

Murray makes his own view clear when he states positively that ‘Baptism has one import, and it bears that same import whether it is dispensed to adults or infants.’<sup>47</sup> It should be administered, however, not on the basis of any assumptions about the spiritual state of the child, but simply because it is a divinely mandated ordinance. ‘Short of that we may not stop. Beyond that we may not go.’ At the same time, Murray goes on to state that ‘Baptized infants are to be received as children of God and treated accordingly.’<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, Murray commends Cunningham for ‘ably and cogently’<sup>49</sup> opposing the idea that ‘there is such a thing in the New Testament as dual confession, one entitling to baptism and another, of a higher order, entitling to communicant membership.’<sup>50</sup>

If Murray’s criticisms of Cunningham are modified by his concession that it ‘may be quite correct’ to say that our conception of what baptism signifies is derived from the New Testament model of adult baptism, there are no such concessions in Robert (Bob) Letham’s trenchant critique in the context of a review of *The People’s Theologian: Writings in Honour of Donald Macleod*. This book contains a number of essays on different subjects and Letham touches on them all, but a disproportionate amount of space is devoted to Michael W. Honeycutt’s contribution on ‘William Cunningham and the Doctrine of the Sacraments.’ Letham charges Cunningham’s baptismal theology with being hardly distinguishable from a credobaptist one. Cunningham was, in Letham’s view ‘wrong; totally, monumentally wrong’. In making his case, Letham continues:

It is true that Cunningham did not have access to the full minutes of the Assembly, which have only recently been transcribed....

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<sup>46</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), p. 85, n. 45. Italics in original. For a view opposite to that of Cunningham, see the Church of Scotland’s 1958 *Interim Report of the Special Commission on Baptism*, which claims that for the Scottish Reformers ‘baptism by its very nature as the sacrament of our first entrance into God’s household was essentially relevant for children but therefore equally adaptable to adults, who can only enter into the kingdom of God as little children.’

<sup>47</sup> Murray, *Christian Baptism*, p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 80, n. 42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

There were a range of discussions on baptism at the Assembly, more fully-recorded by the scribe than most other matters. These covered both the theology and practice of baptism. In each case, the baptism of *infants* was in view. There is no evidence that the divines considered this in isolation from the baptism of adult converts....

Moreover, the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* refers to 'the child to be baptised'. The words of instruction before baptism speak of the reasons why 'the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church' have interest in the covenant and the right to its seal...<sup>51</sup>

Scarcely less severe is the critique of the late David F. Wright. From 1984 until his death, Wright wrote a number of essays on baptism, twenty-seven of which, in 2007, were published together in *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies*. Wright wrote an introduction to this book on 'The Strange History of Infant Baptism, Not Least in Scotland.' Coming to William Cunningham and his essay on 'Zwingli and the Doctrine of the Sacraments', Wright finds it to abound in 'insightful one-sidedness...driven by the bogeyman of baptismal regeneration.'<sup>52</sup> Wright independently came to the view, based on historical research into early church sources, as well as the 'increasingly widespread' consensus among New Testament scholars<sup>53</sup> that believers' baptism was the New Testament norm and so found Cunningham's analysis on that point 'sound in its fundamental instinct', but failing 'to recognize that it indicts most Protestant theology from the reformers on and that the genius of the Westminster divines was indeed to start with the baptism of believers but not leave

<sup>51</sup> Robert Letham, <http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-61-article-8---book-review---the-peoples-theologian-writings-in-honour-of-donald-macleod>. Accessed 9 October, 2019. Letham also says that Cunningham's 'summary of the Protestant doctrine of the sacraments is amazing for its inaccuracy' (email October 9, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> David F. Wright, 'Introduction: The Strange History of Infant Baptism, Not Least in Scotland', in *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), p. xxxvi.

<sup>53</sup> Wright, 'The Origins of Infant Baptism-Child Believers' Baptism?', in *Infant Baptism*, p. 5. Wright also discusses the 1982 report of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in which representatives of various traditions from Baptists to Roman Catholics agreed that, 'While the possibility that infant baptism was also practiced in the apostolic age cannot be excluded, baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents.' Quoted by Wright in 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (the "Lima Report"): An Evangelical Assessment', in *Infant Baptism*, p. 312.

infant baptism out in unilluminated darkness.<sup>54</sup> Cunningham's interpretation of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms was 'bizarre'. He did not 'set out to work with scripture' and was 'no more than selective in his engagement with the actual Westminster documents'.<sup>55</sup>

Wright is only slightly less critical of Bannerman, whom he finds to be 'more balanced and rounded' than Cunningham. He does consider Cunningham and Bannerman to have been right insofar as believers' baptism 'is in an appropriate sense the norm of Christian baptism. They were ahead of their time, but they spoiled their case by exaggeration, and by bifurcating the baptismal waters like the Red Sea at the exodus'.<sup>56</sup> Wright says that he now understands 'with fresh clarity' how 'evangelical circles in my adoptive land which still set such store by the Westminster Confession come to profess such a base estimate of baptism'.<sup>57</sup>

If William Cunningham did not have access to the minutes of the Westminster Assembly, David Wright did. It is on this basis that he delivered a public lecture on 'Baptism at the Westminster Assembly', at a conference commemorating the Westminster Assembly.<sup>58</sup> Among other things, such as public versus private baptisms, the debate over dipping (immersion as an alternative to sprinkling), and the meaning of federal holiness in 1 Corinthians 7:14, Wright argues that the Westminster divines intended the documents they produced to teach baptismal regeneration, and this is what was meant by the Confession of Faith's calling baptism 'the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28:1)'.<sup>59</sup> This is a position Cunningham would have vigorously opposed. He believed it to be a 'most extraordinary blunder' to hold that the early Protestant confessions, both during the Reformation and in the seventeenth century taught baptismal regeneration.<sup>60</sup>

Wright acknowledges that the Confession of Faith offers a 'variety of qualifications' to the assertion that 'the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost' (28:6). Efficacy 'is not tied to the moment of administration (28:6), grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed to baptism that no person can be regenerated or saved without it (28:5) or that all baptized are undoubtedly regenerated (28:5).' Regeneration 'is not automatically enjoyed by all recipients: it

<sup>54</sup> Wright, 'Introduction', p. xxxvii.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. xxxvi.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. xl.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. x-xl.

<sup>58</sup> Published in *Infant Baptism*, pp. 238-256.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, 'Baptism at the Westminster Assembly', p. 244.

<sup>60</sup> Cunningham, 'Zwingli', p. 241.



contains “a promise of benefit to worthy receivers” (27:3), who from one point of view are “those who actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents” (28:4) and from another “such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time (28:6)”<sup>61</sup>

By taking all the above qualifications into account, Wright appears to be using *baptismal regeneration* differently from Cunningham, in a theological rather than temporal sense. At the same time, while highly critical of Cunningham’s interpretation of the Westminster standards and of the doctrine of baptism in general, he does agree with Cunningham (although for different reasons) that believers’ (although not necessarily adult) baptism was the biblical and Christian norm.

## TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

It does appear that Cunningham may have been reading his own understanding back into the Westminster standards, but does that make him wrong in light of ‘the lamp of divine truth’? Letham finds Cunningham’s position not to differ much from a credobaptist approach. Wright finds it bizarre. Murray concedes that Cunningham may be right to see adult or believers’ baptism as the biblical model, but faults him for making a distinction between the meaning of adult and infant baptism. So where does this leave us?

Clearly, Cunningham was opposed to any suggestion of baptismal regeneration, which he understood in terms of water baptism having an intrinsic power to effect justification and regeneration. Wright, however, defined baptismal regeneration differently, with several qualifications, and insisted that this is what the Westminster divines meant by describing baptism as ‘as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ’ (WCF 28:1). However, the point surely is as Tony Lane and others (with slight variations) point out: repentance, faith, baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit all belong together in the New Testament understanding of receiving salvation. Thus, those passages that appear to give to the act of baptism a redemptive or regenerating significance are to be understood in the context of the whole. The various other elements are present as well.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Wright, ‘Baptism at the Westminster Assembly’, pp. 244–45.

<sup>62</sup> Lane, ‘Dual-Practice View’, p. 144. Cf. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 263–305; James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 91; Robert H. Stein, ‘Baptism in Luke-Acts’, in Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright,

This suggests believers' baptism being the biblical norm, as Cunningham maintains and Wright also recognises.

Cunningham refers consistently to *adult* rather than *believers'* baptism. Believers' baptism in established churches need not be of adults only, but the concept of missionary baptism implies that it is of adult heads of families who then bring their families into the church with them as a believing family. Whether or not infants were present in the household baptisms of the New Testament is not the issue so much as on what basis members of the household were baptised—their own profession or that of the head of the household. What then of children growing up in Christian families, which is the norm in both Baptist and paedobaptist churches today? That is another study for another time.

Meanwhile, Cunningham's view (and that of others cited in support) represents an honourable position in Scottish theology and qualifies for what Ken Stewart urges as 'this more modest place' for infant baptism.

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eds. *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), pp. 35-66. See also James J. Cassidy, 'Calvin on Baptism: Baptismal Regeneration or the *Duplex Loquende Modus*?' in Tipton and Waddington, *Resurrection and Redemption, Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), pp. 534-554, for a helpful discussion of the distinction between the sign (*signa*) and the thing signified (*res*) in Calvin.