

BOOK REVIEW

The Validity of the Baptism of the Church of Rome, abridged from J.H. Thornwell, and with a Foreword by John MacLeod. Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1991, pp. 110, £4.50. Reviewed by Rev. Professor-Emeritus Dr. Francis Nigel Lee (Ph.D., Th.D., Sometime Chairman of the Departments of Church History and Systematic Theology, Queensland Presbyterian Theological Seminary).

Editor Tony Home asked me to review the above for a 1992 issue of *The Presbyterian*. Apart from the Foreword, it's an 87-page abridgement of Thornwell's 1846 130-page monograph.

Previously, I myself replied to Thornwell's arguments in full -- in my own 540-page doctoral dissertation *Rebaptism Impossible!* There, I also dealt with the vital and almost pre-emptively important baptismal controversies of Stephen vs. Cyprian and Augustine vs. Donatism and Calvin vs. the Catabaptists -- with none of which Thornwell deals.

Here, I avoid those controversies. So too, the very vital subject of establishing the correct criteria for evaluating the validity of various 'questionable' baptisms (such as those performed by Campbellite regenerationists, by Greek-Orthodox priests, by nurses in Romish hospitals, and even by Gnesio-Lutherans). Here in this present review, I even avoid discussing the validity of baptisms performed by Romish priests themselves -- and concentrate only on Thornwell's baptismal arguments.

Even the World's greatest living Thornwell scholar, the sympathetic Rev. Prof. Dr. Morton H. Smith of Greenville Theological Seminary in Thornwell's native South Carolina, himself admits that apart from the present monograph Thornwell wrote hardly anything on the sacraments. Sadly, magnificent as was the Confederate Thornwell's resistance to the encroachments of Yankee aggression and of the Apocrypha and of "Church-Board-ocracy" -- even he himself had indeed imbibed the arminianizing spirit of the 'Great Awakening.'

This can be seen in Thornwell's anti-covenantal misshaping of the Southern Presbyterian Church's *Book of Discipline* (for which even his fellow Southerner the more famous Robert L. Dabney somewhat criticized him). For Thornwell was theoretically a Semi-Baptist! Paedobaptists like "Thornwell," the Baptist David Kingdon rightly remarked in his own booklet *Children of Abraham* (Carey, Sussex, 1973, p. 64), are "as Hodge realised half-way to becoming Baptists!"

Indeed, Thornwell alarmingly described even covenantal babies as "enemies of Christ." However, even before 1900 -- also his own denomination had repudiated such an at least Anti-Calvinian if not in fact semi-manichaeism error.

The great strength of the monograph by Thornwell here under review, as MacLeod rightly points out, is his clear condemnation of the Romish doctrines of baptismal justification and regeneration. Thornwell also heartily hammers the Pope of Rome, although not as hard as does the original version of the *Westminster Confession* 25:1-6 (which Thornwell once vowed to uphold). This states how "that Antichrist...exalteth himself in the Church" -- and not in some worse-than-Hinduistic temple, as Thornwell would suggest the Roman communion had become.

It is indeed true to say, as Westminster here declares, that Rome is a degenerated part of the visible catholic Church of Christ -- though less degenerated, we would add, than some of the bodies currently in fellowship with the World(ly) Council of Churches! However, it is altogether against the *Westminster Confession* to assert -- as did Thornwell's 1845 General Assembly and as Thornwell himself did according to his 1873f editor and friend John Adger -- "that the papal body is not a Church of Christ at all" (pg. vi). And it was thoughtless of Thornwell recklessly to write that "Papal idolaters...give an idea of God from which an ancient Roman or a modern Hindoo might turn away in disgust" (pp. 76f). Thornwell knew very little about Hinduism!

Yet unfortunately, this misperception colours Thornwell's thoughts throughout his catabaptistic diatribe against Triune Baptism when administered in the Church of Rome. For he does not seek to invalidate baptisms performed in the baptismal-regenerationistic Eastern Orthodox Churches -- which, with their submersionism *etc.*, are baptismally further removed from Scripture than is Rome.

Thornwell forgot that Protestantism was and is not a revolution to destroy worthless Paganism, but a Reformation to purge a deformed *Church*. Though "the horrible harlot," she is also "the *Kirk malignant*" (*Scotch Confession* art. 18). Rome is indeed false. She is *ecclesia falsa* -- a *false Church*, and one plagued by the papal Antichrist. Indeed, she is "the false Church" (*Belgic Confession* art. 29). Yet she is also "the false *Church*" -- and not a Non-Church like Islamic Mosques or like Post-Christian Judaistic Synagogues.

As Calvin himself declared in the *French Confession* (art. 28): "We condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word of God is banished from them [and] their sacraments are corrupted or falsified.... Nevertheless, as some trace of the Church is left in the papacy, and the virtue and substance of baptism remain, and as the efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it -- we confess that those baptized in it do not need a second baptism. But, on account of its corruptions, we cannot present children to be baptised in it without incurring pollution."

It is amazing that Thornwell apparently never wrestled with the anti-rebaptist implications of passages in infallible Holy Scripture (like Gen. 17:10f; Ex. 4:24f; Acts 19:1-7; Rom. 6:3f; Eph. 4:4-6; Col. 2:6-16; & Heb. 6:1-6). He studiously avoided any discussion of the very strongly anti-catabaptist views of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox -- and even quite wrongly sinuated that Calvin agreed with Catabaptists like Thornwell (and incidentally also the Anabaptists)!

Nothing, however, is further from the truth. See Calvin's *Inst.* IV:2:11f & IV:15:16f; his *Comm. on Ezek.* (16:20f & 20:26-31f); and his *Tracts and Treatises* (especially *On Trent* and *Against Westphal*, and *On the True Method of Reforming the Church*).

We totally concur with Thornwell's massive invective against the Romish Mass, but are amazed he apparently did not realise Rome has never alleged any sort of transubstantiation at *baptism*! He also avoided all discussion of the *Westminster Confession* (27:3-5 & 28:5-7) anent the unrepeatability of baptism -- even when received from very unworthy administrators.

Surely the infant son of Moses was *validly* (because unrepeatably) circumcised by the *irregular* act of his own mother {*WCF* 28:5n}? Surely the Protestant Reformers John Calvin and John Craig did not with their unrepeated and unrescinded baptisms by Romish

priests desecrate the Presbyterian Communion Table (*cf.* Ex. 12:48)? But would Thornwell then have admitted them, as such, to communion in his own congregation? For consider *WCF* 29:8*p-q*!

Thornwell also overlooked the implications of the *Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, where it says that "Baptism...is not...to be administered in any case by any private person.... Nor is it to be administered in private places...[nor] in the places where fonts in the time of Popery were unfitly and superstitiously placed."

He also overlooked the force of the statements in John Craig's 1580 *National Covenant* against "that Roman Antichrist" and his "use of the holy sacraments" and "his cruel judgment against infants departing without the sacrament" and "his absolute necessity of baptism" and his agitations to "use the holy sacraments in the Kirk deceitfully."

Certainly God's children within should, after strenuously striving to reform it, leave the Romish Babylon and also her apostate daughter denominations with their women ministers (*etc.*) -- as well as all (Ana)Baptist sects. Thereafter, they should obviously have their own subsequently-born infants baptized only in purer churches. But they are not to repudiate the baptism of the Triune God Whose Name they themselves already bear! To the contrary, precisely because they themselves have been *marked* with baptism as the seal of the Living God (even if in the Papal Church or in a submersionistic sect) -- they need to "improve" that baptism. This they should do not by repeating it elsewhere, but by repudiating *inter alia* also the papal perversions thereof. *Westminster Larger Catechism* 167 & 179. See Rev. 7:2*f*; 9:4*f*; 13:4-18; 14:1-12; 17:4-18; 18:2-4; 22:3-5.

Thornwell the Southerner's personal pique against Hodge the Northerner, caused him calumniously to castigate Princeton for becoming what he falsely called "an apologist of Rome" (pg. vii). Inconsistently, Thornwell did not so accuse the Reformers themselves -- all of whom without exception asserted the validity of baptisms performed within the Church of Rome! Thus Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer, Knox, and all of the various *Reformed Confessions of Faith*. So too John Philpot, John Clement, George Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford, John Owen, David Dickson, Jonathan Edwards, Francis Turretine and Matthew Henry.

Every first-rate Protestant sacramentologist without exception has asserted the validity of triune baptism -- whether performed by the trinitarian Pope of Rome, or even by unitarianising or tritheising Anabaptists not yet themselves unitarian or tritheistic (and whom John Knox rightly regarded as far worse than Romanists). Thus consult also the anti-catabaptists Riissen, De Moor, Samuel Miller, Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, Shedd, William Cunningham, 'Rabbi' Duncan, the original Free Presbyterians, Heppe, Gravemeijer, Kuyper, Warfield, Bavinck, Berkhof, Berkouwer, Buswell, Hoeksema, Potgieter, Heyns, Boice, Ward, Thompson, Tallach and Van Til.

Gratitude should be expressed to my dear friend Jim North of Focus Publications for making (an abridgement of) Thornwell's famous polemic again available to the public -- and in a most attractive and inexpensive format. Jim is just about to publish also my own (antipapal) *Antichrist in Scripture*. I shall be absolutely ecstatic if it look as fine as his edition of Thornwell. May Protestants and Romanists alike buy and study it, and be led to evaluate both Thornwell and triune baptism -- in the light of Holy Scripture as our only infallible guide!

