



**THEOLOGIES OF BAPTISM
AND THE FORMATION OF
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

JOHN C. NUGENT & DEBRA DEAN MURPHY

PAMPHLET #22

Theologies of Baptism and the Formation of Children and Youth



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

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By

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Preface by

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Preface

Jenny Williams and Phil Kenneson

ONE OF the many joys of serving on the planning team for The Ekklesia Project annual summer gathering is seeing months of conversation among trusted friends finally take concrete shape in workshops, worship, table conversations, and plenary presentations. As with any large undertaking, rarely does everything go as planned. There are always a few disappointments—things that don't go quite as well as you had hoped they would—but these are always balanced by plenty of surprising things that surpass expectations in any number of ways.

When the planning team invited John Nugent and Debra Dean Murphy to offer a joint plenary session on the subject of baptism as part of our larger theme of forming youth in our congregations, we knew we had invited two thoughtful scholars and teachers who care deeply about the church, and who both have pastoral sensibilities. We also knew that both were keen to model an ecumenical spirit as they worked through this subject together, well aware as they were that congregations rarely reflect upon their baptismal practices or the theologies that undergird them. Indeed, many of us would be pleased if members of our own congregations and parishes were conversant with the theology of baptism that underwrites our own practice, while few of us would expect these same members to have anything more than a passing acquaintance

with some of the differences in baptismal practices and theologies within the wider body of Christ.

So what pleasantly surprised the planning team was not how skillfully our two presenters complemented each other, nor the number of vital matters they raised in a relatively short time, but how utterly engaged those who gathered to be part of this conversation were. Many people commented afterwards how much they appreciated both the substantive content of the session and its deeply respectful spirit. Others noted how in their experience different baptismal theologies and practices had always been a source of division among Christians, and rarely, if ever, discussed in appreciative terms, cognizant of the beautiful gifts and potential pitfalls of each. This generous outpouring of appreciation for John and Debra's work led us to believe this plenary might be a helpful pamphlet to place into the hands of church people, and so our two presenters graciously revised their presentations to make this possible.

Fred Edie, Associate Professor of the Practice of Christian Education at Duke Divinity School, who was himself an active participant at the 2015 summer gathering, perhaps said it best in reflecting on the conversation spawned by this fine plenary: "I was moved to conclude that wherever one lands on the spectrum of baptismal beliefs and practices, God's gracious intervention in human life is a mystery that leads to joy and wonder."

Our hope and prayer is that your reading and reflection on this pamphlet will be a welcome doorway into such joy and wonder.

Jenny Williams

Phil Kenneson

Co-Chairs of the 2015 EP Gathering Planning Team

Part One:
Believer's Baptism and the Formation
of Youth

John C. Nugent

Delta Community Christian Church

Baptism and Unity

DEBRA AND I were eager to participate in a conversation about baptism because we both saw the potential for greater unity in an area that has for centuries been rife with conflict. So while the focus of our addresses was baptism, this pamphlet is equally about ecumenism. It is about whether those who are committed to radical discipleship in Christian community can be unified despite real differences in core practices.

Though Debra and I represent different baptismal traditions, we have *not* framed this discussion as “point versus counterpoint.” This isn’t a debate. Neither of us is secretly hoping to convince anyone to switch baptismal traditions. What we want is to help those who practice each tradition truly understand the other.

I should probably clarify why we have framed this discussion in terms of only *two* baptismal traditions, those that begin baptizing people in infancy—sometimes called pedobaptists—and

those that baptize people only after they profess faith—sometimes called credobaptists, or those who practice “believer’s baptism.” By clustering them into two groups we do not mean to ignore the variety within each one. By reducing the various strands of baptismal practice into just two clusters, we do not mean to ignore the considerable variety within each. Rather we mean simply to acknowledge that there is a rift between these two clusters, that the differences between them impact how they approach forming youth, and that those same differences ideally position us to learn from one another.

You may be thinking this is quite elementary. Perhaps you’ve taken upper level classes on this subject, or even taught them. That’s great, and we hope your expertise will enrich the conversations we hope to have started. But if you’ve been paying attention at all to wider conversations about baptism, then you know that the church’s language still betrays certain prejudices. You’ve heard people say things like: “That’s not baptism, that’s just someone getting wet. They don’t even know what’s happening to them. Half the people requesting it have no intention of being deeply involved in church life or walking in the way of Jesus when it might cost them dearly.”

Or, perhaps you’ve heard remarks like: “That’s not baptism, that’s just modern western individualism dictating theology. They’re woefully ignorant of the church’s rich tradition, and they’re enamored with the naïve notion that every individual has the right or freedom to choose to become their own person.”

These statements are troubling because they’re partly true. It would be easy to produce evidence from church history and contemporary practice that Christians from both strands of baptismal tradition have understood and continue to understand their own or the other tradition in precisely these ways. But let’s set that reality to the side for a moment.

Instead, let’s turn to one another and listen carefully to what is and has been happening among people with Ekklesia Project

(EP) sensibilities—people who are not swept up in American individualism, people who are deeply committed to costly discipleship and genuine involvement in church life. Of those who attended the 2015 EP conference, 73 were from traditions that practice infant baptism and 72 from those that practice believer's baptism. So the ratio of attendees from these two traditions was nearly 1:1. I find it ironic that only a month before the conference, the list of registered attendees indicated a ratio more like 2:1. Apparently, we credobaptists take our time with more than just baptism.

Be that as it may, we are uniquely positioned as a loose federation of likeminded people from a rich variety of traditions to learn from one another how those with a strong view of the church and a radical commitment to Jesus have been striving to practice baptism faithfully. Let's be open to the possibility that we might learn to say to one another, "Wow, that's not the starting point of our baptismal tradition, but if it were, we would want to do it the way that you all are trying to do it."

Let's affirm and encourage what is good and godly in the other. Let's spark one another's imaginations, that we may see potential for improvement within our own tradition because we have listened sympathetically to others.

Five Dimensions of Baptism

I've been asked to represent believer's baptism. Articulating a believers church theology of baptism is challenging, not least of all because this tradition has a long history of being suspicious of theology. I would love to acquaint you with that fascinating history, but time does not allow. It is enough to say that most streams of this tradition share a common commitment to practicing baptism according to their best understanding of the New Testament's witness and example.

You can write off this approach as naïve primitivism, but it need not be. There is such a thing as a thoughtful, historically-

aware, and theologically-astute commitment to restorationism. If you've not encountered that yet, it may be time to expand your list of "go to" publishing houses. Nevertheless, when believers church thinkers examine the New Testament, several dimensions of baptism come to the forefront. Here I focus on five. These dimensions are not unique to the believers church perspective. They are quite similar to what one finds in the World Council of Church's *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document.

My goal is to present the basic meaning of each dimension when viewed with Ekklesia Project sensibilities from a credobaptist or believers church perspective. I do so while recognizing that these same dimensions can be viewed with the same sensibilities from a pedobaptist perspective. In some cases, our interpretation and application will be nearly identical. In others, it will be slightly or perhaps significantly different. I don't focus on what is unique to the credobaptist perspective, but on how this perspective understands various dimensions of baptism and how that understanding impacts our approach to forming youth in our congregations.

1. *Missional: Baptized to seek first God's kingdom and receive the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:13–15)*

I begin with the missional dimension of baptism. Matthew 3 tells the story of Jesus's baptism. This passage is an important one for credobaptists. Unfortunately, it has often been reduced to a proof-text for the necessity of baptism. The logic goes: Jesus didn't really need to be baptized since he was without sin, but he did so anyway so we could be certain that we must do it, too.

We can do better than this. We can take at face value Jesus's claim that he needed to be baptized, and we can observe that his life changed dramatically after his baptism. Jesus didn't need to turn from a life of sin, but he did require something to indicate his turning away from a life in which his membership in his family of birth and his way of contributing to the local economy were

the things that most fully determined who he was. The Gospels make clear that after his baptism, Jesus ordered his life around proclaiming God's kingdom and forming a community devoted to its coming. Both his family and his hometown felt betrayed by his new priorities. The son of man has no hometown—no place to lay his head—and his new family are those who do the will of the Father. A life like this—one that prioritizes God's kingdom in all things—is not lived by human strength alone. So God gave his Spirit to Jesus at his baptism.

It was therefore necessary for Jesus to be baptized for many of the same reasons it is necessary for us to be baptized. So, from a believers church perspective, we prefer to baptize those who are committed to seeking first God's kingdom by the power of God's Spirit. It marks a change from a posture of learning about and preparing for God's kingdom to a posture of centering one's whole life on God's kingdom.

This missional dimension of baptism helps credobaptists think about how to prepare our youth for baptism. We prepare them not only with right knowledge about God and right conviction about our sinfulness and need for a savior; we also prepare them for lifelong mission. God grants us his Spirit both to make us holy *and* to empower us to bear witness to his kingdom. Though each of us continues to grow in our understanding of God's Spirit, God's mission, and our missional vocation, we prefer not to baptize people until they, like Jesus, commit to prioritizing God's kingdom above all else in their life.

This usually leads us into conversations about other commitments that compete for our allegiance. Our biological families often expect us to prioritize them, as Jesus's family did when they tried to drag him away from his teaching. So we talk about the specific place of families in God's kingdom. Our employers expect us to put our jobs first or, perhaps, second only to our families. So we talk about what it means to view our occupations in light of our primary vocation to seek first God's kingdom in Christian com-

munity. Our desire for companionship tempts us to enter dating and even marital relationships with unbelievers. So we talk about Scripture's clear teaching that believers may only marry fellow believers.

As we prepare our youth for baptism we stress the centrality of mission to the Christian way of life and the need to decouple ourselves from other fundamental loyalties. For Jesus, this did not mean total separation, nor should it for us. But after his baptism, Jesus's relationship with his family, circle of friends, and wider community was never quite the same.

2. *Salvific: Baptized to identify with Christ and his victory over sin and death (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:9-15; 1 Pet 3:21)*

Next we consider the salvific dimension of baptism. There has been considerable debate among credobaptists as to the precise relationship between baptism and sin. Some have reduced baptism to an outward symbol of an inward reality. Others affirm that in baptism God washes away sin. If it is symbolic in some way, they affirm, it must be an effectual symbol—God is truly doing something through our baptism. Believers churches that take radical discipleship seriously typically affirm “repenter's baptism” as much as believer's baptism. It is important to us not only that Jesus is the messiah through whom God has reconciled all things to himself and through whom God washes away our sins in baptism, but also that we repent of the sin that has ruled over our lives.

For credobaptists, being buried and raised with Christ is not simply about dying to sin and rising to a new life that is free from sin. It means identifying with all that the death of Christ means. According to Romans 6, it means death no longer has dominion over us. We are truly alive to God. Dying with Christ in baptism, we renounce death's claim on our lives. Fear of death must no longer determine our decisions. Like Christ, we can live for God's

kingdom despite threats to our lives and our livelihood. We can make choices that seem out of place in a culture of fear and death. We can love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We can trust God, both with our lives *and* the lives of our loved ones.

Colossians 2 goes further. The death of Christ into which we have been baptized disarmed the rulers and authorities, made a public example of them, and triumphed over them. To rise with Christ in baptism therefore means participating in his victory over all powers and principalities. We neither serve nor fear the sword of the state or any other power.

This baptismal profession means a lot for how we form youth in our congregations. It means first of all that the church family must live such lives before our children that they can see that we are no longer captivated by sin, death, and various world powers. It means that the instruction we offer youth does not shy away from the political implications of the gospel. It means that the stories of Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael should be taught not only in light of their anti-idolatry sentiments, but also in light of the state's disordered desire to rule over our lives. Preparation for baptism should not be the first time our youth encounter such themes. Having counted the costs, baptism should be their public pledge to walk in love and not fear.

3. *Moral: Baptized into a new way of life (Acts 2:38; Rom 6:3-4)*

This leads to a third dimension of baptism, the moral dimension. This dimension focuses less on the old life we are leaving behind and more on the new life that God has given us. This newness is not a “redo.” It is not reclaiming the gift of life we received at birth and trying to do better this time around. It is embracing God's gift of *new* life—embracing the kingdom that Jesus brought in his life, death, and resurrection. It is to accept that a new day has dawned in world history—the day that Israel's prophets foretold, kings drooled over, and angels jealously look upon.

It is to recognize that the present form of this world is passing away, that everything has become new, that new creation is everything, that all things in heaven and earth have been reconciled to God through Christ, and that God's people are the first fruits of the new creation. It is to be born from above, born anew by the word of God, born again into a living hope. In this new life our inner nature is renewed daily. We have been washed, regenerated, and renewed according to the image of God.

The newness of life we receive in baptism also means receiving God's promised Spirit, being enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, experiencing God's goodness, tasting the powers of the coming age, and receiving an unshakeable kingdom. According to the Apostle Paul, all things are ours because God has given them to us (1 Cor 3:21–22).

These are lofty statements, but they permeate the New Testament. When we look around at this broken world, things certainly don't appear to be this way. But through faith we see that they are. Through our baptismal goggles, we no longer view anyone or anything from a human point of view. The Christian walk is not a moral code to keep; it is a gift we receive and a privilege we enjoy. It's a serious walk because a lot is riding on it. That we walk in newness of life, loving one another as God has loved us, is essential to our neighbors' salvation. They will know we are Christians by our love for one another. They will know that God sent Jesus when we live together in unity the new life we've been given.

The gift of new life that God offers us deeply impacts how we form youth in our congregations. We want more than anything for them to see God's offer as the gift that it is. We don't want it to seem like an obligation. We don't want to coerce them into godliness. We don't want to frame it as "an offer they can't refuse." No baptismal tradition wants that. But for those who withhold baptism until the age of disciple-ability, it is especially tempting to *sell* conversion, to push people along before it's too late, to instill fear as to what might happen if they wait too long.

So we do our best to frame the formation of youth as exposure to God's generous offer. We try not to expect Christlikeness from those who lack key resources of faith, including new birth, regeneration, and the Holy Spirit. In word, deed, and our life together, we want to paint for them the clearest picture possible of what God's kingdom is like. We want our love and unity to draw them to God's love—the way that it drew us and continues to draw others.

This is one of the greatest challenges facing the believer's baptism tradition. We want our youth to behold the kingdom as a precious pearl and a priceless treasure despite the fact that it is, in a real sense, also a family heirloom—and for that reason, a gift they might be tempted to take for granted. We are not so much looking for a dramatic conversion experience as wanting them to see, grasp, and rejoice in the magnitude of God's gracious gift. We want them to embrace new life with joy and not dilute the pool of Christian witness, which is watered down enough as it is.

It is therefore tempting for us to overcompensate—to remain hands off as much as possible while still pointing our youth in the right direction. But there are two passages that warn us from taking this too far. One is 1 Corinthians 7:14, where the Apostle Paul encourages believers to remain married to unbelievers, saying, “the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” According to this passage, something about being raised by a Christian parent sets children apart. Their closeness to God's family privileges them somehow in God's sight. And we must be careful not to withhold a privilege that God is extending.

This interpretation is supported by Titus 1:6. One attribute of a potential elder is that their children are believers. It was expected. This could be interpreted in many ways. Was it expected because the parents expect it of their children and raise them accordingly? Or was it expected because the parents live such kingdom-cen-

tered lives that those who have a front row seat cannot help but see the gospel as the good gift that it is? At the very least, this passage means that good Christian parenting in the early church led children to believe often enough that it became an expectation.

4. *Ecclesial: Baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–13; Gal 3:26–29; Acts 2:41, 47)*

The fourth dimension of baptism is ecclesial. We are baptized into the body of Christ. This meaning is perhaps most evident among Ekklesia Project circles. Many of us are deeply suspicious of language that suggests that people are baptized into a purely *personal* relationship with Jesus.

Yet this is precisely where the problem lies for several streams of the believers church tradition. Our postponement of baptism gives the impression that baptismal candidates must wait until they have some sort of personal encounter with God, which assures them that they are ready. These sorts of encounters often happen at revivals, conferences, and retreats. Such events focus a person's attention on their relationship with God with a degree of intensity that often exceeds ordinary church gatherings. They therefore view their baptism as a personal experience and their congregation as a community that serves and supports that experience.

Yet this does not represent the approach of credobaptists with a strong view of the church. For us, believer's baptism is baptism into the community of believers. But not just any sort of community. First Corinthians 12 speaks of baptism into Christ's body in order to launch a discussion of what membership in the body looks like. All members are graced by God's Spirit so they can actively serve other members of the body. Each one is called to edify the other. The body cannot function properly if any member is not doing his or her part.

This impacts how credobaptists form youth in our congregations. We form them to become contributing members. We show

them what membership is like. We teach them what membership means. We make clear that being baptized means entering into body life in a way quite different from their childhood. They are no longer “along for the ride.” If they are not ready to accept responsibility for service to the body, we do not baptize them. Once they become members, we put them on the prayer list, expect them to serve actively in our gatherings, and involve them in the most tedious of church life meetings. Though they were welcome to do such things prior to their baptisms, they are expected to do so afterward. They are also expected to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, to bind and loose in the manner of Matthew 18. An eager desire to function as an indispensable part of the church family is therefore a key indicator that someone truly believes that Jesus has inaugurated God’s kingdom and gathered the new covenant community.

5. *Social: Baptized into a social reality that transcends social differences (1 Cor 12:12–13; Gal 3:26–29; Col 2:10–12. . . 3:9–11; cf. 2 Cor 5:16–17)*

Fifth, and finally, to be baptized into the body of Christ is to be baptized into a new social reality that transcends social differences. Paul said it most famously in Galatians 3: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek. . . slave or free. . . male and female.” He said this sort of thing so often that some scholars believe that the earliest baptismal confessions included a line like this. By word of mouth, they deliberately baptized people into a new creation in which they no longer viewed each other from a human point of view.

Part of the old self that dies in baptism is the self that discriminates against people based on birth status, heritage, and societal standing. The early church experienced this in a concrete way. Church gatherings were the first occasions when many Jews would

have eaten with Gentiles, Romans with barbarians, and rich with poor. Christian homes were likely the only places where believers experienced such unity amid diversity. Paul refers to this new social reality as the “new humanity” or “new creation.” It is one of the most concrete ways God’s people experience and bear witness to God’s kingdom.

Believers churches that are committed to reflecting God’s kingdom find concrete ways to incorporate the new humanity into their baptismal practice. Whether youth or adult, those who are unwilling to die to old prejudices are unprepared to enter the waters of new life. This is not because the new humanity serves as the entrance requirements for new life; it’s because new humanity is the new life into which God welcomes us. It’s part of the gospel. It’s the world to come breaking into the world that is and supplanting the world that was.

The new social reality into which God welcomes us in baptism directly impacts the believers church approach to youth. Like the early church, we strive to live such lives together that our youth see and experience a social dynamic among God’s people unlike what they experience at school, on the team, or in the neighborhood. So it is crucial that they are present among us as we relate to one another in ways that reflect God’s kingdom. We want them to experience how we make decisions together, how we strive to hear every voice, and how we expect God’s Spirit to speak through any of us regardless of age, gender, education, or longevity in the community.

We want them to interact with the diverse set of guests that we welcome into our homes. They need to see that Christians don’t always hang out with people who are just like them. God has given us a strangely diverse group of friends. As in all things, this example should be reinforced in preaching, teaching, and every other facet of the church’s worship life. Youth should not be caught off guard by questions about this only after they begin contemplat-

ing baptism. It should seem natural to them because it's the air we breathe in our life together.

Concluding Thoughts

These are some of the ways that credobaptists with Ekklesia Project sensibilities strive to be obedient in baptism. What makes us credobaptists is not that we take these dimensions seriously, but that we delay baptism until a person is eager to receive and enter into them. This delay would mean precious little, of course, if as church families we did not strive to order our life together according to the nature of this gift. Our greatest challenge is presenting God's offer to our children as a gift that they may accept or reject. This is less about the nature of human freedom and more about the nature of God's saving initiative, as we understand it.

Fortunately for us, framing baptism as a divine gift is something that pedobaptists do quite well and something that Debra exemplifies in part two of this pamphlet.

Part Two: The Baptism and Formation of Children

Debra Dean Murphy
West Virginia Wesleyan College

THE ESSAYS in this pamphlet are a modest contribution to a conversation going back more than a generation. The work of ecumenical groups like the Faith and Order Commission gave rise to the hope that, for many within both pedobaptist traditions (Christians who baptize infants and children) and credobaptist ones (those who baptize believers upon profession of faith), Christian initiation would be seen as a “unitary and comprehensive process” that “vividly embodies the coherence of God’s gracious initiative.”¹

And while there is much more that unites us than distinguishes us, the honest differences between the ecclesial communities that John and I come from are best addressed by saying and showing how our baptismal practices are indeed “vividly embodied,” and how it is, in practical terms, in our successes and our failures, that the formation of our young flow from the same gos-

1. Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982 – 1990: Report on the Process and Responses, Faith and Order Paper No. 149 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), 112.

pel we profess and our shared desire to respond to God's gracious initiative in our lives.

Let me begin with a brief outline of what I hope to accomplish here. First, I will note a cluster of biblical texts—surprising ones, perhaps, and one in particular—that have helped inform much of the Church's thinking and practice regarding baptism. Second, I will explore the theological concept of "participation in the new creation" as one of the foundational ways Christians have understood baptism. Third, I will reflect upon the rite or sacrament of confirmation and the ways many churches and parishes struggle to make confirmation an integral part of the formation of children and youth. And finally, I will conclude, perhaps in spite of evidence to the contrary, not on a note of despair, but one of hope.

Baptism and Scripture

For churches that follow the lectionary cycle, there is a cluster of texts from St. John's gospel that are typically read in worship during the season of Lent. They include the stories of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man blind from birth, and the raising of Lazarus.² All of these readings are full of baptismal resonance, even though none is overtly about baptism. Being born from above, the restoration of sight, being called forth from death to life—each invitation Jesus issues is a summons to claim one's true humanity and one's place in the new creation. Such texts and themes are not accidental, we know, as Lent is, in many Christian traditions, the prime season of preparation for the sacrament of baptism.

In chapter 4 of St. John's gospel is the familiar story of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus encounters at Jacob's well. In the heat of the noonday sun, with no one else around, Jesus violates all sorts of religious and social protocols and asks the woman for

2. Appointed for years A and B, the number and order of these texts vary somewhat between the Revised Common Lectionary and the Lectionary for Mass.

a drink. In the course of their conversation—the longest Jesus has with anyone in the four gospels—he offers her “living water.”

There are complexities in the story that have to be named and addressed, including the history of animosity and schism between Jews and Samaritans that hovers over this remarkable encounter and the woman’s mysterious marital history (and the uncharitable interpretations of her through the centuries). But central to the narrative is a theme that occurs again and again in Scripture: ordinary water becomes the means, the stuff, the sign of new life in the Spirit. “[W]hoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

Water and the Spirit are everywhere in the Bible—from the Spirit that hovered over the watery chaos at creation, to creation’s consummation when “[t]he Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’ . . . let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17).

In between Genesis and Revelation is a text that forms the backdrop of this encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. From the prophet Jeremiah we hear: “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13).

The Samaritan woman is drawing water from a cistern—stagnant water, likely. Jesus is offering her the fountain of living water, what St. Cyril of Jerusalem calls “the grace of the Spirit.”³ The cracked cistern that is her empty, graceless life has been met with what St. Cyril calls “living, leaping water”—God’s Spirit calling to her spirit, summoning her to wholeness and newness of life.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, early in the section on Christian prayer, verses from this story are quoted to help

3. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 16. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310116.htm>

shape a vision of the Christian life as one of response to the gift of God's desire for communion with us:

“If you knew the gift of God!” [John 4:10]. The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us.⁴

Illustrative of this point (quite literally), is a beautiful contemporary Orthodox icon, painted by Constantina Wood and housed at St. Michael's Priory in Milton Keynes, England. (<http://www.cosamara.com/view-page.php?ID=103>) In the image, the well looks remarkably like a baptismal font. This is not an attempt to rewrite the biblical story but is a deeply suggestive, richly imaginative rendering of how the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman stands in for the divine-human encounter in which God graciously invites each of us into the life-giving waters of baptism, into the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into our true selves, and into the new creation where there is no more thirst or hunger or scandal or exclusion of any kind. Through this icon and in this text (especially as we experience it liturgically in the middle of Lent), we come to see that baptism begins with God's initiating action, God's movement toward us, God's very desire for us. As St. Cyril so beautifully puts it:

The Spirit comes gently and makes himself known by his fragrance. He is not felt as a burden, for he is light, very light. Rays of light and knowledge stream before him as he approaches. The Spirit comes with the tenderness of a true friend and protector to save, to heal, to teach, to counsel, to strengthen, to console. The Spirit comes to enlighten the mind first of the one who receives him, and then, through him, the minds of others as well.⁵

4. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2560.

5. St. Cyril of Jerusalem.

The shunned woman at the well with her troubled past is an icon of the mystery of divine grace, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit through the living waters of baptism. She is surprised by this unbidden gift, overtaken and transformed by it. The Spirit enlightens her mind (she is known as St. Photini or Photina by eastern Christians—from the Greek *phos* for light) and then she enlightens the minds of others. One of the Church’s earliest designations for baptism was *photismos*, meaning “illumination.” In baptism “our eyes are opened to see with the light of Christ.”⁶

“Come see a man who told me everything I ever did” (4:29) proclaims the Samaritan woman to any who will listen. She sees, she summons, and she invites, just as Jesus calls her to claim her true humanity and her place in the new creation.

Baptism and Participation in the New Creation

What does this have to do with baptizing babies and confirming adolescents? Everything, I want to suggest. This story reveals in microcosm the shape of our baptismal vocation: By water and the Spirit, the baptized are recipients of a free and unconditional gift. Through the Spirit’s ongoing work, and in cooperation with the efforts of the community who nurture the baptized, they are transformed and enlightened for witness in the world. They are invited to live into their true humanity and to take their place in the new creation. Baptism is, according to the Catechism (which in this instance is quoting St. Gregory of Nazianzus),

God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift . . . We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called gift because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; grace since it is given even to the guilty; Baptism because sin is buried in the water; anointing for it is priestly and royal as

6. Timothy Radcliffe, *Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation* (Bloomsbury, 2012), 235.

The Baptism and Formation of Children

are those who are anointed; enlightenment because it radiates light; clothing since it veils our shame; bath because it washes; and seal as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship.⁷

When we read the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman baptismally—which is not the only way to read it, of course—we are reminded of a foundational truth about baptism: it is a disclosure of divine grace. Baptism does not assume our initiative, but God's; it does not begin with our faith but with the faith of Jesus Christ and the faithfulness of God and God's Church. "By grace you have been saved through faith," says the writer of Ephesians, "and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). This is true whether the candidate for baptism is a baby or a grown-up or somewhere in between. Each of us comes to the font, the pool, or the river empty-handed.

Churches that baptize infants (which are always at the same time churches that baptize older children and adults) safeguard the priority of God's initiative; for them, the grace of God is manifestly prior to the individual's response of faith.⁸ The faith that the child's parents and godparents profess—and that the child will claim for herself at confirmation—is not so much sure knowledge as it is trusting hope. It is God's gift of discovering—from the beginning of her earthly life until its end—how to live into the full measure of her baptismal vocation and into the gifts and demands of God's reign.

In his book, *Children of Promise*, Geoffrey Bromiley states eloquently how this gift unfolds in the life of a congregation, I cite him at length here:

From the very beginning infants are in the sphere of the word and Spirit, and the prayer of parents and congregation is made for them. They are not necessarily converted, and baptism itself will not convert them, but the gospel promises are before

7. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1216.

8. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Christian Initiation (Ecumenical Studies in History No. 10)*. (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1969), 54.

them and every reason exists to believe that the Holy Spirit has begun his work within them. They thus receive baptism as a sign and seal of the divine election, reconciliation, and regeneration. As they grow older, they may come quickly to individual repentance and faith. On the other hand they may move away for a period, or perhaps forever. But baptism is always there, bearing its witness to the will of the Father, the work of the Son, and the ministry of the Spirit. The church's proclamation tells them what they are to do. They are to die and rise again with Christ in personal repentance and faith, and are to begin the outworking of their renewal in conversion.⁹

The risk that Bromiley alludes to here—of a baptized child “moving away” from the promises made on his behalf is sometimes cited as a reason not to baptize infants. It is of a piece with the theology which assumes that a candidate for baptism must be able to claim the life of faith and discipleship—its joys and its costs—for herself. It is true that infant baptism isn't fail-safe, but we know also that the baptized of any age can move, drift, fall, or walk away.

One of the many ways we name how it is that baptism is received as gift and grace, as anointing, as enlightenment, as rebirth, and as the seal and sign of God's Lordship is to say that it makes us participants in God's new creation. The United Methodist baptismal liturgy says to candidates for baptism—whether they are infants, older children, or adults: “Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation and made to share in Christ's royal priesthood.” In the Roman Catholic liturgy, the baptized hear: “You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ.”

As participants in the new creation, the baptized share in the divine life of the Trinity. As the writer of 2 Peter states: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that

9. Geoffrey Bromiley, *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Eerdmans, 1979), 80–81.

is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.” (2 Pet 1:4). Yet our sharing in the life of the Trinity, our participation in the divine nature has all sorts of real-world, nitty-gritty implications: how we make and spend money; whether we vote, and for whom; and whether and to what extent we allow our thinking about race, gender, and a host of other things to be shaped by the brokenness of the old creation, rather than the new.

The true humanity we take on in baptism summons us to the freedom to love beyond the bounds of family, tribe, and nation. This is the nature of the *ekklesia* itself, as it bears witness to the new creation made possible in Christ through the power of the Spirit: we are the community of the baptized whose love for the world (the neighbor, the stranger, the enemy) glimpses the eternal self-giving love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a love without partiality because its source is the Trinitarian love-in-communion that transcends every exclusivism. It is not a love that we muster by our own power, through force of will or personal resolve. Rather, it is a love imputed to us and efficacious through us. We are its vessels, not its wellspring.

Yet baptism—perhaps especially in churches where infant baptism is normative—is sometimes entered into lightly and performed promiscuously. In a culture that sentimentalizes children, the baptism of an infant can easily turn into a family-centered spectacle (replete with flash photography or roving videographer), a domesticated, status-conscious rite of passage that communicates little of the radical, costly, suffering love we are baptized into.

In such ways we reveal our failure to communicate to the baptized—of any age—and to the community responsible for them the true nature of the new creation that awaits them and that will require much of them.

Baptism and Confirmation

If the baptism of infants seeks to safeguard the priority of God's grace, confirmation seeks to safeguard the significance of the human response to baptismal grace—a concern also at the heart of credobaptist theology. And yet challenges arise when the baptized are presented for confirmation. First, there is often confusion about what confirmation actually is. There are historical reasons for the confusion; namely, the separation of confirmation from baptism in the west beginning in the fourth century. But some unintended bad theology can also distort our understanding and practice of confirmation. We can wrongly assume and thus unhelpfully communicate to confirmands:

the idea that baptism is when your parents sign you up for membership in the Church, and confirmation is when you make that decision your own. That would suggest that you only become a real Christian when you make that personal decision. But [most] Churches deny that. The baptized are fully Christian. We may take years to embrace the decision of our parents and live it as our own deepest identity, but that is a matter of accepting what we are rather than of becoming Christians for the first time.¹⁰

There is also the difficulty faced by Catholics and mainline Protestants alike of overcoming the widespread view that confirmation is a kind of graduation. This is due in part to the practice of making confirmation preparation primarily a classroom-based educational experience. If the period leading up to an adolescent's confirmation feels mostly like school, then she will probably feel like she's "done" when the classes are over and the ceremony has taken place.

It is within this nexus of challenges, I suspect, that pedobaptists might learn from our sisters and brothers in credobaptist traditions. Where we seem unwittingly to create the conditions for the baptized and confirmed to opt out of church life, what can

10. Radcliffe, 254.

credobaptists teach us about how better to integrate older youth into our communities?

There are more subtle problems. Confirmands can sometimes be made to feel like special projects, like isolated members of the body put on display for others, routinely segregated from the life of the whole congregation. This, we know, is of a piece with the idea that “youth ministry” is a thing—its own thing, a very separate thing from, say, “young adult ministry” or “ministry to senior citizens.”

But I think about Grace Fellowship Church in San Francisco. They confront these rarely contested divisions in a way characteristic of the wisdom of that community. At their Jubilee, the whole congregation confirmed their baptismal vows together, and they look forward to making this normative within the rite of confirmation. The hope is that this will communicate to baptized youth that, as Pastor Doug Lee says, “they’re participating in something we’re all growing into.”

I suspect that they will still face challenges, but I think that organically weaving confirmation into the whole life of the whole body also communicates to their youth that the faith they claim as their own at confirmation is not really their own. Rightly, it is the faith of the Church—Grace Fellowship and the whole body of Christ—in all of its flawed, beautiful striving. In this I am reminded of Rowan Williams’ insight in his book *Tokens of Trust*: “Faith has a lot to do with the simple fact that there are trustworthy lives to be seen, that we can see in some believing people a world we’d like to live in.”¹¹

Confirmation is not about signing the contracts our parents made, nor is it about graduating out of the faith. It isn’t the process or practice of making one more niche population in the life of a congregation. The word *confirmatio* implies “strengthening” and “firming up.” According to the Catechism, confirmation “perfects

11. Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to the Christian Belief* (Westminster John Knox, 2007), 21–22.

baptismal grace.” In the Catholic liturgy, the bishop prays that the gifts of the Holy Spirit endowed at baptism—wisdom and understanding, right judgment and courage, knowledge and reverence, wonder and awe—might be strengthened in a special way at Confirmation. And in the concluding rite, courage is prayed for again. St. Thomas Aquinas believed that the greatest courage is that of endurance. Like all of the virtues, the courage to endure is not learned or lived by one’s own power but in and with the community of the baptized, as the whole church strives to keep its baptismal promises, to endure—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—through thick and thin.

Baptismal Hope

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman—like the story of Jacob and Rachel at the same well generations before—turns out to be a love story. As Richard Lischer has observed about it: “Only one who loves you knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only one who loves you can look at your past without blinking . . . We Christians know a lot about real love, not make-believe love, but only because ‘he told me everything I ever did.’”¹² As the waters of baptism plunge us into life in the new creation, we enter a love story that—as Martin Luther said—will take our whole lives to finish. And then some.

Pedobaptist churches often struggle to nurture our young over the long haul for the long haul. It may be that the cultivation of courageous endurance is the enduring challenge for those ecclesial communities who entrust their babies to God’s grace and make bold promises on their behalf.

But because we also believe that God’s grace precedes any and all our efforts, precedes even the faith our children will, we pray,

12. Richard Lischer, “Strangers in the Night,” *The Christian Century*, February 24, 1999, 213.

come to confess, we let go of the false notion that their formation is entirely in our hands. We make our peace with a truth that is both difficult and liberating. As Timothy Radcliffe puts it:

[s]ome babies may never enter a church again, and their later search for meaning may lead them away from Christianity to other faiths or even to atheism, but it is our belief that somehow God will be with them, opening ways forward where there seem to be none, never giving up. This is why parents testify to their faith precisely by not fretting when their children wander far from the Church. To do so would be a denial of our faith in the God who leaves the ninety-nine safe sheep to look for the one who was lost.¹³

May God give us, their parents, godparents, mentors, and teachers, the grace to grow into such wisdom, to live into such faith, and to bear witness to such astonishing hope.

13. Radcliffe, 13.

