

Still seeking an ecumenical spirit on baptism

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The [controversy over Rodney Kennedy's decision to baptize a baby](#) has been fascinating. The prominent American Baptist pastor [told RNS](#) that he is “no longer interested whether confession of faith comes before or after baptism,” given the larger issues facing the church.

Many other Baptists, especially Southern Baptists, very much disagree. “The Christian community needs to have a conversation about baptism,” said Kennedy.

We've had one, actually. In 1982, the WCC's Faith and Order Commission put out [Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry](#), the culmination of decades of work. Its claims were by no means intended to be imposed within the various churches from the top down, not even in those traditions where such a thing would be plausible. But its baptism section in particular is a powerful expression of a broadly shared Christian heritage and witness.

A [good ecumenist like Kennedy](#) is no doubt well versed in the BEM document—and he's right that the conversation needs to continue. In 2011, Faith and Order produced [a follow-up study text](#) exploring ongoing barriers to the mutual recognition of baptism practices. BEM's work is far from done.

The American Baptists were part of the WCC in 1982 and are now. The Southern Baptists weren't and aren't, but [they did participate in the process that produced BEM](#)—a document that, to be clear, identifies believer's baptism as the primary biblical norm. But BEM is also quite eloquent on what's shared between those who baptize only believers and those who also baptize infants—and on how we might help each other grow.

The RNS story contrasts the two traditions breezily and unhelpfully, connecting infant baptism with original sin and believer's baptism with the baptism of Jesus. In fact, as BEM's baptism section begins, “Christian baptism”—in whatever form—“is rooted in the ministry of Jesus.”

Later comes this summation: “Baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift.” Before I encountered this in seminary, my shorthand was that infant baptism emphasizes community while believer’s baptism emphasizes individual faith. Maybe so, but the crux is what BEM identifies here: the gift of grace on the one hand and the human response to it on the other. If God’s the one acting, why wait? If the act of confessing and believing is the main thing, well, maybe wait till a person can at least form a coherent thought. Here’s the key BEM paragraph identifying what’s needed on either side:

[Believer baptists] may seek to express more visibly the fact that children are placed under the protection of God’s grace. [Those who practice infant baptism] must guard themselves against the practice of apparently indiscriminate baptism and take more seriously their responsibility for the nurture of baptized children to mature commitment to Christ.

It’s the classic theological tension between divine vs. human agency. But not *vs.*, not really, because it’s a case for mutual reform, not a statement of mutually exclusive options. “Both forms of baptism,” says a BEM commentary section, “embody God’s own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community.” Neither form gives a strong sense of all this in every instance, but both can and should. So the churches should recognize each other’s baptisms—and allow themselves to be mutually reformed.

Needless to say, that’s not where most Southern Baptists are at. Jason Allen, an SBC seminary president, told RNS that if you baptize someone too soon, “it’s an injustice to that person. They’ll be inclined to think they have a right standing before God.”

Now, Allen’s speaking here as a Baptist, commenting on another Baptist’s action. But in [a time of much denominational “switching,”](#) the ecumenical implications are unavoidable. “Baptism is an unrepeatable act,” insists BEM. “Any practice which might be interpreted as ‘re- baptism’ must be avoided.” Yet Southern Baptists and others do this routinely. [As Robert Johnson points out](#), this can have the effect of reducing baptism to a local membership rite, distant from the biblical witness and the church catholic.

It can also imply that the traditions’ different emphases are in fact competing claims, that you have to do it the right way because doing it the wrong way didn’t count. In the case of Baptists etc. re-baptizing Catholics etc.—the far more common

scenario, for [logistical reasons](#)—I'd maintain that it implies as well that God's grace isn't powerful enough to work through worship-done-wrong. At a minimum, it certainly reflects a limited ecumenical spirit.

I come from Baptist stock, and I get that the believer's baptism thing is central and formative. But the tone of the reaction to Kennedy reveals the ready slippage in some circles from "this is how Baptists do it" particularity to "this is how *real* Christians do it" sectarianism. I have little patience for the suggestion that baptizing a young child is "an injustice to that person." We do it with water; we do it in the name of the triune God. And we do it trusting that God's grace is the operative thing.

If that amounts to a live threat to a Baptist sense of orthodoxy, ecumenism has a long way to go.