

Ian Hugh Clary, “‘Defending Truth at Every Expense’: Alexander Carson (1776-1844) on Baptism” *The Gospel Witness* (June 2010).

### **Life of Carson**

The British Particular Baptists of the eighteenth-century could turn to a number of leading lights for theological guidance. Names like Booth, Fuller and Haldane are just a selection representing the quality of Baptist scholarship from this period. In Northern Ireland the Baptist cause was theologically undergirded by the work of Alexander Carson (1776-1844), a pastor-theologian who was influential in his day, yet remains relatively unknown today.<sup>1</sup> After his death the *Christian Freeman* could say: “Mr. Carson’s worth is not known. His pen has furnished some of the finest specimens of *critical acumen*, well applied, that are not to be found in our own or in any other language.”<sup>2</sup> In light of such a compliment, Carson is a Baptist worth discovering.

Carson was an occasional theologian and wrote on topics as they were contested in the broader church. For instance, he wrote against Unitarianism,<sup>3</sup> Roman Catholicism<sup>4</sup> and Higher Criticism.<sup>5</sup> The well-known Presbyterian theologian Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), who taught at the Free Church College in New College, Edinburgh, used Carson’s work on the inspiration of Scripture in his class on systematic theology. One of Carson’s earliest biographers, G. C. Moore, claims that had Carson remained a Presbyterian he would have taught Moral Philosophy at the Royal College of Belfast.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Carson’s life and thought see Ian Hugh Clary, “Alexander Carson (1776-1844): ‘Jonathan Edwards of the Nineteenth Century’” in *American Theological Inquiry* 2.2 (July 2009): 43-52.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted at the end of Alexander Carson, *Works* (Dublin/London/Edinburgh: William Carson/Houlston & Stoneman/Wm. Whyte, 1850), II, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Carson, “Reply to the Rev. Dr. Drummond’s Essay on the Doctrine of the Trinity, in a letter to the Author” in *Works* (Dublin/London/Edinburgh: William Carson/Houlston & Stoneman/Wm. Whyte, 1850), II, 189-396; “Review of the Discussion on the Unitarian Controversy” in *Works* II, 397-456.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Carson, “Theories of Inspiration by Dr. Pye Smith, Dr. Dick, and Bishop Wilson, examined and refuted, and the verbal Inspiration of the Scriptures proved” in *Works* (Dublin/ London/ Edinburgh: William Carson/Houlston & Stoneman/Wm. Whyte, 1854), III, 91-260; and “Review of Dr. Pye Smith’s Defence of Dr. Haffner’s Preface to the Bible” in *Works*, III, 419-469.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Carson, “The Doctrine of Transubstantiation,” in *Works* (Dublin/London/Edinburgh: William Carson/Houlston & Stoneman/Wm. Whyte, 1850), II, 47-128.

<sup>6</sup> G. C. Moore, “Memoir of Alexander Carson, LL.D.” in Alexander Carson, *Baptism in its Mode and Subjects* 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1850), xxv.

spite of the importance of much of his other writings, his work that has had a lasting legacy on subsequent generations of Baptists is *Baptism in its Mode and Subjects*.<sup>7</sup>

Carson was born in Annahone, Co. Tyrone in 1776. He was raised by his parents in the Presbyterian Church of Ireland and taught the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards. He studied for ministry at the University of Glasgow where he excelled in the biblical languages, in particular Greek. Carson poured hours of labour into mastering the language, exerting himself to the point of enlisting the help of fellow students to ask him questions as he lay in bed. At Glasgow he earned both a BA and MA—the university would later ask Carson to teach Greek.

After his return to Ireland from Scotland he took up the ministerial charge at the Presbyterian Church in Tubbermore (Tobermore). He would remain there until 1804 when his ecclesiological convictions changed to a congregational polity.<sup>8</sup> The impetus for this change had to do with the slow infection of Arianism in the denomination and Carson’s virtual impotence when striving against it due to the ecclesiastical machinations that worked against him.

This would not be Carson’s only shift in his ecclesiology. Not long after becoming an Independent he came into contact with Baptist missionaries sent from Scotland by the Haldane brothers.<sup>9</sup> When the issue of baptism became a point of contention in his church, Carson withstood the arguments of the Baptists. However, after he began to write a tract against them he saw that his own arguments were not consistent with Scripture. As a result, Carson resigned his paedobaptist views. Eventually Carson planted a Baptist church in Tubbermore and went on to plant more in the surrounding area including nearby Carndaisy.

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Carson, *Baptism in its Mode and Subjects* (London: Houlton and Stoneman, 1844). A modern reprint is *Baptism: Its Mode and Subjects* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1981), the edition cited herein.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Carson, “Reasons for Leaving the Synod of Ulster” in *Works* (Dublin/ London/ Edinburgh: William Carson/Houlston & Stoneman/Wm. Whyte, 1856), IV.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the Haldanes see George McGuinness, “Robert (1764-1842) and James Haldane (1768-1851)” in Michael A. G. Haykin ed., *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 2000), 218-235.

Carson was involved in Particular Baptist life in the British Isles, especially with the Baptist Missionary Society, the agency that sent William Carey to India.<sup>10</sup> It was a preaching trip for the BMS in England that occasioned Carson's premature death. On his return home, Carson awaited a boat in Liverpool that would carry him across the Irish Sea to Belfast. Listlessly as he glanced at his watch, he fell off a dock into frigid water. Providentially a passerby helped Carson out of the water with a ladder. Unfortunately Carson made a bad decision and boarded the boat to Ireland. He arrived in Belfast with a fever and was taken to the home of Rev. Robert Wilson. On August 24, 1844, at the age of sixty-eight, Carson died.

### THE BIG BOOK ON BAPTISM

*Baptism in its Mode and Subjects* is an impressive study that displays the width and depth of Carson's learning in philosophy, linguistics, history and theology. It does not read as a single piece, but rather as a collection of different writings on the same subject—nearly every chapter appears to be a separate treatise. Unfortunately no editorial effort brought the work into one argument and thus there is needless repetition. While this is a drawback, it can be helpful in observing how Carson addresses different groups of paedobaptists in different historical situations such as clerics in the Church of England and Congregationalists in America. Due to the size of the volume a study of it such as the following will be necessarily selective and limited in scope. It will follow the title of the work in evaluating Carson's view of the mode of baptism and then the subjects.

Carson begins *Baptism* by engaging with the philosophical issue of burden of proof as developed by Richard Whately, Archbishop of Dublin. Carson straps paedobaptists with the need to prove rather than presume what they posit as an argument: namely infant baptism. Throughout the work he regularly points out that the paedobaptists with whom he interacts assume their first principles, rather than prove them. "The burden of proof," according to Carson, "must necessarily lie on the side that needs the proof."<sup>11</sup> Because infant baptism lacks sufficient biblical evidence, it is incumbent upon those who affirm it

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<sup>10</sup> For Carson on mission see Alexander Carson, "The Propagation of the Gospel, with Encouragement to the Vigorous Prosecution of the Work" in *Works* (London/Edinburgh: Hamilton, Adams/Wm. White, 1847), I, 425-454.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 3.

to validate their position by argument, especially in light of strong Baptist opposition. Carson argues, “Every opinion is to be supported by the holders of it, with the arguments on which it rests; and the business of him who rejects it is to disprove these arguments.”<sup>12</sup> For Carson, to determine the veracity of an argument it must be demonstrated by an appeal to an authority, namely, Scripture: “If any doctrine, or rite, declines to show its proof, from the admitted standard, it necessarily falls to the ground for want of proof.”<sup>13</sup> Further he asks, “Do the Scriptures teach, that an institution in practical existence, has a pre-occupation that entitles it to be received as Divine, until it is convicted of human origin? Is it a self-evident truth? No such thing: it is a figment forged to sanction the doctrines and traditions of men.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Mode of Baptism**

Carson exhibits an adept handling of lexicography and semantics as he examines the Greek verb *bapto* and its derivative *baptizo*, under the category of mode of baptism. The primary meaning of *bapto*, says Carson, is “to dip,” while its secondary meaning is “to dye.” Carson argues that “Every occurrence of the word may be reduced to one or other of these acceptations.”<sup>15</sup> While some have argued that it can also denote “to wash” Carson points to the lack of biblical examples as a reason for ruling out this use. The one possible example where the word is translated “to wash” is Luke 11:38: “But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash (*ebaptisthe*) before the meal, was surprised.” However, “to dip” is a better rendering according to Carson because “Dipping is the thing expressed; washing is the consequence, known by inference. It is dipping, whether it relates to the hands or the whole body.”<sup>16</sup> To those who argue against Carson’s understanding of *bapto* and *baptizo*, he makes an appeal to their use in the history of language. Over one hundred pages are given to “a copious list of examples,” from classical Greek and biblical literature. Carson recognizes that this may appear both

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 67.

“tedious” and “uninteresting” to many, but believes that this is the best method to settle the issue.<sup>17</sup>

In a chapter on defining Greek words, Carson answers objections to earlier remarks he had made on the subject of baptism (presumably the treatise that he refers to is included in *Baptism*). In response to his critics, Carson simplifies any objections down to one question: “What is the meaning of the word? When it is ascertained, the question is settled.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore when Carson refers to meaning, he speaks of the historical meaning as it was understood by the biblical writers, “Whatever is the meaning of the word at the time of its first application to the ordinance, must be essential to the ordinance; for the ordinance is expressed by the word.”<sup>19</sup> The ordinance may change in practice over time and the meaning of the word may change also, “but such change has no effect on the meaning of the word as used in Scripture for this ordinance.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore the original meaning of “to dip” remains as the definition to be debated, not translations based upon subsequent use.

Carson addresses the issue of baptism in the writings of the church fathers, albeit only briefly and without much detail. Patristics is a subject that he shows relative comfort in discussing. For instance, he answers the challenge that Cyprian of Carthage allowed perfusion (pouring) in his *Letter 69* regarding the baptism of the Novatian heretics. While Cyprian allows for pouring, argues Carson, it is only as a substitute for baptism if an alternate is necessary. In terms of how Cyprian understands *baptizo* Carson says, “This Father uses the word in its proper sense of immersion, in reference to the ordinance.”<sup>21</sup> Tertullian uses the Latin *tingo*, which can mean “to dip” or “to dye,” for baptism—this phrase also corresponds with Tertullian’s use of *mergito*, which means “to dip,” “to plunge,” or “to immerse.” Likewise, Jerome translates “to baptize” in the Great Commission into the Latin *intingo* which is “to dip into.” For Carson this “shows that in his time the Greek word was understood to signify *immersion*.”<sup>22</sup> Alongside these fathers, Carson also examines the writings of Justin Martyr, Origen, Clement of Alexandria,

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<sup>17</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 242.

<sup>19</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 243.

<sup>20</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 245.

<sup>21</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 489.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 492, emphasis his.

Chrysostom and Gregory of Thaumaturgus. Unfortunately, Carson does not deal with texts in some of these fathers that seem to support infant baptism. For instance, Jerome could say, in reference to the subjects of baptism, “The truth is that, as baptism ensures the salvation of the child, this in turn brings advantage to the parents.”<sup>23</sup> As well, Chrysostom links baptism with circumcision and Cyprian with purification.<sup>24</sup> It would have done Carson’s argument well to synthesize these apparently opposing views into a consistent historical theology of baptism.

In another chapter Carson undertakes a critique of the eight classifications of Ewing’s *Greek Lexicon* under the entry for *bapto*, a source for Carson’s paedobaptist opponents.<sup>25</sup> In each of Ewing’s classifications the idea of “to dip” is conspicuously absent or underappreciated. Carson goes to great pains to explain when and why it is appropriate to understand “to dip” as a primary definition. Some of Ewing’s classifications are superfluous in Carson’s mind, while others do not even warrant mentioning. Carson also adds a number of classifications that Ewing left out of his lexicon, including baptism of the Spirit, baptism as a metaphor for Jesus’ suffering and the distinction between purification and washing.<sup>26</sup>

In a short chapter entitled “Sprinkling? Pouring? Immersing?” Carson counters arguments that sprinkling or pouring were the proper modes of baptism. One critic, basing his argument on Romans 6:4, claimed that baptism is a likeness to Christ’s death, but not necessarily his burial. In this he sought to escape the correspondence between burial into a grave and immersion into water. Carson replies: “But the likeness to Christ’s burial is a likeness to his death; it is a likeness to him in the state of death. Besides, the phrase *buried with him in baptism*, shows that the likeness to death respects burial.”<sup>27</sup>

## The Subjects of Baptism

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<sup>23</sup> Jerome, “Letter 107” in S. L. Greenslade ed., *Early Latin Theology: Selections from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Jerome* Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 338.

<sup>24</sup> Chrysostom, “Instructions to Catechumens” in *The Works of St. Chrysostom* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 9 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 161; Cyprian, “Letter 69” in S. L. Greenslade ed., *Early Latin Theology: Selections from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Jerome* Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 152.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 266-276.

<sup>26</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 275.

<sup>27</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 424.

While the dominant theme of *Baptism* is mode, Carson also spends some time arguing that the subjects of baptism are believers—indeed, the entire third chapter is dedicated to the question and it is also found interspersed in other chapters. Carson grounds his argument for what is now called credobaptism in the text of Scripture, namely the Great Commission found in both Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16.<sup>28</sup> “It is well known,” Carson says, “that the word corresponding to teach, in the first instance in which it occurs in this passage [Matthew 28:19], signifies *disciple*, or *make scholars*. To disciple all nations, is to bring them by faith into the school of Christ, in which they are to learn his will.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the persons who are to be baptized, according to this text, are “scholars of Christ” and to be a scholar of Christ, one must have first “believed in him for salvation.”<sup>30</sup> Carson compares the words of the Great Commission in Matthew and Mark paralleling Matthew’s use of the word “disciple” with Mark’s “believer.” He concludes from this that, “According to this commission, then, none are warranted to be baptized but disciples or believers.”<sup>31</sup> Not only does this commission affirm the baptism of believers, but it excludes the baptism of infants: “Had there been even a divinely appointed baptism for them in infancy, it cannot interfere with this baptism, nor excuse from obedience to the command that enjoins believers to be baptized.”<sup>32</sup> Infants also should not be baptized because they cannot be saved by the gospel. Since salvation only comes by placing faith in the gospel message, which requires hearing, an infant cannot be saved by the gospel. Though the gospel is good news, says Carson, “to infants it is not news at all.”<sup>33</sup> The logic of the Great Commission is that salvation by faith is the prerequisite of baptism: “None can be saved by the Gospel, but such as believe the Gospel; none can be baptized with the baptism of the Gospel, but such as believe the Gospel.”<sup>34</sup> Thus saving faith necessarily precedes baptism.

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<sup>28</sup> Carson adheres to the longer ending of Mark, but see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2002), 102-106. While arguments based on the ending of Mark are not valid when considering baptism in Scripture, they are helpful, however, when determining early church views on the subject.

<sup>29</sup> Carson, *Baptism* 169, emphasis his.

<sup>30</sup> Carson, *Baptism* 169.

<sup>31</sup> Carson, *Baptism* 169.

<sup>32</sup> Carson, *Baptism* 170.

<sup>33</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 173.

<sup>34</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 173.

In a moment of personal reflection, Carson recalls his days as a Presbyterian: “Many infants have I sprinkled; but if I know my own heart, I would not now pour water into a child’s face in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, for the globe on which I stand.”<sup>35</sup> In terms of his practice as a Baptist Carson candidly admits, “If one instance of infant baptism is proved, I will baptize infants; but a million of such examples would not set aside believer baptism.”<sup>36</sup>

Since paedobaptists commonly appeal to the continuity of circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant and baptism in the new covenant, Carson therefore spends a number of pages dealing with this issue. He distinguishes between the two covenants, rather than conflating them as paedobaptists do. “Infants are not saved by the new covenant,” Carson says, “and therefore they cannot be connected with it, in any view that represents them as interested in it.”<sup>37</sup> This is so because “the new covenant knows nothing of any salvation but through faith.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, in the Old Testament faith was required for salvation and even Abraham’s own children were not saved by his covenant. Abraham “was the head of believers only. By that covenant he was constituted the father of believers in all ages, but of none else.”<sup>39</sup> Circumcision was for Carson not carried over into new covenant baptism. Though Colossians 2:11-12 is often cited as proof of this, Carson instead argues that believers are “circumcised with the circumcision of Christ, in or by the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. What is said of baptism is something additional.”<sup>40</sup> Instead of a link between circumcision and baptism, Carson argues that circumcision of the flesh in the old covenant is carried over into the new covenant by circumcision “made without hands”—the circumcision of the heart.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

While this has not been a full treatment of Carson’s overall theology of baptism, it does demonstrate the salient points of his thought. In relation to mode, Carson the linguist

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<sup>35</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 174.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 215.

<sup>38</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 216.

<sup>39</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 228.

<sup>41</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 229.

argued that *bapto* and its cognates, based upon the latest lexical and philological research, primarily signified “to dip” or “to immerse.” He pillaged both classical and Christian literature to demonstrate that this indeed was the use of the term in and around biblical times. When discussing baptism’s subjects, Carson argued exegetically and theologically that only believers are to be baptized. Though much time has elapsed since Carson made his case for baptism, many of his arguments still stand and can be used in current debates. Of course, Carson has to be read critically as some of his scholarship is outdated—seen in the case of his use of the ending of Mark—and he is not as thorough in all aspects of his scholarship—as with the use of the fathers. Nonetheless, Carson’s contribution to Baptist theology, in this and other areas, is important and he should be treated seriously as a major figure in Baptist history. As Carson said of himself, “I must defend truth at every expense,”<sup>42</sup> may that expense not be losing Carson from our Baptist heritage.

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<sup>42</sup> Carson, *Baptism*, 239.