

# **Baptism in the Reformed Tradition,**

## **by John Riggs**

reviewed by [Jeffrey Gros](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

Recognition of common baptism has been fundamental to the ecumenical renewal and liturgical reform movement. The common texts of the various churches of the Western tradition reflect a common scholarly enterprise of Catholic and Reformation churches. This volume is an important contribution to liturgical theology, focusing particularly on developments in the Presbyterian tradition, but with important implications for the whole liturgical movement.

John Riggs's thesis is that the 1993 Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, and the Lutheran Book of Worship which preceded it, have been so influenced by the liturgical renewal movement of the past two centuries, especially the Roman Catholics' Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, that certain central emphases of the Reformation have been lost. Riggs does not seek to reverse these liturgical reforms. He only wants to correct them to take account of Reformed theology of church and sacraments.

Riggs begins with an overview of the liturgical movement, the development of the RCIA, its ecclesiological implications and a critique of the Lutheran Book of Worship in the light of Luther's theology. He discusses the first-generation reformers, Zwingli, Luther and Bucer; the second generation, Calvin and Bullinger; and devotes a full chapter to Calvin's theology of baptism. The subsequent history of Reformed baptismal theology and the Book of Common Worship are the subjects of the rest of the book. Riggs indicates where Reformed elements have been suppressed in the Book of Common Worship and makes suggestions for revisions that would reflect more clearly the ecclesiology and sacramental understanding of that tradition.

He outlines how the liturgical movement has helped the Catholic Church move from a baptismal theology narrowly focused on cleansing from original sin to one that emphasizes ecclesial initiation and the paschal motif of identification with Christ's death and resurrection. Central to the Reformed tradition is an emphasis on the

sovereignty of God, with implications for understanding the relationship between the invisible and visible church, and leading to reservations about sacramental mediation; and an emphasis on covenant theologies, with implications for the doctrine of election and predestination and for church membership.

For Riggs the liturgical movement implies a theology of the church as a continuation of the incarnation. Members are "engrafted into the paschal mystery and . . . [become] once again Christ's mission in the world." The Reformed tradition, on the other hand, is based on a covenant election theology which the author sees as "not just different from the theology operative in the liturgical renewal movement; it would seem more adequate."

This study demonstrates the important dialectic between liturgical renewal and theological reflection on the rites produced in that renewal. It raises several questions for liturgical theology: How does the common liturgical development proceed ecumenically without losing any of the gifts of the liturgical and theological traditions the churches bring to their common understanding of sacramental worship? What are the criteria for liturgical reform: the scripture and the faith of the church through the ages, or modern scholarship on scripture and tradition interpreted through the 16th-century confessions (or the Council of Trent)? And how can reform of the church best proceed ecumenically? Do we not need consensus theological texts to accompany converging liturgical texts?

This is an important volume for anyone interested in an overview of Reformed sacramental theology and baptism, as well as for liturgical and sacramental scholars attentive to the great tradition we share and dedicated to its renewal.