

## **Initiating a Conversation about Allowing Baptismal Flexibility** **Reggie Kidd**

Ours is a church committed to what C.S. Lewis (following Richard Baxter) liked to call “Mere Christianity.” Though we appreciate the distinctives of denominational commitments, and think Christ’s universal church is the richer for the ways the common light of the gospel is refracted, we desire to be an expression of the body of Christ where there is a clear distinction between core and peripheral beliefs. We think we reflect the believing church for what in the providence of God it really is — brothers and sisters called to find a common identity in Christ himself, not in preferences or principles. That being the case, we need, I contend, to take account of areas in which believers have drawn different conclusions on nonessentials.

Some of us in the fellowship and in leadership are persuaded that baptism is: 1) an ordinance; 2) to be performed only on those who have personally expressed faith in Christ; and 3) properly administered by immersion. This is the theology and practice we currently follow.

Others of us are persuaded that baptism is: 1) a sacrament as well as an ordinance; 2) to be performed on infants of believers as well as on believers themselves; and 3) properly administered by sprinkling or pouring.

Thankfully, our church’s current position is not exclusionary in that we do not require people who have been baptized as children or in churches that differ from us theologically to be rebaptized. However, we are exclusionary in that we cannot honor the theological scruples of those who are persuaded that their infants should bear the sign of inclusion in the family of God &/or that sprinkling or pouring is a more proper mode. Is it possible to find a way to allow both sets of persuasions to come to expression in our fellowship? I believe this church’s particular contribution to the Kingdom of God would be enhanced if we could.

**Proposed:** That alongside our normal provision of baptism by immersion for adult believers only and the dedication of believers’ infants, we also make available the baptism of believers’ infants, and that we also allow baptism by sprinkling or pouring.

Because my proposal calls for the recognition of a position outside our “tradition,” allow me to explain its strengths, and therefore why some of us scruple over it.

**Sacrament.** A theology of ordinance operates under the basic premise that in baptism (and the Lord’s supper) we are the primary actors. Out of obedience to the Lord’s command we present ourselves for baptism, receiving the symbol of our belonging to him and to his body. At the Lord’s supper we remember his death and resurrection, and look forward to his coming.

By contrast, a theology of sacrament assumes that God is also doing something, in fact that *he* is the primary actor. Baptism does outwardly signify our inner relationship with him. But in classical theology it is also — and more importantly — thought of as a means by which God seals his relationship with us. Narrative accounts of baptism speak of the human actors (e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized by Philip), but theological statements refer to God washing or cleansing his people with water, or Jesus doing the same to his bride (Ezk 36:25; Tit 3:5; Eph 5:26). In the Lord’s supper we not only remember him, he fellowships with us; and in reality the latter is the basis for the former.

**Believers’ infants as well as believers themselves.** Those who think believers should baptize their infants do so for the following reasons:

1. In Col 2:12, Paul offers the phrase “having been buried with Christ in baptism” as an explanation of what it is to have undergone “the circumcision of Christ.” It is monumental that Paul tells Gentile believers they have experienced circumcision. It means that this old covenant bond has fallen away in form only, but not in substance. As with other aspects of the old administration, so here: with the coming of Christ shadow has yielded to reality (Col

2:17; Heb 8:5; 10:1). Circumcision's substance has been realized in Christ, and that in baptism.

The spiritual significance of old covenant circumcision is often misperceived by Christians. Under the old covenant, circumcision marked off Hebrew children as special recipients of God's mercy, for they had been born into the covenant community. But it was no substitute for the inward reality being pictured. Indeed, Moses and Jeremiah commend to their countrymen a "circumcision in heart" without which circumcision of the flesh does them no good (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). From this fact I believe it is fair to infer that physical circumcision was intended to be a means by which Hebrew parents expressed thanks for the gift bestowed upon them in their children, and called out to God for his work of grace in those children. Nor did old covenant circumcision presume upon God's election of and saving grace in a particular child — the circle marking out "actual Israel" was always narrower than that marking out "physical Israel" (Rom 9:6).

How different are things under the new covenant? The promises are still "to you and to your children" (Acts 2:39). Strikingly, when even Gentile household heads come to faith in Christ, care is taken to include their entire households in the preaching and baptizing (Acts 10:2; 11:14 [Cornelius]; 16:15 [Lydia]; 16:31-34 [the Philippian jailer]; 18:8 [Crispus]). It is probable that a spouse or a slave or a child old enough to speak for himself or herself who would not believe the gospel would be excluded from baptism. But to my mind that is not likely in the case of infants.

2. The NT simply does not say clearly one way or the other whether the connection between circumcision and baptism means infants of believers should be baptized. To many, it seems self-evident that as a sign of new birth baptism should be withheld until one becomes a true child of Abraham, i.e., comes to saving faith in Jesus. However, several features of the NT strike others of us as arresting:

a. Paul's silence about whether believers' infants should or should not be baptized is subject to interpretation. His likening of NT baptism to OT circumcision has always seemed to me to make the question one of why he would not make explicit the exclusion of infants had he intended it. It is an arguable point, because it is a matter of interpreting his silence, and I think it is understandable that divergent practices arose after it was no longer obvious what the accepted practice was in the first century church. But the point is that it is arguable.

b. To Paul, the faith of one or more parent has a sanctifying effect on the whole family — a believer's children are in fact called "holy" (1Co 7:14). Culturally, that meant that believers in mixed marriages did not have to worry about being polluted by sexual contact with their pagan spouses. Rather, the effect ran in the opposite direction (see also 1Pt 3:1). No one I know would assert that Paul teaches that a nonbelieving spouse should be baptized contrary to his or her convictions, nor that children who can speak for themselves should be baptized against their expressed desires either. But the baptism of infants would appear to be an appropriate recognition of the special status these children have: they are *in* the church rather than *outside* it — *within*, so to speak, the force field of God's special grace until they exclude themselves from the covenant and its community.

c. This would seem to coalesce with Jesus' concern for the inclusion of children in the Kingdom of God. An especially poignant passage is Luke 18:15. This is one of the accounts of Jesus' saying about children (*paideia*) not being hindered from coming to him, since of such is the Kingdom of God. In this case, what occasions Jesus' remark is the disciples' rebuking people who were bringing their infants (*brephe*) to be touched by him. Many of us believe that it is a more accurate reflection of the relationship of children and the Kingdom to include believers' children in the covenant

community and to express that through baptizing them.

### **Sprinkling or pouring alongside immersion**

In the historic, orthodox church there have arisen two competing modes of baptism. One takes its cue from the etymology of the word *baptize* (*bapto* = “dip”) and from the image of death, burial, and resurrection associated with baptism in Romans 6 and Colossians 2. It is easy to see how these data have led many Christians to embrace immersion as the proper way of signifying a believer’s identification with Christ.

A tradition of sprinkling or pouring has also arisen, however, operating from several assumptions:

1. In Rom 6 & Col 2, Paul is not discussing the mode of baptism, but its substance: we are dead to sin and alive to God because we are united with Christ.
2. More instructive for the mode of baptism are the lines of connection between a washing from above for purification from sin and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which brings the full benefits of Christ’s work on the cross into our being. In a word, water baptism is an external sign and seal of the inward reality of baptism in the Holy Spirit. Without systematizing the data, let me cite some of the relevant passages:
  - a. the writer to the Hebrews sums up different old covenant purificatory sprinklings (9:13,19,21) as “various washings” (9:10 — despite the English versions, the Greek is *baptismos*; see also 6:2; it happens to be the very term Paul uses in Col 2:12);
  - b. through Ezekiel, God promised both to sprinkle his people with clean water to purify them from their sin and also to put his Spirit within his people, giving them new hearts (36:25-27);
  - c. the new covenant reality being prefigured in all this is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the constitutive act by which God washes, regenerates, and renews us (Tit 3:5; 1Co 6:11; Eph 5:26); puts us in relationship with Christ (Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27); and places us into the body of Christ (1Co 12:13);
  - d. the NT pictures the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a pouring out upon us (Tit 3:5) or a pouring out within our hearts (Rom 5:5), rather than an immersing or dipping of us into the Holy Spirit.

Both forms of baptism highlight precious aspects of what Paul calls our “one baptism” (Eph 4:5). But there simply is not unanimity in the believing church over which mode is biblically more accurate. Much of what drives me to ask you to consider legitimating these different expressions of baptismal theology and practice is a respect for the contours of revelation. God has made some things so clear in his Word that those who are taught by his Spirit cannot help but agree; but he appears to have left some things open to the kind of interpretation in which the Spirit can teach us to forbear with one another and to value perspectives that can complement our own.