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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS
TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM,
FROM CLEMENT OF ROME A.D. 90 TO CYPRIAN A.D. 258

by

JOHN ROYAL SCHNELLE III

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Approved by:


Major Professor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The rite of Christian baptism is a central feature in the Christian religion. Instituted by Jesus of Nazareth, it became an important practice within the early church.¹ However, no substantial work exists in English showing the development of this rite in the early period of Christianity, especially during the period of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Therefore, the intent of this work is to analyze the development of baptismal thought from the period of Clement of Rome A.D. 90 to Cyprian A.D. 258. I intend to answer the following two questions from my examination of the early church Fathers. To what extent did the rite of baptism

¹In this essay the term church refers to the universal body of believers in the Lordship of Jesus. There are many New Testament references to the church used in this sense, e.g. Acts 8:3; 12:1, I Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 5:23; and Colossians 1:18. Additional New Testament references are also made to the local church which would be considered as individual manifestations of the universal church, e.g. Acts 14:13; Romans 16:1; I Corinthians 4:17; II Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 4:15; and I Thessalonians 1:1. Although the church in the period of the Ante-Nicene Fathers was organized and complex, no sense of an institutional church with an ascending hierarchy was present. Additional references may be found in theologian Emil Brunner's The Misunderstanding of the Church and historian Kenneth Scott Latourette's History of Christianity.

develop over this period of approximately 150 years following New Testament times and did the ritual in the third century maintain the New Testament tradition of baptism? Moreover, if the rite of baptism did change, why?

During the first three centuries of Christianity, the church was a persecuted body which struggled in a hostile environment. The Fathers of the early church wrote in the complex cultural setting of the Roman Empire. The background of these early writers range from Greek Christian apologists to Latin theologians and from the western capital of Rome to the Egyptian city of Alexandria.

The writings of these early Christian Fathers on baptism all stem from the common heritage of the New Testament. The New Testament provided the foundation from which nearly all later theological thought developed. Thus, a brief and comprehensive, yet by no means complete, understanding of the origin and importance of baptism in the New Testament must be attained before proceeding to the contributions of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, from Clement of Rome A.D. 90 to Cyprian A.D. 258.

Baptism in the New Testament

Many religions preceding Christianity in the ancient world practiced a rite of washing similar to Christian baptism.² Gunter Wagner, a knowledgeable historian on pagan

²In this essay the New Testament documents are used as legitimate historical sources. Most theologians recognize

mystery cults and their influence upon the rite of Christian baptism, acknowledges the fact that earlier religious cults had cleansing rites similar to the Christian form of baptism, but that they were by no means the same.

The Eleusinian mystery cult had a preliminary purification rite, used for the purpose of cleansing before the actual ritual of initiation; the Osiris-Isis cult also included a sprinkling in the initiation rite, strictly for cleansing and preparing the initiate; the Adonis cult, according to Wagner, originally did not feature the "resurrection" of Adonis, but borrowed that aspect from the influence of the Osiris cult; the Attis cult also knew nothing of a resurrection in its oldest tradition, but the idea of rebirth occurs only beginning in the fourth century.³ Although the existence and influence of these mystery cults upon the rite of Christian baptism remains a possibility, Wagner believes the connection is far too thin:

The parallelism here could only be formal, consisting in a ritual dying and the beginning of a new lease of life, while no points in contact could

the significance of New Testament literature as valid historical material, e.g. F. F. Bruce in New Testament History and Oscar Cullmann in The New Testament: An Introduction for the General Reader.

³Gunter Wagner, Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries, trans. by J. B. Smith (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1967), pp. 259-266.

possibly be established with regard to the performance of the rites and their significance.⁴

Closer to the heritage of Christianity is the possible connection of Jewish proselyte baptism to the rite of Christian baptism. Proselyte baptism consists of three parts: circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice. The reason for this ritual is that the Jews believed that when accepting a Gentile proselyte into their faith, the convert should experience the same acts in which the Israelites had participated in the Sinaitic covenant.⁵

Although the Jewish rite of proselyte baptism had many similarities to the rite of Christian baptism, many differences also existed. Geoffrey Lampe, noted scholar of early Christianity, points out that proselyte baptism was not only self-administered, but also had no ethical significance, whereas Christian baptism called for an administrator and involved the forgiveness of sins and impartation of the Holy Spirit.⁶ The baptism of John the Baptizer and Jesus called for a change of heart rather than just a change of creed. Most New Testament scholars, such as Lampe, George R. Beasley-Murray, Karl Barth, Oscar Cullmann, and Johannes

⁴Ibid., p. 267.

⁵New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed., a.v. "Baptism (In the Bible)," by Herman Mueller.

⁶Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit, A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1951), p. 24.

Schneider, agree Christian baptism was a unique innovation and did not owe its heritage primarily to a Jewish antecedent.⁷ However, Christian baptism did have an acknowledged forerunner, John the Baptizer, the story of whose work and purpose are contained within the New Testament.

John the Baptizer, a cousin of Jesus of Nazareth, was the object of a prophecy uttered by his father, Zacharias. At John's birth, Zacharias foretold that his son would be a prophet of God and would prepare the people through his mission.⁸ The baptism which John preached in the area surrounding the Jordan River centered around the forgiveness of sins. Yet, John, himself, recognized and openly spoke of the insufficiency of his baptism, for the future baptism, of which he foretold, would be the fulfillment of the preparation which he had begun:

As for me, I baptize you in water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not even fit to remove His sandals; He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.⁹

⁷Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit, p. 24; George R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 24-25; Karl Barth, The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism, trans. Ernest Payne (London: SCM Press, 1948), p. 17; Oscar Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), p. 10; Johannes Schneider, Baptism and the Church in the New Testament (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, Ltd., 1957), p. 28.

⁸Luke 1:76 (NASB). NASB = New American Standard Bible.

⁹Matthew 3:11 (NASB).

The former cults and mystery religions worked under the theory that the ceremonial washings had magical effects, whereas the baptism of John, and later the baptism of Jesus, required an effort on the part of the individual to change his ways and conveyed no magical powers to the candidate in spite of his own personal attitude.¹⁰ Repentance was a necessity on the part of the candidate for the forgiveness of sins. The individual played an active role in his conversion by effecting a change of heart which in turn led to his desire for baptism and the forgiveness of sins.

John had the distinct honor of baptizing Jesus of Nazareth, who would later advocate baptism and would command his disciples to "baptize all nations." John did not understand why his cousin, Jesus came to him for baptism imparting the forgiveness of sins, for John believed Jesus to be sinless. Yet, Jesus was baptized, not for the forgiveness of sins, but to provide an example for his disciples to follow. The gospel of Matthew reported the baptism of Jesus as occurring in this way:

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?' But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he permitted Him. And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God

¹⁰This is but one of several interpretations and yet it is soundly founded within the New Testament, e.g. Acts 2:38; 3:19, 26:20; Revelations 2:5; and 2:21-22.

descending as a dove; and coming upon Him and behold a voice out of the heavens, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'¹¹

From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, John began willingly to fade into obscurity. His mission of "preparing the way" had been accomplished. Upon receiving word after Jesus' baptism of his increasing popularity, John clearly stated, "He must increase, but I must decrease."¹²

Jesus of Nazareth preached baptism was a necessity for salvation.¹³ He taught, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved."¹⁴ When the Pharisee, Nicodemus, approached Jesus, he was informed that a rebirth was necessary if one were to see the kingdom of God. "Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born of water and the spirit, he can not enter the kingdom of God . . . you must be born

¹¹Matthew 3:13-17 (NASB).

¹²John 3:30 (NASB).

¹³The belief that baptism is necessary for salvation is but one interpretation, albeit, in my opinion the most probable. Of the three largest denominations, only Roman Catholic's believe in the necessity of baptism. A leading representative for that position is Lorna Brockett, in The Theology of Baptism. However, the Reformed and Baptist movements hold that although baptism should be done out of belief, it is not imperative to one's salvation. Reform theologian Karl Barth supports this view in his work, The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism, along with Baptist George R. Beasley-Murray in Baptism in the New Testament. New Testament literature supports the view of baptism as necessary to salvation, as evident by the teachings of Jesus as cited in the text, e.g. Mark 16:16 and John 3:5,7. Although several interpretations exist, in my judgment, baptism as necessary for salvation has a strong Scriptural and historical basis and is the correct point of view.

¹⁴Mark 16:16 (NASB).

again."¹⁵ The following of Jesus continued to increase and the number of his disciples soon surpassed that of John's. Yet the New Testament testifies that Jesus, himself, did not do the baptizing, but allowed his disciples to administer the rite. Although baptism was not performed by Jesus himself, the rites entire force depends on its author, in whose name and by whose command it is administered.

However, the baptism of Jesus did not attain its full significance until after his death and resurrection. For within the act of baptism the candidate participates with Jesus in a burial under the water and emerges from under the surface as a form of resurrection. Jesus forewarned his disciples many times of his upcoming trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. The figurative terms with which he spoke of his death honored and enhanced the symbolic role of the rite of baptism. In referring to his future suffering and death, Jesus told his disciples, "But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished."¹⁶ As will be evident from the later writings of the Apostle Paul, the belief that Jesus rose from the dead offered assurance to the new Christian that he too would rise from the dead, which is clearly symbolized in the raising of the new-born Christian from the watery grave of baptism to walk in a newness of life. The belief that Jesus

¹⁵John 3:5,7 (NASB).

¹⁶Luke 12:50 (NASB).

was the "firstfruits of them that slept" offered the Christian certain confidence that he too would rise from the dead. For the Christian was secure in the belief that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead and baptism offered a means of participation yielding the same results.

The death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, according to the New Testament, took place during the feast of the Passover. The New Testament also testifies that for forty days Jesus remained on this earth offering "infallible proofs" of his resurrection by appearing to groups of people ranging from one to five hundred. Shortly before his ascension, Jesus gave his apostles a mission. This mission involved teaching about Jesus and making converts throughout the world. Jesus said:

Go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.¹⁷

Ten days after the ascension of Jesus recorded in Acts, came the day of Pentecost, and the origin of the church. The Apostle Peter preached to a multitude of Jews gathered from numerous countries and converted 3,000 of them with a message based upon the Messiahship of Jesus. The individuals touched by the sermon of Peter asked bluntly what they needed to do, implying faith on their part and a desire to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Peter, representing the Apostles,

¹⁷Matthew 28:19,20 (NASB).

responded with the classic answer, "Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Thus, from the very origin of the church baptism was seen as a necessity and imparted both forgiveness of sins and the implanting of the Holy Spirit to the repentant individual on that Day of Pentecost.

Following the foundation of the church at Pentecost, baptism was frequently mentioned throughout the remainder of the book of Acts, largely centering upon the conversion of individuals coming from all walks of life. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in a body of water beside the desert road; the centurion, Cornelius, and his household were the first Gentile converts to be baptized; Lydia, a seller of purple in Philippi, consented to baptism as did the Philippian jailor in the middle of the night. The one apparent requirement of these sundry assortment of converts was belief, a belief in Jesus: "But when they (the Samaritans) believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike." Philip said to the Ethiopian eunuch, "If you believe with all your heart, you may (be baptized)." Concerning salvation, the Philippian jailor was instructed, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you

¹⁸Acts 2:38 (NASB).

shall be saved."¹⁹ Baptism was also administered by several individuals. Philip, Ananias, Peter, and Paul all baptized those willing to accept Jesus.

One difference between the baptism of Jesus and John the Baptizer became clearly apparent in the situation which existed at Ephesus. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit came only from the baptism instituted by Jesus:

Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found some disciples and he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said to him, 'No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' And they said, 'Into John's baptism.' And Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.²⁰

The book of Acts, in regard to baptism deals primarily with the physical practice of the rite. It is largely within the writings of the Apostle Paul, a follower of Jesus of Nazareth and a missionary of the gospel to the Gentiles, that the doctrinal importance of baptism receives attention. Paul sent letters to both churches and individuals concerning many of the practices in Christianity, one of which was baptism. Paul devoted substantial attention to the importance of baptism in his epistle to the Romans. Romans 6 reads like this:

How shall we who died to sin still live in it?
Or do you not know that all of us who have been

¹⁹Acts 8:12; 8:37; and 16:31 (NASB).

²⁰Acts 19:1-5 (NASB).

baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death is no longer master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.²¹

From this passage, many characteristics of baptism are made clear. Baptism frees the convert from the penalty of sin, for baptism represents the death of the old self. Moreover, the candidate through the act of baptism, participates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because the convert believes Jesus is no longer restrained by death, he gains assurance as to his own salvation. This passage also indicates that total immersion was the practice of the Apostolic period because of the symbolism implied by a burial. Once the neophyte was raised from the watery grave of baptism, he had essentially resurrected from the old life which had been dominated by sin and was now alive to God and experienced a newness of life, free from his former debt to sin. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, spoke again of the participation of the convert with Christ:

²¹ Romans 6:2-11 (NASB).

Having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.²²

It was through the death and resurrection of Jesus that baptism received its power and meaning. The noted twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth said, "Baptism is the acted parable of His death in which man is at his own baptism 'planted.' It is a repetition of Christ's baptism, in which man finds himself as the candidate for baptism is now the second most important figure."²³ Jesus' death on the cross became the sacrifice for all men, offered as a means of salvation if they would believe in him and submit to baptism. Peter confirms the idea that baptism offers salvation to the individual, not because of any cleansing power, but because it is done out of belief and obedience: "Baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."²⁴ Yet Schneider believes baptism was more than just an act done out of obedience:

²²Colossians 2:12-14 (NASB).

²³Barth, The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism, p. 18.

²⁴I Peter 3:21 (NASB).

It is carried out indeed in obedience of faith, but it is not sufficient to regard it merely as an act of obedience. If it is the inescapable condition for entry into Christ's saved community, then faith in Jesus Christ and confession of him are the essential requisites for its administration.²⁵

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, to beware of dividing factions that could exist within the church. He also was thankful that he had baptized only Cripus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanus, so as not to promote a following after his name. Paul taught that he would rather spread the news by preaching of the saving power of Jesus through baptism, rather than over-emphasizing his own administration of the act, which would convey the message that the identity and notability of the administrator was not stressed in the act of baptism. The important item was to be baptized in the name of Jesus, whereas the administrator was only the instrument through which this rite was accomplished.

These New Testament passages represent the foundation used by the Ante-Nicene Fathers, from Clement of Rome A.D. 90 to Cyprian A.D. 258, in developing their contributions to the rite of Christian baptism. Baptism in the New Testament appears to be a fairly simple and spontaneous act. In summation, Barth describes the importance of baptism from the New Testament in this way:

In baptism Jesus Christ seals the letter He has written in His person and with His work and which we

²⁵Schneider, Baptism and the Church in the New Testament, p. 47.

by faith in Him have already received. Sealing--that is the special work of baptism. If it be understood thus, one ought to and must say of it in the words of Scripture: it saves, sanctifies, purifies, mediates, and gives the forgiveness of sins and the grace of the Holy Spirit, it effects the new birth; it is the admission of men into the covenant of grace and into the church.²⁶

Although the baptismal ceremony of the New Testament appears rather simple, by the third century the early church had established a standard practice of baptism. Many complementary rites appeared and were observed in connection with baptism.

²⁶Barth, The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism, p. 29.

CHAPTER II

THE BAPTISMAL CEREMONY, A.D. 90-258

The act of Christian baptism was a momentous event in the life of the early church. In essence, it was the form of initiation that bestowed membership into the local church upon the candidate. The ceremony which surrounded this act had become quite elaborate by the late-second century. This chapter deals solely with the development of a standard form of the ritual of baptism, except for exceptional cases, such as clinical baptism or re-baptism, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Ante-Nicene Sources

Four different sources from the Ante-Nicene Fathers wrote in sufficient detail on the subject of baptism to observe the actual practice of the rite. These works differ largely in terms of geographical origin and chronological perspective, yet their sum offers a comprehensive understanding of the act of baptism existing in the Christian world of the second and third centuries. The works which contain information on the practice of baptism are the Didache, or Teachings of the Twelve Apostles; Justin Martyr's First

Apology; Tertullian's treatise, On Baptism; and Hippolytus' work, Apostolic Tradition.

The Didache has been referred to as one of the greatest literary discoveries of modern time by theologian Justo Gonzalez, the author of A History of Christian Thought.¹ Discovered in Istanbul in 1873, this Greek text has been the subject of scholarly controversy over its origin, author, and date. Possible dates of authorship range from A.D. 70 to the middle of the second century. Regardless of the precise date, the Didache provides one of the earliest written instructions concerning baptism.

Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165) is the most important of the Greek apologists for Christianity of the second century. His First Apology, written in Rome and addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and sons, is an attempt to verify Christianity as the fulfillment of the philosophic quest. Traditionally, Justin acquired his surname as a descriptive title from the way he met his death during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, about A.D. 165.²

Tertullian (A.D. 160-230), representing Latin Christian thought, wrote from Carthage in North Africa. He blended Roman common sense with penetrating intelligence in creating his own convincing style of writing. His late-second century

¹Justo Gonzalez, A History of Christian Thought (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 66.

²Henry Bettenson, The Early Christian Fathers (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 12-13.

treatise, On Baptism, offered a very detailed description of the ceremony and administration of this sacrament.

Hippolytus (fl. A.D. 217-235) lived in Rome at the beginning of the third century. He is principally known as a competent and learned compiler whose interest lay in practical matters. He wrote Apostolic Tradition to codify the doctrines and practices of the entire church worship service, of which baptism is only a part.³

The Rite of Baptism

In examining the conditions which must be fulfilled to accomplish the act of baptism, this section will deal exclusively with believer's baptism. One cannot say adult baptism, for one can be an adult and not be baptized or one can be baptized and not be an adult. Infant baptism will be dealt with separately in a later chapter. The writers of the early-second century did not codify in minute detail what practices were involved in the early baptismal rite. Therefore, most of the information concerning the procedure followed by baptismal candidates comes directly from Tertullian's On Baptism, whose precise date is unknown, but was written in the very late-second century, and Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition, which was written around A.D. 230.

The initial requirement for believer's baptism was a belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The very confession

³Berthold Altaner, Patrology, trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), p. 183.

at baptism assured the administrator and the congregation of the prior presence of belief on the part of the candidate.⁴ Justin Martyr claimed baptism was available to all those who, "are persuaded and believe."⁵ Yet the term belief also implied a sense of inward change, for Justin continued in his narrative, ". . . and undertake to be able to live accordingly."⁶ Thus, sincere repentance for one's previous sins was considered a preliminary requirement along with belief.

Hippolytus, in Apostolic Tradition, spoke of a three-year period of preparation as a catechumen. These years were to be spent hearing God's Word and building Christian character. The length of time was not the important requirement for the catechumen, rather it allowed them to prepare with much thought and prayer for the rite of baptism. Three years allowed adequate time for the candidate to build up virtuous ways and eliminate sinful shortcomings in preparation for the Christian life.⁷

All of those who profess a sincere repentance over past sins and possess faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and

⁴New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Liturgy of)," by Joseph Andreas Jungmann.

⁵Justin Martyr, The First Apology of Justin, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867), 2:59.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, ed. Gregory Dix (London: S.P.C.K., 1968), p. 28.

Saviour could be a recipient of Christian baptism. Tertullian wasted no words in describing the proper candidate. "So let them come, when they are growing up; when they are learning, when they are being taught what they are coming to; let them become Christians when they have become competent to know Christ."⁸ Tertullian promoted the existence of a conscious desire to come to Christ before the rite should be performed. In addition, Hippolytus' mandate of a three-year period of instruction also served to support Tertullian in assuming a knowledgeable age as a prerequisite for baptism.

Once the period of instruction had been completed, a time of examination was required. The catechumens having completed their instructional period then enrolled in the ranks of the competentes, those "seeking" baptism. According to Hippolytus, the life of the candidate was examined closely and exercises called "scrutinies" were held. The catechumen underwent many exorcisms, the exsufflation or blowing out of the Devil, and the imposition of hands. The candidate's life was thoroughly examined, evidently by the leaders of the local church, along with his behavior while a catechumen, and assessed as to his ability to live the Christian life. Once the scrutiny of the candidate had been

⁸Tertullian, On Baptism, ed. Ernest Evans (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), p. 39.

successfully accomplished, preparation was begun for the actual ritual.⁹

With an event of the magnitude of baptism, special emphasis and attention was given to this ceremony. Believer's baptism was normally restricted to coincide with the celebration of Easter (Passover) and Pentecost, and thus indicate the solemnity of the occasion.¹⁰ The practice of delaying baptism until the Jewish holidays of Passover and Pentecost did not apply to the baptism of infants, who were baptized soon after they were born. Sister Teresa Marie De Ferrari, a Roman Catholic theologian, suggests that ". . . in view of the growing number of Christians, joint preparation of adult candidates was restricted to certain times of the year and solemn baptism was given only a few times."¹¹ This suggestion would indicate that by the mid-third century the church was beginning to organize and solidify its rituals into standardized rites.

On the preceding Thursday, the candidate would begin preparing for his baptism by bathing. According to the Didache, written by at least the mid-second century, the administrator, along with any others who were able, joined

⁹Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 41.

¹¹New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Theology of)," by Teresa Marie De Ferrari.

the candidate in fasting prior to the day of the baptism.¹² Justin Martyr, a second century Christian apologist, went even further in suggesting the congregation should assist the preparation of the candidate by joining him in fasting and prayer.¹³ By the end of the second century, Tertullian included fasting, praying, and confessing one's sins in the baptismal preparation.¹⁴ Whereas, according to Hippolytus in the third century, the candidate would continue his preparation by fasting on the preceding Friday and Saturday, then on Saturday the overseer of the congregation would come and exorcise the candidate again and again to rid him of every evil spirit so they would never return henceforward.¹⁵

Once the day of baptism arrived, the candidate assumed a passive role in lieu of the dominant one taken by the administrator of the act of baptism. New Testament literature nowhere described the necessary qualifications of those who are entitled to carry out the act of baptism, however, there does seem to be effort to downplay the identity and notability of the administrator for fear of creating factions. In the church of the early Apostolic period, a freedom of practice was apparent. Ignatius, writing early in

¹²Didache, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers, 38 vols. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1961), pp. 19-20.

¹³Justin Martyr, First Apology, p. 59.

¹⁴Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 41.

¹⁵Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 32.

the second century, insisted that baptism could not be administered without the overseer.¹⁶ Taken literally, this passage would infer that a leader of the local church is being referred to, for one individual could not be at more than one place on the occasions of Passover and Pentecost. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-210) promoted the service of women missionaries, who did not hesitate to baptize when the occasion arose.¹⁷ By the end of the second century, however, the administration of baptism was largely reserved for the leaders of the local church. Tertullian agreed with a certain liberty in administration, but only when the baptism was an emergency. He gave a loose hierarchy of those having the power of conferring baptism:

The supreme right of giving it belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop: after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the Church's dignity: for when this is safe, peace is safe. Except for that, even laymen have the right: 'for that which is received on equal terms can be given on equal terms: unless perhaps you are prepared to allege that our Lord's disciples were already bishops or presbyters or deacons: that is, as the word ought not to be hidden by any man, so likewise baptism, which is no less declared to be 'of God', can be administered by all.'¹⁸

¹⁶Ignatius, Letter to the Smyrnaeans, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers, 38 vols. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1961), 1:93.

¹⁷Clement of Alexandria, The Miscellanies, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 4:349-469.

¹⁸Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 35.

Tertullian goes on to emphasize that baptism by laymen should only be in cases of emergency, since they ". . . must not arrogate to themselves the function of the bishop."¹⁹ However, he is not as permissible in allowing laywomen the right to baptize and suggested they should be silent and consult their husbands. Nonetheless, Tertullian did not discount baptism by women, he merely discouraged it.²⁰

The medium in which baptism takes place is water. According to the Didache, running water was preferable, but standing water, acceptable. Cold water was also favored, but warm was allowed.²¹ Tertullian saw great symbolism in water as the means of baptism. According to him, the book of Genesis in relating the chronology of creation states, ". . . the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters."²² Also in creation, the waters were the first to produce life. Thus, Tertullian believed that the Spirit would continue to linger over the waters of the baptized.²³

Once the eventful day for baptism arrived, the candidates were led to the baptismal site early in the morning. Many sources mention the assembling of the congregation to witness and welcome new Christians into their fellowship.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 36.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Didache, p. 19.

²²Genesis 1:2 (NASB).

²³Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 7.

Justin asserted that the congregation would bring the baptismal candidates to the water and witness a similar regeneration through the act of baptism, as had occurred in their own lives.²⁴ However, Anglican C. E. Pocknee, in his article, "The Archeology of Baptism," argues that the presence of the local congregation at the actual baptism is an error in thought. He asserts that the passage from Justin merely refers to the first celebration of the Eucharist by the candidate with the congregation, whereas the actual baptism was performed only in the presence of the administrator and sponsors. Pocknee's major defense of this theory rests upon the point that the candidate was completely naked prior to the rite. The fact that the candidates were indeed naked is well attested by both Justin and Hippolytus. In solidifying his thesis, Pocknee cites the Syrian text Didascalia, written c. A.D. 230, which tells of deaconesses who assist the female candidate to undress, for it is not fitting for them to be seen by men. Therefore, a modern inference is that the entire congregation would not have been present at the actual baptism.²⁵ However, Justin mentioned that the assembly and not just the administrator and sponsors would witness a regeneration similar to their own. Also, according to the Apostolic Tradition written by Hippolytus, the candidates' clothes were removed before the

²⁴Justin Martyr, First Apology, p. 59.

²⁵C. E. Pocknee, "The Archeology of Baptism," Theology 74 (1971): 309-310.

actual baptismal service began and no direct mention or implication is made that the congregation separated itself from the baptismal candidates. Perhaps an innocence existed within early Christianity which cannot be comprehended by modern scholars of that period.

Before the actual ceremony began, prayer to God was invoked by the administrator to bring the Holy Spirit down upon the waters.²⁶ Theodore Klauser, a twentieth-century German scholar, suggests in his article, "Taufet in lebendigen Wasser!" that this invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the waters may have arisen from the change from running water as advocated in the Didache, to cistern water for baptizings. The invocation over the water was an effort to create "living water" which was best symbolized by running water.²⁷

As can be noted from the exorcisms of the candidate prior to baptism, the Devil was clearly seen as the Christian's primary foe. Before the baptismal proceedings progressed further, the candidate was called upon to renounce publicly any association with the Prince of Darkness. Hippolytus recorded this standard verbal denial, "I renounce thee Satan, and all thy service and all thy

²⁶Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 33.

²⁷Theodore Klauser, "Taufet in lebendigen Wasser!" Pisciculi, ed. T. Klauser and A. Ruecker (Munster, 1939), pp. 163f. Cited by Everett Ferguson, Early Christians Speak (Austin: Sweet Publishing Co., 1971), p. 40.

works."²⁸ Tertullian's repudiation differs slightly with this pronouncement, "We solemnly profess that we disown the Devil, his pomp, and his angels."²⁹ This public denial took place shortly before the candidate and administrator entered the water, and was spoken before the entire congregation under the hand of the leader of the local church. Hippolytus mentioned that this denial was to be spoken while facing to the west, which was directly followed by a turn to the east and a declaration of faith in the trinity.³⁰ This practice was evidently for the purpose of showing the complete internal change which had taken place within the candidate. Kirsopp Lake, professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard University, suggests that the renunciation of the Devil found in Hippolytus and Tertullian takes the place of the moral vow which is implied by I Peter, Justin Martyr, and the Didache.³¹ Thus, what had only previously been implied, now formed part of the actual baptismal rite. After the strong renunciation, the candidate was anointed with the oil of exorcism, whereby all taint of Satan and his demons were

²⁸Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 34.

²⁹Tertullian, De Corona, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 11:336.

³⁰Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, pp. 34-35.

³¹Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 1928 ed., s.v. "Baptism (Early Christian)," by Kirsopp Lake.

removed and the candidate stood ready to be immersed into Christ.³²

Once all of the preliminaries of the ritual had been completed, the actual rite was performed.³³ The candidate and the administrator entered the water, whereupon the candidate was asked in an interrogatory manner whether he believed in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and following each affirmation there ensued an immersion.³⁴ This triple confession alternating with immersions may have originated with Tertullian. This practice will be discussed in more detail in a future chapter. The interrogatory questioning of the candidate soon changed, or was supplemented by a declaratory statement of faith on the part of the candidate, thus allowing the candidate to verbally testify to his belief in the deity of Jesus.³⁵

Once the confession of faith was made to the question of the administrator, he placed his hand upon the candidate's head and plunged the future Christian beneath the water. The ceremony, according to Hippolytus, would occur in this manner:

³²Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 35.

³³The background of the central act of baptism will be observed in greater detail in the next chapter. However, this section is included in this chapter to allow ample continuity and understanding to the ceremony which surrounds the actual baptism.

³⁴Tertullian, De Corona, p. 336.

³⁵Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 40.

And when he who is to be baptised goes down to the water, let him who baptises lay hand on him saying thus: 'Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty?' And he who is being baptised shall say: 'I believe.' Let him forthwith baptise him once, having his hand laid upon his head. And after this let him say: "Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, Who was born of Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and died and was buried, and rose the third day living from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?' And when he says: 'I believe," let him baptise him the second time. And again let him say: 'Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?' And he who is being baptised shall say: 'I believe.' And so let him baptise him the third time.³⁶

Once the candidate arose from the third immersion, he was led out of the water. Hippolytus designated an elder as the one to anoint the candidate with the oil of thanksgiving once he had emerged from the water.³⁷ This function was performed immediately before the candidate dried himself and put on his clothes. Tertullian does not designate specific roles to be performed by the overseer, elder, deacon, or laymen, but certified that each one was individually competent to perform the rite of baptism. After the candidate was fully clothed, he was led again to rejoin the congregation.³⁸

The ceremony continued, according to Hippolytus, when the overseer approached the candidate and laid his hand upon

³⁶Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, pp. 36-37.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 37-38.

³⁸Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 35.

his head and gave a prayer. Unction or a second anointing was then performed by the overseer, who with the oil marked the sign of the cross upon the baptized one's forehead.³⁹ Following baptism the kiss of peace was bestowed upon the candidate as a means of welcoming him into the fellowship of the church. The kiss was a sign of brotherly love and showed that the candidate was now considered as an equal member of the body of Christ.⁴⁰

The new Christian was now allowed to partake in his first communion, which closely followed his baptism. Along with the bread and wine, the baptized one is given a mixture of milk and honey, representing the nourishment that is given to a new-born child, just as the candidate had now become a babe or a newcomer into the fellowship of the church. According to Tertullian, this mixture also symbolizes the entrance into Canaan or the promised land. In the Old Testament when the Israelites escaped from the Egyptians under the leadership of Moses, they were destined to journey in the wilderness for forty years before they could enter the promised land, the land of Canaan, flowing with milk and honey. For the new Christian, the mixture meant their anticipation of this event was finally over, they had been accepted into Christ.⁴¹

³⁹Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 38.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 39.

⁴¹Tertullian, De Corona, p. 336.

The event of baptism was not meant to be soon forgotten, for the new Christian was to refrain from a bath for the next week. They also enjoyed being administered the Eucharist in the future pre-dawn meetings, by none but the hand of the congregational leader. Upon the yearly anniversary of one's baptism, offerings were to be made on behalf of the dead, in honor of the Christian's spiritual birthday.⁴² Tertullian adds the observance of another action as a subtle reminder of one's allegiance:

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, on all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [of the cross].⁴³

The rite of baptism was meant to be a lasting sign of one's allegiance to Christ.

Dating the Baptismal Ceremony

The rite of baptism appears to have grown more complex through time. Lake reaches a very practical conclusion as he summarizes the contributions of the Ante-Nicene Fathers to the development of baptism in the first and second centuries. According to Lake, within this summary one may note those fathers with whom various additions are normally associated:

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

As might have been expected, the rite gradually became more and more complicated. The earliest form, represented in Acts, was simple immersion (not necessarily submersion) in water, the use of the name of the Lord, and the laying on of hands. To these were added at various times and places which cannot be safely identified, (a) the trine name (Justin), (b) a moral vow (Justin and perhaps Hermas, as well as already in the New Testament in I Peter), (c) trine immersion (Justin), (d) a confession of faith (Irenaeus, or perhaps Justin), (e) unction (Tertullian), (f) sponsors (Tertullian), (g) milk and honey (Tertullian).⁴⁴

Most scholars accept the ceremonies set forth by Tertullian and Hippolytus as embodying the standard ritual surrounding the rite of baptism. Twenty-two parts of the second century baptismal ceremony have been identified by scholars: twelve in preparation, five in administration, and five after the ceremony.⁴⁵

An Anglican minister, Michael Moreton, in his article "Groundwork for Initiation," saw the complex development of the rite of baptism as a step towards a strong foundation for the church:

The stabilization of Christian initiation into a complex rite that admitted to the eucharistic life, accompanies 'the flowing of the forms of Christian ministry into permanent, official orders' and is evidence that 'the Church was becoming conscious of itself as an institution in history'.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 1928 ed., s.v. "Baptism (Early Christian)," by Kirsopp Lake.

⁴⁵Henry Brown, Baptism Through the Centuries (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publications, 1965), p. 48.

⁴⁶Michael Moreton, "Groundwork for Initiation," Theology 75 (1972): 522-529.

E. C. Whitaker, noted liturgical theologian from the Reform tradition, supports Moreton's suggestion that the Christian initiation had stabilized into a standard complex rite by c. A.D. 220. He reported that recent discoveries of the initiation rite of the early Syrian Church provided compelling evidence through similar features that Moreton's proposition of universality was correct.⁴⁷

Authors of The Waters That Divide: the Baptism Debate, Donald Bridge, a Baptist minister, and David Phypers, who is training for the Anglican ministry, note ". . . that changes in the administration and understanding of baptism effected the growing importance and position of Christianity."⁴⁸ The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, adds further support in affirming that the first completely developed baptismal ritual appears in Tertullian.⁴⁹ Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics voices its support of a standard ritual in a less convincing tone, ". . . there were probably fixed forms for the administration of the sacraments, of which traces may be seen even in this period (Justin, Tertullian, and especially the Didache)."⁵⁰

⁴⁷E. C. Whitaker, "Letters to the Editor," Theology 75 (1972):424-425.

⁴⁸Donald Bridge and David Phypers, The Waters That Divide: the Baptism Debate (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 77.

⁴⁹Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, 1951 ed., s.v. "Baptism," by Paul Drews.

⁵⁰Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 1928 ed., s.v. "Baptism (Early Christian)," by Kirsopp Lake.

In the period of the Apostolic Fathers, the major authorities on baptism are Justin Martyr and the Didache. The views presented by Justin represent the practice in Rome, while the Didache delineates the custom in western Syria. Yet both agree in the fundamentals. Both have the Trinitarian formula and both agree fasting is a necessary prerequisite. One could safely assume participation in the Eucharist followed the baptism. "Thus by the middle of the second century the administration of baptism would seem to have been alike in essentials throughout the whole Church."⁵¹

Geoffrey W. Lampe, an Evangelical scholar of early Christian baptism and the author of The Seal of the Spirit, presents as a quite radical possibility that:

. . . it is quite likely that Justin may omit to mention ceremonial additions by which the rite of baptism may have been already embellished--additions which were to make the complex rite of initiation as it was practiced in the time of Tertullian or Hippolytus so impressive and awe-inspiring a ceremony. Some of these elements which we find in the fully developed rite of the late-second century may already have been present in the service as known to the author of I Peter.⁵²

Moreton wholeheartedly agrees with Lampe in recognizing the New Testament roots of baptism:

This single complex rite, embodying a number of related features, all contributing to the manifold meaning of incorporation into the life of the Church, has its roots in the Church in the time of the New

⁵¹ Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, 1951 ed., s.v. "Baptism," by Paul Drews.

⁵² Michael Moreton, "The Emergence and the Forms of a Rite of Initiation in the Church," Theology 75 (1972): 41-47.

Testament. What emerges at this stage at the end of the second century is an agreed rite, as at this time there emerges an agreed form of ministry, that is commonly accepted throughout the whole Church.⁵³

By the third century, the initiation process of baptism had stabilized into a standardized rite, as evidenced by Tertullian's treatise, On Baptism; and Hippolytus' work, Apostolic Tradition. Justin Martyr is the one substantial link in the baptismal ceremony between the New Testament and the end of the second century and because his description of baptism is somewhat sketchy, he provides a catalyst for controversy over dating much of the ritual surrounding baptism. The words of Tertullian, however, restrain the zealous advocate of a unified ceremony since the time of the New Testament:

If for these [the baptismal ceremony] and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, there should be no doubt that Christian baptism had become a standardized ritual by the late-second century. Many ceremonies surrounded baptism by the third century, originally serving to enhance the importance of the rite; however, the actual baptism was the nucleus of the ritual.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Tertullian, De Corona, p. 337.

CHAPTER III

THE ACTUAL PRACTICE AND DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM, A.D. 90-258

In His final words before the ascension into heaven, Jesus left His Apostles a command to be followed, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."¹ This commission was accepted and practiced by the Apostles as is evidenced by numerous accounts of baptism in the book of Acts. However, the uniformity of the mode in which they baptized is still in question.

The Mode of Baptism

According to scholars William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, authors of the standard Greek-English lexicon, the Greek² verb βαπτίζω literally means to dip or immerse. In most places in the New Testament, this verb signifies the religious act of baptizing. Baptism grew into a standardized ritual and the term was not translated after

¹Matthew 28:19 (NASB).

²This is Koine (common) Greek, the language of the New Testament.

encountering the language barrier of Latin in the second century, but merely transliterated as "baptizo."³

The possible modes of baptism range from immersion to affusion (pouring) to aspersion (sprinkling).⁴ These terms are not universally recognized as having a concise or distinguishable definition. For instance, a few modern scholars believe that immersion need not be submersion, but might constitute standing in a shallow river or container and having water poured over the candidate. This lack in uniform interpretation of early references to the mode of baptism by modern scholars composes much of the controversy.

There is no disagreement that immersion was the primary mode of baptism in the New Testament and the Apostolic Period. Only in the mode of immersion is baptism a form of burial, by which it is pictured three times in the New Testament.⁵ This mode was undoubtedly practiced throughout Christendom, since the Fathers indicate in their writings, or allude to, a total submersion of the body and according to historian Everett Ferguson, the Fathers, ". . . are representative,

³New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed., a.v. "Baptism (In the Bible)," by Hans Mueller.

⁴Due to the divergence of present-day opinion over the meaning of these terms, in the context of this paper they shall mean the following. Immersion is the total submersion of the candidate beneath the surface of the water. Affusion is the pouring of water over the candidate's head, regardless if he be standing in an insufficient depth of water for immersion, or not. Aspersion is the sprinkling of water over the candidate.

⁵Romans 6:4,8,13; Colossians 2:12; and II Corinthians 5:15 (NASB).

authoritative church leaders from both the Greek and Latin speaking branches of the church."⁶

The Letter of Barnabas, an anonymous tract, was written sometime between A.D. 70 and A.D. 150. The letter was evidently widely-read in the second and third centuries, for it is frequently quoted by both Clement of Alexandria and Origen.⁷ The writer of this work described baptism in the following manner: "Blessed are they who put their hope in the Cross and descended into the water. . . . We descend into the water full of sins and uncleanness, and we ascend bearing reverence in our heart and having hope in Jesus in our spirit."⁸

Another early work, the Shepherd of Hermas was written in the form of visions, mandates, and parables. This cryptic treatise was thought to have been penned between A.D. 140 and A.D. 154.⁹ The "Shepherd" described the transition brought about through baptism in this way:

They descend then into the water dead and they ascend alive . . . [the apostles and teachers] descended therefore with them into the water and ascended again. The former went down alive and came

⁶Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 47.

⁷Roy J. Deferrari, ed., Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:188.

⁸The Letter of Barnabas, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:208-210.

⁹Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 1:228.

up alive, but the latter who had fallen asleep previously went down dead but came up alive.¹⁰

Additional evidence comes from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Although this manuscript would not have been widely-accepted in the second century as authoritative, it does appear to support immersion as the accepted form of baptism. The papyrus contains a fragment of an uncanonical gospel which has been dated from the second century. It is a reply from Jesus concerning his being ceremonially unclean:

You have washed in these running waters wherein dogs and swine have been cast night and day, and you have cleansed and wiped the outside skin which also the harlots and flute girls anoint, wash, wipe and beautify for the lust of men, but within they are full of scorpions and wickedness. But I and my disciples, who you say have not bathed, have been dipped in the waters of eternal life.¹¹

Tertullian also associated baptism with the mode of immersion: "Baptism itself is a bodily act, because we are immersed in water, but it has a spiritual effect, because we are set free from sins."¹² In an earlier passage, Tertullian clearly viewed immersion as the proper mode of baptism:

There is no difference whether one is washed in the sea or in a pool, in a river or a fountain, in a reservoir or a tub, nor is there any distinction between those whom John dipped in the Jordan and those whom Peter dipped in the Tiber, unless that

¹⁰ Shepherd of Hermas, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:266.

¹¹ Oxyrhynchus Papyri, cited by Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, pp. 34-35. For comparative study of N.T. words, see Adolph Deissman's Bible Studies.

¹² Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 17.

Eunuch whom Philip dipped in the chance water found on their journey obtained more or less of salvation.¹³

Origen, living in the first quarter of the third century, added his testimony to baptism by immersion. In his Homilies on Exodus, Origen saw the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites as a type of Christian baptism: "The evil spirits seek to overtake you, but you descend into the water and escape safely; having washed away the filth of sin, you come up a 'new man,' ready to sing the 'new song.'"¹⁴

The evidence found in the writings of the early Christian Fathers is overwhelming in support of immersion as the most accepted form of baptizing. Nonetheless, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers contain evidence for an alternate means of baptizing. The earliest evidence for a deviate mode comes from the Didache, which was written by at least the mid-second century. This document endorsed immersion as the preferred means of baptism, but provided an option if enough running water was not readily available:

. . . Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you have no running water, baptize in other waters; and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴ Origen, Homilies on Exodus, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers, 38 vols. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1957), 26:266.

¹⁵ Didache, pp. 19-20.

However, J. P. Audet, the foremost Roman Catholic student of the Didache, believes that the passage following baptism in the trine name in running water, is all an interpolation into the original manuscript. He argues that at some time in the transmission of the text the instructions for pouring was inserted.¹⁶ Ferguson, an authority on early church history, offers an alternative possibility as to why the Didache included pouring as an alternative for immersion." The candidate stood in whatever amount of water was available and water was poured over the remainder of the body to wet sufficiently the whole person. Or perhaps the intention was for the water to represent running water. Ferguson offers this interpretation of the actual meaning of the text:

If you do not have either cold water (in a natural pool or fountain) or warm water (in an artificial container in sufficient amount to duck the head into it), pour out water three times on the head.¹⁷

Cyprian, writing in the mid-third century, also offers alternative means to become a legitimate Christian. However, he indicates that his mode was largely used in cases of emergency:

You have asked also, what I thought concerning those who obtain God's grace in sickness and weakness; whether they are to be accounted legitimate Christians, because they are not washed with the

¹⁶J. D. Audet, La Didache (Paris, 1958), pp. 105-110, 365-67, cited by Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, pp. 47-48.

¹⁷Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 48.

water of salvation but have it poured on them. . . . We think that the divine benefits can in no way be mutilated and weakened. . . . In the sacraments of salvation, when necessity compels, and God bestows His mercy, the divine abridgements confer the whole benefits on believers, nor ought anyone to be troubled that sick persons seem to be sprinkled or poured upon when they obtain the Lord's grace. . . . Whence it appears that the sprinkling also of water holds equally with the washing of salvation. When this is done in the church, where the faith of both receiver and giver is sound, all things may stand firm and be consummated and perfected by the majesty of the Lord and by the truth of the faith.¹⁸

In the second century, other than the Didache, there was no evidence for any other mode of baptism other than immersion, even in instances of an emergency. Only in the mid-third century are exceptions permitted. These special cases were called clinical baptisms, derived from κλῖβα, the Greek noun for sickbed. Ferguson believes this rite initially sought to duplicate the normal practice by liberally wetting the whole body. Not until Cyprian, who around A.D. 250 gave the first systematic defense to the legitimacy of this practice, does clinical baptism achieve recognition for being as acceptable as immersion.¹⁹

The obvious question which must be raised at this point is why did the practice of affusion and aspersion become accepted modes of baptism in the early church? Noted New Testament scholar, A. T. Robertson, suggests as a plausible explanation that because baptism was believed to be necessary

¹⁸Cyprian, Epistles, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 8:311-312.

¹⁹Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 51.

for salvation and those who died without baptism were lost, clinical baptism arose.²⁰ Henry Brown, the author of Baptism Through the Centuries, offers a far simpler reason. He believes that the gradual change occurred simply as a matter of convenience. In support of his argument, Brown quotes James Cardinal Gibbons, in Faith of our Fathers:

For several centuries after the establishment of Christianity, baptism was usually conferred by immersion; but since the twelfth century, the practice of baptizing by infusion has prevailed in the Catholic Church, as the manner is less attended with inconvenience than baptism by immersion.²¹

Christian Bunsen, a great literary scholar in the nineteenth century, suggested that the Western Church under the guidance of Rome, abolished adult baptism and introduced sprinkling in its place.²² Gilbert Burnett, Bishop of Salisbury in the eighteenth century Church of England, proposed that the danger from immersing in cold northern climates with the expansion of Christianity was a good reason for changing the mode of baptism to sprinkling.²³ John Cunningham, author of The Growth of the Church, believes that the introduction of infant baptism played an important role in the growth of sprinkling: "You could not

²⁰The International Bible Encyclopedia, 1979 ed., a.v. "Baptism," by A. T. Robertson.

²¹Henry Brown, Baptism Through the Centuries (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publications, 1965), p. 32.

²²J. W. Shepherd, Handbook on Baptism (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Company, 1912), p. 192.

²³Ibid.

take a dying man from his bed, nor a sickly child from its mother's lap and plunge it into cold water."²⁴

Little evidence exists as far as architectural evidence in determining the mode of baptism in the early Christian centuries. The earliest of the discoveries dates back only to the opening decades of the third century. In the apostolic age, baptism was performed in open-air settings such as rivers, lakes, and seas.²⁵ W. N. Cote, author of the former standard work on ancient baptismal archeology, writes that ample evidence exists in art and literature that open-air baptism persisted until a comparatively late period.²⁶ This evidence would appear to support baptism by immersion.

Three modes of baptism appear in the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers: immersion, where the candidate and administrator go down into the water and the former is plunged totally beneath the water's surface; affusion, where the depth of water is not sufficient to submerge the candidate and thus the administrator with his hand poured water over the neophyte's head; and aspersion, where a copious amount of water is sprinkled over the candidate. Immersion, without dispute was the standard mode of baptism for the

²⁴Ibid., p. 195.

²⁵John G. Davies, The Architectural Setting of Baptism (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), p. 2.

²⁶Alec Gilmore, Christian Baptism, A Fresh Attempt to Understand the Rite in Terms of Scripture, History and Theology (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), p. 195.

early church. Several New Testament and early Christian references directly state or imply the complete submersion of the candidate. Affusion, the only basis for which was the Didache in the period of the Apostolic Fathers (A.D. 70-150), was allowed only as a secondary alternative to immersion. The origin of sprinkling comes much later in the early third century, and forms part of the gradual trend away from immersion. The possible explanations for this divergence ranges from climate to convenience to clinical baptism. Accompanying the baptismal mode was baptism in the trine name--which included trine immersion--and the development of a baptismal creed.

Trine Immersion and the Baptismal Creed

The commands of Christ, mentioned earlier in Matthew 28:19, to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, is a highly disputed matter of form. There are no other New Testament passages which testify to the use of the trine name in the formula of baptism. Nor are there any succeeding documents to substantiate this directive until well into the second century in the writings of Justin, unless an early date for the writings of the Didache is adhered to. Descriptions of baptism in the New Testament book of Acts even appear contrary to this command by simply describing the act as being done "in the name of Jesus."²⁷

²⁷Acts 2:38; 8:16; and 10:48 (NASB).

Various scholars have suggested numerous possible explanations for this apparent discrepancy. One possibility is that the passages in the book of Acts are merely summarized accounts of baptisms where the full formula was actually used. Another potential reason for this is that the apostles had used this shorter form of baptism during the life of Jesus and thus, had grown accustomed to using it in their own lifetime.²⁸ However, a simple and practical explanation comes from New Testament scholar Lars Hartman in his short study, "Into the Name of Jesus." He suggests the phrase, "into the name of Jesus," was spoken at the rite of baptism as a term of "purpose or reference." "'Into the name of Jesus' was above all a definition, a phrase which mentioned the fundamental reference of Christian baptism which distinguished it from other rites."²⁹ Thus, "into the name of Jesus" was invoked at the time of baptism, not to exclude God the Father or the Holy Spirit, but to identify the baptism as a Christian act, not to be confused with similar pagan rites.

By the mid-second century the use of the trine name was widely evident among the Apostolic Fathers. For example, the Didache mentioned the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Moreover, Justin recorded this statement of faith as

²⁸ The International Bible Encyclopedia, 1979 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Reformed View)," by Thomas M. Lindsay.

²⁹ Lars Hartman, "In the Name of Jesus," New Testament Studies 20:432-440, July 1974.

accompanying baptism in his First Apology: "For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washings with water."³⁰ Accompanying this affirmation of faith in the Trinity, was a trine immersion. This practice was evidently begun as a visible means of testifying to the candidate's belief in the Trinity and as tangible evidence for the use of the trine formula. Evidence for the trine formula and trine immersion began with Justin and was clearly called for by both Tertullian³¹ and Hippolytus³² in their respective works dealing with the rite of baptism. Even the Didache alludes to trine immersion in specifying affusion to be done three times.³³

Nonetheless, prior to A.D. 150 little evidence can be found among the Fathers to support this practice. John Ford, Professor of Theology at Catholic University, maintains that any effort to reconstruct a primitive creedal statement, whether christological or trinitarian, has proved unsatisfactory. It was in the second and third centuries that the confession of faith, in Christ or the Trinity, became standard.³⁴ In Tertullian at the end of the second

³⁰ Justin Martyr, First Apology, p. 60.

³¹ Tertullian, De Corona, p. 336.

³² Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 37.

³³ Didache, p. 19.

³⁴ New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed., a.v. "Baptismal Symbol," by John Ford.

century and in Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century, the creed has assumed the formula dialogue between administrator and candidate, with the latter answering only with short affirmations of belief. By the third century, theologian E. C. Whitaker, believes the use of the baptismal formula had become standardized: "This is not to say that it was always used in identical form. The varying forms which we have noted suggest the existence of a basic and irreducible form, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.'"³⁵

Joseph H. Crehan, author of Early Church Baptism and the Creed, believes Jesus Christ so occupied the minds of the people that to confess Him, was sufficient for baptism of earliest times. Therefore the early church grouped together a short formula of "facts about Christ." Then by the mid-second century "facts about God" were included in the formula to combat the Marcionite view that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the New Testament from spreading among the baptismal candidates. "Facts about the Holy Ghost" were later added to complete the formula because the Montanists were challenging the right of the church to give the Holy Spirit.³⁶

³⁵E. C. Whitaker, "The Baptismal Formula in the Syrian Rite," Christian Quarterly Review 161:346-352, July-Sept., 1960.

³⁶Joseph H. Crehan, Early Church Baptism and the Creed (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1950), pp. 143-144.

In the earliest period, the candidate's role in the rite of baptism began as a simple declarative confession of faith in Jesus Christ according to the New Testament. The eunuch seeking baptism from Philip made the simple statement, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."³⁷ However, Oscar Cullmann, a noted scholar of early Christianity from the Reform Tradition, believes a more extensive baptismal formula existed in the New Testament.³⁸ Citing numerous New Testament passages, he proposes that the Greek verb ωδύσκειν, meaning "hinder" or "forbid," was involved in the candidate's questioning over his having fulfilled baptismal prerequisites.³⁹ This would mean that a far more involved and complex formula existed in the New Testament. However, one must understand Cullmann's objective is not to trace the actual New Testament baptismal formula, but to provide evidence for infant baptism from New Testament times. Therefore, Cullmann's proposition of a New Testament baptismal formula appears to be a foregone conclusion in his desire to prove the existence of infant baptism in New Testament literature.⁴⁰

³⁷This verse is not contained in many of the earlier manuscripts.

³⁸Oscar Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), pp. 71-80.

³⁹Acts 8:36; 10:47; and 11:17 (NASB).

⁴⁰Cullmann argues in his book, Baptism in the New Testament, that the term "forbid" or "hinder" represents a more detailed and elaborate baptismal formula to be found in the New Testament. He argues that the candidate's response using

From the simple declarative statement of faith, the candidate's response developed into a standardized ritual. By the time of Hippolytus, the declaratory statement had become a formal interrogation. Crehan sees a primary reason for this development as arising from Roman legal organization:

The substitution of interrogations for plain profession of faith by the candidate may be traced to the growth of legal ideas in the Church, as it gradually became clear that the great legal creation of the Roman Empire had something to offer towards the perfecting, on the natural side, of the organization of the Church.⁴¹

The trine name in the baptismal formula and trine immersion are clearly evident among some of the early church Fathers. The controversy, however, arises over the fact that only a single New Testament passage serves as a foundation for the inclusion of the trine name in the baptismal formula, while several passages in Acts seem to contradict this command. Nonetheless, the practice did exist and was broadly observed as the correct means of Christian baptism

these terms implies a standard formula in regard to asking for baptism. Cullmann, then applies his theory to children in the passage found in Mark 10:13-14: "And they began bringing children to Him, so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, 'Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'" Thereby, without the existence of any direct reference to infant baptism in the New Testament, Cullmann feels his proposition proves infants were indeed baptized in New Testament times because of this supposed reference to a standard baptismal formula.

⁴¹Crehan, Early Church Baptism, p. 144.

by the second and third centuries. The physical rite of baptism carried special meaning in terms of the spiritual benefits which it bestowed. The importance of baptism is derived from these spiritual blessings.

The Doctrine of Baptism

The Ante-Nicene Fathers preached the necessity of water baptism for all individuals because of the spiritual benefits which accompanied the rite.⁴² Through this one act of obedience, many blessings were gained by the candidate. The New Testament is the first literature to record the many spiritual assets which coincided with Christian baptism; however, the writings of the Fathers are not as comprehensive in recording every spiritual advantage to be gained through baptism. Some of the works on this subject, written in the early to middle second century, include the Didache, Ignatius' Letter to Polycarp, the Letter of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and Justin Martyr's First Apology.

Baptism was accepted from the beginning as the rite of admission into the fellowship of the local church. The

⁴²Again, I recognize and acknowledge the existence of various interpretations regarding the difficult and sensitive subject of the doctrine of baptism. For further reference, some of the outstanding representatives from the major points of view are given. From the Roman Catholic viewpoint is Vincent Wilkin's From Limbo to Heaven; from the Reformed Tradition comes Karl Barth's The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism on the one hand, with Oscar Cullmann's Baptism in the New Testament on the other; then from the Baptist point of view is George R. Beasley-Murray's book, Baptism in the New Testament.

Didache expressly stated, "Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist but those baptized in the name of the Lord."⁴³ In more figurative terms, the Shepherd of Hermas described baptism as the foundation for the Christian life. Hermas, in a vision, saw a great tower being built upon the waters. The tower represented the church and the water was the foundation of baptism.⁴⁴ Thus, baptism was thought in early Christendom to mark the beginning of the Christian life. However, this concept changed in later centuries as the habit of postponing baptism gained acceptance. Then baptism was seen as the culmination rather than the beginning of the Christian life.⁴⁵

The forgiveness of sins was the benefit of baptism most widely described by the early Christian Fathers. So closely was it linked to the rite of baptism, that many delayed the practice until late in life, since it was believed that baptism could not be repeated. According to the Shepherd of Hermas, baptism was the sole means to gain forgiveness of past sins:

And I said to him, 'I should like to continue my questions.' 'Speak on,' said he. And I said, 'I heard, sir, some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place when

⁴³Didache, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁴Shepherd of Hermas, pp. 245-246.

⁴⁵James Franklin Bethune-Baker, An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine: To the Time of the Council of Chalcedon (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1958), p. 379.

we descend into the water and receive the remission of former sins.' He said to me, 'That was sound doctrine which you heard, for that is really the case.'⁴⁶

Barnabas also maintained that the forgiveness of sins occurred in the waters of baptism as he described the remarkable change which occurred within the individual from the time before the candidate entered the water until the new Christian emerged from his cleansing bath: ". . . we go down into the water laden with sins and filth, and rise up from it bearing fruit in our hearts."⁴⁷

In the mid-second century, Justin also wrote that through baptism the candidate's past sins would be forgiven. Quoting from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, Justin revealed baptism as the means by which a sinner could escape his past sins. In a later passage, Justin explicitly related how all people are "brought up in bad habits and wicked training"⁴⁸ and yet still could obtain the remission of sins:

. . . in order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father . . . in the name of Jesus Christ . . . and in the name of the Holy Ghost. . . .⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Shepherd of Hermas, p. 266.

⁴⁷ The Letter of Barnabas, p. 210.

⁴⁸ Justin Martyr, First Apology, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Nonetheless, this blessing obtained by the forgiveness of the candidate's past sins was also accompanied by a yoke of responsibility upon the new Christian. According to the Shepherd of Hermas, the new Christian apparently had one opportunity for forgiveness through a second repentance, after which, post-baptismal sin must not occur:

'After that solemn and holy call, if a man sins after severe temptation by the Devil, he has one chance of repentance.' 'But, if he sins and repeats offhandedly, it is unprofitable for such a man.' 'Only with difficulty will he live.' . . . 'For, now I know that if I do not commit additional sins, I shall be saved.' 'You will be saved,' he said, 'as well as all who do this.'⁵⁰

By the late second century baptism was often postponed until late in a person's life because the candidate was under pressure to live a sinless life after baptism. According to James Franklin Bethune-Baker, in his book An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine, the unbaptized were regarded as belonging to the church if the intention of being baptized in later life was present, because of the difficulty of living a sinless life after baptism, and thus, baptism was thought of less and less as the rite of initiation into the church.⁵¹

Besides forgiveness of sins, there is also evidence that the Apostolic Fathers believed that water baptism brought the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The indwelling

⁵⁰Shepherd of Hermas, p. 267.

⁵¹Bethune-Baker, An Introduction to Christian Doctrine, p. 379.

of the Holy Spirit was a gift from God which aided the Christian after baptism in his effort to live a sinless life. The Letter of Barnabas spoke of the reliance of the new Christian on the Holy Spirit following baptism: ". . . we go down into the water laden with sins and filth and rise up from it bearing fruit in our hearts, resting our fear and hope on Jesus in the Spirit."⁵² Clement of Rome appeared to have baptism in mind when he spoke of "the seal of the Son of God" and "one Spirit of grace poured out on us."⁵³ According to John N. D. Kelly, a leading authority on early Christian doctrines, the theory connecting the reception of the Holy Spirit with baptism was fairly general in the second century.⁵⁴

Besides remitting the previous sins of the candidate, baptism added further blessings to aid the new Christian in his future efforts to avoid falling back into his former sinful nature. With the indwelling of the Spirit, the neophyte obtained an ally to stave off his former sinful appetite. Ignatius is quite descriptive in describing baptism in military terms:

⁵²The Letter of Barnabas, p. 210.

⁵³Clement of Rome, The So-called Second Letter to the Corinthians, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:70.

⁵⁴John Norman Davidson Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 194.

May none of you turn out a deserter. Let your baptism be ever your shield, your faith a helmet, your charity a spear, your patience a panoply.⁵⁵

Justin, in advocating the necessity of baptism to receive forgiveness for past sins, described baptism as regeneration and illumination:

Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated . . . and this washing is called illumination, because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings.⁵⁶

Justin was concerned that the candidate understand the spiritual blessings, such as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins, were necessary gifts in order to fulfill the Christian's responsibility and he cautioned, ". . . we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ (by means of baptism) . . . and undertake to be able to live accordingly."⁵⁷

Perhaps the greatest of the spiritual benefits mentioned by the Fathers to be received at baptism by the Christian was eternal life. The Letter of Barnabas, in explaining the Old Testament passage of Ezekiel 47:12, associated eternal life with baptism:

And there was a river flowing on the right hand, and beautiful trees grew out of it; and whoever shall eat of them shall live forever. This means

⁵⁵Ignatius, Letter to Polycarp, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:126.

⁵⁶Justin Martyr, First Apology, pp. 59-60.

⁵⁷Ibid.

that we go down into the water full of sins and foulness and we come up bearing fruit in our hearts; fear and hope in Jesus in the Spirit. And whoever shall eat of them shall live forever. This means: whoever hears these things spoken and believes shall live forever.⁵⁸

Clement of Rome, perhaps the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, taught this: "Keep the flesh pure and the seal undefiled that we may receive eternal life."⁵⁹ Clement was urging the Christian not to fall into the state of apostasy once he had received the seal of baptism in order that the benefit of eternal life could be reaped. Hermas taught that the seal is preached in order that all individuals "might enter into the Kingdom of God."⁶⁰

Admission into the fellowship of the local church, the forgiveness of sins, the reception and indwelling of the Holy Spirit and eternal life were all major spiritual blessings attributed to baptism by the Apostolic Fathers of the early second century. By the third century as Christianity began to grow and expand into more far-flung geographical regions, the increased importance of baptism slowly began to develop.

The theology of baptism became more elaborate in eastern Christendom from the late second to the mid-third century. This is not to say the effects of Christian baptism were

⁵⁸The Letter of Barnabas, p. 210.

⁵⁹Clement of Rome, Second Letter to the Corinthians, p. 70.

⁶⁰Shepherd of Hermas, p. 331.

changed drastically, but only that through growth and organization the rite became more complex. The major Christian writers in eastern Christendom came mostly from the school in Alexandria, administered by Clement and continued by his pupil Origen, who later resided and taught in Palestine.

Clement, writing in the last of the second century, spoke of baptism as a "free gift," since former sins were remitted, and also as "enlightenment," because of the rebirth of the individual:

This ceremony is often called 'free gift,' since by it the punishments due to our sins are remitted; 'enlightenment,' since by it we behold the holy light of salvation, that is, through it we are enabled to see the divine; we call it 'perfection,' needing nothing more, for what more does he need who has the knowledge of God.⁶¹

Clement stressed, perhaps too heavily, the importance of knowledge in the Christian's life. However, his writings were not simple statements describing the effects of baptism, as many of the earlier writings of the Fathers appear to have been. Clement slanted his writings on baptism as a response to the Gnostic teaching that a new life could be obtained after a series of stages, whereas, Clement saw baptism as a single dividing line between two distinct styles of life.⁶² Once a person accepted Jesus and was

⁶¹Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 4:182.

⁶²Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 1928 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Early Christian)," by Kirsopp Lake.

baptized, he became a partaker in the divine nature.

Clement described the change which occurred in these words:

Those who are baptized are cleansed of the sins which overcloud their divine Spirit like a mist, and they acquire a spiritual sight which is free and unhindered and clear, by which alone we are able to behold divinity, with the help of the Holy Spirit, who flows in on us from heaven.⁶³

Origen reiterated much of what his mentor had taught concerning the effects of baptism on the Christian.⁶⁴ As a prolific writer on biblical exegesis, Origen spoke of three kinds of baptism in his various writings. These three views have been summarized by Roman Catholic theologian Lorna Brockett in the following manner:

The baptism of the Old Testament, at the Exodus, in the cloud and the sea, which is, like John's baptism, a symbol of Christian baptism; secondly, Christian baptism, which gives the Spirit, and is both the reality signified by Old Testament baptism, and a symbol of the baptism to come; and finally the eschatological baptism with the spirit and with fire, which will be conferred upon all Christians before they enter into glory.⁶⁵

Clement of Alexandria and Origen, representing Christian thought in the eastern Christian world, show little divergence from the rather simplistic writings of the early Christian Fathers. Their thoughts on baptism contain the

⁶³ Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, p. 134.

⁶⁴ Much of Origen's theology is suspect by the larger segments of Christianity, however, his thoughts on Christian baptism closely follows the writings of his teacher, Clement of Alexandria and provides legitimate evidence for this study.

⁶⁵ Lorna Brockett, The Theology of Baptism (Notre Dame: Fides Publishing Inc., 1971), pp. 36-37.

some basic theological elements as the earlier writers, only the elements are presented as a more complex synthesis of the baptismal effects. This progression toward complexity became even more evident in the writings of the western Fathers of the church.

The major representative Fathers of western Christendom during the late second century and early third were Tertullian, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Cyprian. Of these four men, Tertullian and Cyprian wrote from the North African city of Carthage, while Hippolytus' writings came from Rome and Irenaeus' from Lyons. The general unity in thought on the effects of baptism began to change in the third century.

Hippolytus faithfully recorded the traditional theology of the earlier century associating both forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit with the single act of baptism. However, other ceremonies surrounding baptism began to be given roles of greater importance, such as the laying on of hands with prayer and unction with oil. And on occasion these practices were linked with the reception of the Spirit.⁶⁶ According to John N. D. Kelly, the opening chapters of Tertullian's book On Baptism, clearly associates the bestowing of the Holy Spirit with the act of baptism, but in a later chapter Tertullian remarks: "Not that in the waters we obtain the Holy Spirit, but in the water, under [the influence of] the angel, we are cleansed, and [thus]

⁶⁶Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, pp. 208-209.

prepared for the Holy Spirit."⁶⁷ Later in the same work, Tertullian associated the reception of the Spirit with the laying on of hands: ". . . the hand is laid on us, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through [the words of] benediction."⁶⁸ The theology of Tertullian is apparently confused over the exact moment the gift of the Spirit is bestowed in the baptismal ceremony.

Cyprian continued the movement in the mid-third century to disassociate the reception of the Spirit with baptism. This is not to say that the more traditional view had been completely abandoned,⁶⁹ but rather, the more general approach was now to associate the Spirit with the ceremonies which followed baptism. The anonymous work, A Treatise on Re-Baptism, often attributed to Cyprian, distinguished in terms of importance that the role of baptism was "the less" and the laying on of hands was "the greater."⁷⁰ Kelly, an outstanding scholar in the area of early Christian doctrine, presents a possible explanation for the disintegration of the former unitary baptismal rite into a number of component

⁶⁷Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 15.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁹The third century theologian, Novation, maintained the conservative view that the Holy Spirit became an active force through baptism and prepared the Christian for immortality.

⁷⁰A Treatise on Re-Baptism, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 13:417-418.

parts. He argues: "With the weakening of the significance of baptism itself, the result in part of its delegation to presbyters, the importance of the imposition with hands or of sealing with chrism, which were reserved to the bishop, became enhanced."⁷¹ As the organization of the church grew more and more complex, the roles played by those in positions of higher authority became more important and the power to bestow the Holy Spirit was now thought to be the sole prerogative of the overseer.

Yet, Cyprian, too, is not without ambiguity. From his Epistles comes this statement: "It is through baptism that the Holy Spirit is received, and those who have been baptized and have obtained the Holy Spirit are admitted to drink the cup of the Lord."⁷² Cyprian appears to be just one step further than Tertullian in consenting to the separation of the Holy Spirit and baptism. This evolution into a two-step ceremony appears to be in the stage of transition at the end of the age of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

With the transferral of the reception of the Holy Spirit to a later ceremony controlled by the bishops, the forgiveness of sins became the major accomplishment of baptism. Hippolytus spoke of the "purifying power" of

⁷¹Kelly, Early Christian Doctrine, p. 210.

⁷²Cyprian, Epistles, p. 310.

baptism⁷³ and Tertullian said the spiritual effect of baptism was "that we are freed from sins."⁷⁴ Irenaeus said, "Jesus Christ . . . did also command them to be baptized for the remission of sins."⁷⁵

So also did the Fathers in western Christendom teach that baptism brought salvation. Tertullian spoke of how the simplicity of the act of baptism often presented a stumbling block to the earthly mind:

. . . with so great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty of preparation, finally, without expense, a man is dipped in the water . . . and then rises again, not much the cleaner, the consequent attainment of eternity is esteemed the more incredible.⁷⁶

Cyprian also, spoke that salvation was attainable through baptism. ". . . from that death which once the blood of Christ extinguished, and from which the saving grace of baptism and of our Redeemer has delivered us. . . ."⁷⁷ Cyprian, the latest of the Fathers under examination, vividly described the events which took place at baptism in this way:

⁷³Hippolytus, Discourse on the Holy Theophany, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 5:237.

⁷⁴Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 17.

⁷⁵Irenaeus, Against Heresies, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 24 vols. Ante-Nicene Christian Library (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 9:87-88.

⁷⁶Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 5.

⁷⁷Cyprian, Epistles, p. 145.

For as I myself was held in bonds by the innumerable errors of my previous life, from which I did not believe that I could possibly be delivered, so I was disposed to acquiesce in my changing vices, and because I despaired of better things, I used to indulge my sins as if they were actually parts of me and indigenous to me. But after that, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of former years had been washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, had been infused into my reconciled heart,--after that, by the agency of the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth hath restored me to a new man;--then, in a wonderful manner, doubtful things at once began to assure themselves to me, hidden things to be revealed, dark things to be enlightened, what before had been difficult began to suggest a means of accomplishment, what had been impossible, to be capable of being achieved; so that I was enabled to acknowledge that what previously, being born of the flesh, had been living in the practice of sins, was of the earth earthly, but had now begun to be of God and was animated by the Spirit of holiness.⁷⁸

It is evident that as the organization of the church began to expand, the significance of baptism began to change in some respects. For example, this is true concerning the power to confer the Holy Spirit, which had become a means to accentuate the ascending levels of authority in the hierarchy in western Christendom. Initiation into the fellowship of the local church, forgiveness of sin, salvation, and the reception and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit were always connected in some way to the rite of baptism, yet as time progressed, each of these spiritual blessings contributed to making the act of baptism more important than the mode. The baptismal ceremony became more elaborate and certain blessings, formerly gained through baptism alone, were associated with certain ceremonies to

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 3.

accentuate each of the spiritual benefits obtained through baptism in a special way. Theological change did not come through the adoption of strange pagan rites, but through growth in numbers and expansion in organization. Pressures from without were not the cause of baptismal expansion and organization, but rather, phenomenal growth within the church itself was the source, which apparently indicated to the Fathers a need to standardize and organize the rite of baptism. One evident area in the expansion and organization of the doctrine of baptism is the rise of infant baptism in the third century. As the practice grew to alarming proportions, the theology of baptism also had to expand to justify the increasing use of this mode.

CHAPTER IV

VARIATIONS IN BAPTISM, A.D. 90-258

The practice of believer's baptism was unquestionably the normal custom in the period A.D. 90-258. This fact can be easily attested to by the passages from both Tertullian and Hippolytus, which describe in minute detail the practice of the rite and the preparation of the candidate. However, variations in baptism existed and began to be accepted or rejected by the early Christian Fathers. By the third century, infant baptism, the baptism in blood, and rebaptism were all matters which received substantial attention. The most far-reaching and widely practiced of these variations was infant baptism.

Infant Baptism

The origin of infant baptism is a highly controversial matter for both modern historians and theologians. As such, the first material to be considered are those writings which clearly speak of the existence of infant baptism, before considering the possibility of an origin in the New Testament. Many scholars assert that infant baptism need not necessarily preclude believer's baptism, but could conceivably exist in conjunction with the established practice.

The earliest direct reference to infant baptism comes near the end of the second century. Irenaeus' statement in Against Heresies, concerning the broad extent of salvation, is often referred to as the first clear statement among the early Fathers concerning the practice of infant baptism. According to Irenaeus: "For he came to save all by means of himself--all, I say, who by him are born again to God--infants, children, adolescents, young men and old men."¹ However, this statement is not explicit in testifying to the existence and practice of infant baptism. For example, Kurt Aland, a leading contemporary opponent against the view of the presence of infant baptism in the New Testament,² fails to see the connection of Irenaeus with the practice of baptizing infants:

It does not seem apparent to me that Irenaeus has baptism in view here, and certainly there is no thought of infant baptism; he is concerned solely with the fact that Jesus sanctified all humanity in that he was made like all, lived through all ages of life and was an example to all.³

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, p. 200.

²The debate between Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland over infant baptism has lasted for about twenty years. Both come from the Lutheran tradition, but disagreement arises over when infant baptism originated. The view of Jeremias is that New Testament Christians baptized infants and therefore that practice should be maintained at the present time. Aland's view is that new Christians did not baptize infants, yet infants should be baptized now. For examples, see Jeremias' works, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries and The Origins of Infant Baptism, and Aland's book, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?

³Kurt Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, trans. by George R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 59.

Beginning with Tertullian, at the end of the second century, definite references to infant baptism appear in patristic literature. However, Tertullian wrote as an opponent of the practice of baptizing infants:

It follows that deferment of baptism is more profitable, in accordance with each person's character and attitude, and even age; and especially so as regards children. For what need is there, if there really is no need, for even their sponsors to be brought into peril, seeing they may possibly themselves fail of their promises by death, or be deceived by the subsequent development of an evil disposition? . . . let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ. Why should innocent infancy come with haste to the remission of sins?⁴

Tertullian clearly advocated an age of accountability should be reached by the candidate before Christian baptism was administered, yet by so advising he verified the presence of infant baptism. Everett Ferguson, a noted historian of the early church, does not believe that Tertullian would oppose an established and generally accepted practice of the church. Moreover, Ferguson believes that infant baptism received its earliest support from North Africa and probably originated from that region.⁵

On the other hand, Thomas M. Lindsay, Professor of Church History at Glasgow, Scotland, proposes that if Tertullian had known that infant baptism was not an established practice dating back to Apostolic times, he most certainly would have used this fact as a convincing means of

⁴Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 39.

⁵Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 60.

dealing with his opponents.⁶ Joachim Jeremias, a noted modern advocate of the existence of infant baptism in the New Testament, views Tertullian's opposition to baptizing infants as referring only to special cases. According to Jeremias, Tertullian's work, On Baptism, was written with the baptism of only new converts in view, and what Tertullian doubts is the unfair responsibility laid upon the sponsors.⁷ However, Aland, Jeremias' opponent, understands Tertullian to be addressing the entire church, mentioning the fact that other writings by Tertullian confirm this view.⁸

The Apostolic Tradition, written by Hippolytus in Rome in the early third century, shows that a mixed situation existed. The candidate spent three years as a catechumenate in preparing for the rite of baptism and was required to undergo a period of intense examination called "scrutinies," reviewing the reasons for his desire of baptism. After this, he was baptized. Nonetheless, the situation of baptism involving little children is also described in Hippolytus' work:

And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents

⁶The International Bible Encyclopedia, 1979 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Reformed View)," by Thomas M. Lindsay.

⁷Joachim Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, trans. by David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 83.

⁸Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 65.

answer or someone from their family. And next they shall baptize the grown men; and last the women.⁹

Many church historians do not accept this as proof of the common practice of infant baptism in early Christianity. Ferguson, for example, believes that the provision of sponsors was an "awkward adjustment" for those incapable of answering for themselves. Sponsors first appear in the writings of Tertullian and evidently the confession of faith was such an integral part of Christian baptism that it could not be dispensed with even for those unable to speak for themselves.¹⁰ Aland suggests that since Hippolytus' earlier writings deal with catechumens of three years, in which the life and behavior of the candidate are examined, there exists grounds for a possible interpolation hypothesis of the infant baptism section.¹¹

The first definite advocate of the practice of infant baptism comes in the mid-third century in the writings of the Eastern Father, Origen. Three passages in his works set forth Origen's view of infant baptism. Described by Lindsay as the most learned Christian writer during the first three

⁹Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 33.

¹⁰Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 60.

¹¹Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 60. Aland presents no firm evidence that the passage in Hippolytus is an interpolation, but merely offers the suggestion as a possible solution to the existence of the passage in view of the overwhelming evidence from the Apostolic Tradition for believer's baptism.

centuries, Origen set forth the theology of the necessity of infant baptism. He was aware that one of the main functions of Christian baptism was the forgiveness of sins and thus began to develop the idea of infant sinfulness. He cites Job 14:4 from the Septuagint as the biblical basis for the sinfulness of infants: "No one is free from uncleanness."¹² Thus, Origen's desire to explain the already existing practice of infant baptism provides evidence that the practice preceded the theological justification. Ferguson sees the theological development as gradual and not in direct association with original sin: "The sequence was infant baptism, then the doctrine of infant sinfulness, and not a doctrine of original sin leading to the practice of infant baptism."¹³ Thus, Ferguson implies a gradual progression to the use of original sin as the doctrine to justify the baptism of infants.

Origen is also cited by the advocates of the view that infant baptism was taught in the New Testament, because of his statement in Commentary on Romans, which dates the practice of baptizing infants back to the Apostles:

For this also the church had a tradition from the apostles, to give baptism even to infants. For they to whom the secrets of divine mysteries were given knew that there is in all persons the natural stains of sin which must be washed away by the

¹²Job 14:4 (NASB).

¹³Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 60.

water and the Spirit. On account of these stains the body itself is called the body of sin.¹⁴

Aland believes that the writings of Origen are really defensive works against the belief that infants do not need baptism. He points out that Origen says specifically, "I take this occasion to discuss something which our brothers often enquire about. Infants are baptized for the remission of sins. Of what kinds? Or when did they sin?"¹⁵ Aland suggests the voices against infant baptism are so strong Origen has to enter into discussion with them time and again.¹⁶ Ferguson notes that the Latin translators were not totally faithful in their conveying full confidence on the part of Origen, whereas the Greek translation of Origen's thoughts on baptizing infants are not nearly as charged with assurance.

By the middle of the third century, Cyprian in the West was known as a consistent exponent of the practice of infant baptism. He, like Origen, believed an infant was in need of baptism at birth because of another's sinfulness:

. . . who having been born recently has not sinned, except in that being born physically according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death by his first birth. He approaches that much more easily to the reception of the

¹⁴Origen, Commentary on Romans, cited by Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 57.

¹⁵Origen, Homilies on Luke, cited by Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 57.

¹⁶Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 55.

forgiveness of sins because the sins remitted to him are not his own, but those of another.¹⁷

Cyprian wrote to the North African bishops to not delay the baptism of infants until the eighth day, as analogous to circumcision, but to baptize the infant immediately. Accompanying the rite of baptism was the privilege to participate in taking the Eucharist. Thus, even for infants, the partaking in these emblems was deemed necessary. However, Cyprian's description of this privilege by an infant girl serves more as a harmful force to his position than helpful. The Eucharist was evidently forced upon the little child which would indicate a perversion of what should have been a joyful occasion:

. . . the little child . . . turned away its face, compressed its mouth with resisting lips, and refused the cup. Still the deacon persisted, and although against her efforts, forced on her some of the sacrament of the cup. Then there followed a sobbing and vomiting. In a profaned body and mouth the Eucharist could not remain; the draught sanctified in the blood of the Lord burst forth from the polluted stomach.¹⁸

Aland concedes that according to a synodal letter of Cyprian in A.D. 250, infant baptism was a church requirement, including the children of both Christian and proselyte parents.¹⁹ By the time of Cyprian, infant baptism was a

¹⁷Cyprian, Epistles, p. 193.

¹⁸Cyprian, On the Lapsed, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers, 38 vols. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1957), 25:33.

¹⁹Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 48.

generally accepted practice. However, in dealing with the complexity of thought on the origin of infant baptism, Aland presents the following as a feasible explanation:

A beginning of this 'custom of the church' about the end of the second century leaves enough time before A.D. 230/250 for the formation of a firm ecclesiastical usage, and on the other hand, it explains why arguments against it have not been silenced.²⁰

However, several scholars believe there is adequate evidence indicating the practice of infant baptism, beginning in New Testament times and proceeding to the second century. Thus, a chronological examination of the evidence for and against the practice of infant baptism during both New Testament times and the period of the Apostolic Fathers, is necessary.

Jeremias, the foremost proponent of the view that infant baptism was practiced in New Testament times, believes all New Testament statements referring to baptism come from a missionary situation. Missionary baptism focuses upon the adult believer, whereas their children "hidden in the bosom of the family" could not claim the same degree of attention.²¹ However, there remains one major fact which inhibits belief in the practice of infant baptism in the New Testament and which Jeremias and others have not dealt with convincingly. There are no explicit references concerning the baptism of infants within the New Testament. This lack of any direct

²⁰ Ibid., p. 55. This is also the thesis of his book.

²¹ Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, p. 11.

evidence for infant baptism in New Testament literature has caused many scholars to be critical of any attempt to insert the practice by implication. For example, Frederick Schliermacher, the prominent nineteenth-century German, said: ". . . all traces of infant baptism which one has asserted are to be found in the New Testament must first be inserted there."²² Coinciding with this belief, Johannes Warns, in his recent book Baptism: Studies in the Original Christian Baptism, states:

In the time of the Apostles the custom of baptizing children of tender years was wholly unknown. This fact is today acknowledged by all authorities of the different churches and is openly declared in the best textbooks.²³

Despite the apparent lack of direct evidence, Jeremias has assembled a number of indirect references, which he believes, clearly show the existence of infant baptism in the New Testament. For example, he points out that there existed within the Jewish religion a primitive type of Christian baptism, called "proselyte baptism." Jeremias claims a connection exists between Christian baptism and proselyte baptism. He states the Apostle Paul, as a student of the Hillelite Gamaliel, would have been familiar with this practice. Within proselyte baptism, when Gentiles adopted the Jewish faith, the children did also, the boys by

²²Johannes Warns, Baptism: Studies in the Original Christian Baptism (London: Paternoster Press, 1957), p. 56.

²³Ibid.

circumcision and the girls by baptism. In this manner, Jeremias connects the Old Testament law of circumcision with the New Testament rite of baptism:

The description of baptism as 'Christian circumcision' makes it very probable that the procedure of baptism was the same, that is, the children of every age were baptized along with their parents when the latter were converted to the Christian faith.²⁴

Going even further than Jeremias in his effort to reconcile proselyte baptism with Christian baptism is Reform theologian Pierre Marcel, a leading advocate of covenant theology. Covenant theology is the belief that the elements involved in the Old Covenant (Old Testament) were also present in the New Covenant (New Testament). Thus, for example, by analogy, the church replaced the nation of Israel, the Eucharist replaced the Passover celebration, and baptism replaced the rite of circumcision. Therefore, since circumcision was performed on the eighth day, so was baptism necessary for the newborn infant. Baptism was the sign of entry into the New Covenant, just as circumcision had been the means of entering the old.²⁵

In addition to proselyte baptism and covenant theology, there is another approach used by Jeremias to prove his thesis concerning infant baptism. In this, he cites what he

²⁴Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, p. 40.

²⁵Pierre Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, trans. by Philip Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1953), pp. 187-245.

calls an "oikos formula." Oikos is the Greek noun for household. In Acts 16:15 it states: "Lydia . . . and her household had been baptized." Acts 16:33 says: ". . . and immediately he (the Philippian jailor) was baptized, he and all his household." The passage from Acts 18:8 expresses: "And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized." Then Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:16: "Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanus."²⁶ Therefore, Jeremias believes everyone included in the term household would have been baptized. The point in question is this: Did the household being referred to, include infants? Jeremias insists that not only were small children referred to, but the word oikos implies special reference to them. According to Jeremias, the new Christians had inherited the rich tradition of family solidarity from their Jewish background. The household would follow the father. This fact was taken for granted and thereby explains the lack of emphasis upon the children.²⁷

This possible reference to infants is combined with the promise of the remission of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit found in Acts 2:38. The following verse (Acts 2:39)

²⁶Acts 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; and I Corinthians 1:16 (NASB).

²⁷Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, p. 20.

indicates that this promise was delivered to the believers and their children. Thus, Norman Fox, twentieth-century Baptist author of the article on infant baptism in the New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, believes Acts 2:29 provides the strong probability, to say the least, that infants were baptized by the Apostles.²⁸

Previously mentioned as a possible reference to infant baptism in the New Testament, is Cullmann's belief that the Greek word κωλύειν meaning "to hinder" or "prevent" was part of the baptismal formula. Moreover, Cullmann feels that when Jesus instructed his disciples not to hinder the children from coming to him, he was referring to their need for baptism.²⁹ Despite all of these indirect evidences for the presence of infant baptism in the New Testament, substantial disagreement exists regarding the presence of infant baptism in New Testament times.

The first and foremost evidence against the baptism of infants in the New Testament is the fact that there is no direct reference to infant baptism anywhere in its pages. Accompanying this fact are many New Testament passages which associate belief with baptism. Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved. . . ." On the day of Pentecost, it is recorded that 3,000 were told to

²⁸The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, 1951 ed., s.v. "The Baptism of Infants," by Norman Fox.

²⁹Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament, pp. 71-80.

"repent and let each of you be baptized." Later in the book of Acts, it states that 5,000 "believed" before baptism. In describing the growth of the church, Acts affirms that, ". . . more believers were constantly added."³⁰ These passages call for an active belief on the part of the individual seeking baptism, which infants would not be able to manifest. In all of the household passages in Acts, a prior belief was called for by Paul and shown by the baptismal recipient. Lydia was said to have ". . . opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." The Philippian jailor was told, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, ". . . believed in the Lord with all his household."³¹ Aland believes that the household might not even have had children in mind, but could possibly be referring to the household servants.

According to Aland, there is no proof that circumcision and baptism were administered at the same time. He further claims Jeremias is "reading the issue" by comparing proselyte baptism and Christian baptism. Besides making unwarranted assumptions, Aland believes Jeremias evades the issue of Jews or women becoming Christians which would have no precedence from proselyte baptism. In further refuting the presence of infant baptism, Aland interprets the word

³⁰Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, 4:4; and 5:12 (NASB).

³¹Acts 16:14; 16:31; and 18:8 (NASB).

children in the passage from Acts 2:29, ". . . the promise is for you and your children . . . ,"³² as referring to future generations and not the current children of the believers.³³ Thus, he concludes that infant baptism in the New Testament is of questionable repute, and the evidence for the practice in the second century is of similar documentation.

The Didache, perhaps the earliest of the writings in the Apostolic period, contained no evidence for the existence of infant baptism. To the contrary, the work mentioned a period of fasting prior to the baptism and participation in the Eucharist following the rite which does not appear applicable to infants.³⁴ The Shepherd of Hermas presupposes a probation period before baptism, when those contemplating baptism could ". . . change their minds and return to their evil desires . . . ," whereas, infants would not be in control of their spiritual destiny.³⁵ The Shepherd of Hermas further contradicts the entire purpose of baptizing infants when it testifies to the innocence of infants:

Those who believed are such as these: They are like innocent infants, in whose heart no wickedness enters and who do not know what evil is but always remain in innocence. Such as these will undoubtedly live in the kingdom of God, because in no way did they defile the commandments of God, but innocently

³²Acts 2:39 (NASB).

³³Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 54.

³⁴Didache, pp. 19-20.

³⁵Shepherd of Hermas, pp. 249-250.

remained in the same frame of mind all the days of their life. As many of you then who will continue and be as infants, with no wickedness, will be more honored than all others, for all infants are honored before God and are in the first rank before him. Blessed are all of you therefore, who remove evil from yourselves and put on guiltlessness.³⁶

Nor is the Shepherd of Hermas the only of the writings of the second century to testify to the innocent state of infants. Barnabas wrote, "Since he renewed us in the forgiveness of sins, he made us into another image, so as to have the soul of children, as if he were indeed refashioning us."³⁷ In figurative terms, Clement of Alexandria also testified to the pureness of the young:

Not naked of possessions, but, as a just man, he departs naked of evil and sin . . . pure in flesh, holy by abstinence from evil deeds; God shows that he would have us to be such as he has generated us from our mother, the water.³⁸

Aristides, a Greek Christian apologist in A.D. 140, wrote concerning the innocence of infants who die young: "And when a child, has been born to one of them [Christians], they give thanks to God; and if it should die as an infant, they give thanks the more because it has departed life sinless."³⁹ Thus, the innocence of infants in the second

³⁶Ibid., pp. 345-346.

³⁷The Letter of Barnabas, p. 210.

³⁸Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 12:261.

³⁹Aristides, Apology, cited in Ferguson, Early Christians Speak, p. 55.

century appears to be unquestioned with no mention of the taint of another's sin at birth.

Those who argue for the existence of infant baptism in the second century rely heavily upon the testimony of Polycarp at his martyrdom. Polycarp claimed: "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong."⁴⁰ Therefore, advocates of infant baptism in the second century claim Polycarp was baptized as an infant. A similar passage from Justin Martyr also serves to suggest that aged Christians had been baptized as infants. Justin spoke of, ". . . many men and women of sixty and seventy years of age, who became disciples of Christ from their childhood."⁴¹ If these passages do refer to infant baptism, the practice must have existed during the first century.

However, the opponents of infant baptism before A.D. 200 are able to present valid explanations for the indirect passages used in support of baptizing infants. When Polycarp said he had served Christ for eighty-six years, could he not have meant he served Him as a child, but was baptized at a more responsible age? Aland uses a passage from Clement of Rome's First Letter to the Corinthians, written c. A.D. 96, to further enhance this possibility. Clement spoke of "trustworthy and prudent men, who have

⁴⁰The Martyrdom of Polycarp, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:155-156.

⁴¹Justin Martyr, First Apology, p. 15.

lived among us irreproachably from youth to old age."⁴²

According to Aland, the birth of these men would have dated before the foundation of the church, thus, their youth was not exclusively the earliest period of youth, and quite certainly not the time of infancy.⁴³

The writings of Justin Martyr would, like the testimony of the Didache, presuppose the baptism of adults. Prayers, the holy kiss, and the Eucharist would not have been instituted for infants. Justin also wrote that, ". . . we . . . of choice and knowledge may obtain in the water the remission of the sins formerly committed."⁴⁴ Thus, in baptism the Christian exercises his choice and knowledge, which would mean that one is not an infant.

In conclusion, the practice of infant baptism existed and can be documented by the third century. However, whether the practice was then a new innovation or a long-standing Apostolic tradition is not as clear. Despite the amount of possible indirect references to the existence of infant baptism in the first and second centuries, the historian cannot dismiss the total lack of any direct evidence from this time period. Perhaps Aland said it best when he stated:

⁴²Clement of Rome, First Letter to the Corinthians, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church, 40 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1947), 1:57-58.

⁴³Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 75.

⁴⁴Justin Martyr, First Apology, p. 60.

The historian can help to clarify the issue, but no more. Here, then, the historian is driven to lay down his pen, not because he is defeated, not because his material has proved incapable of historical treatment, but because, at this point, he is faced by the problem of theology. . . .⁴⁵

The Baptism in Blood

Martyrdom was accepted as an adequate substitution for water baptism by Tertullian in the late second century and was also approved by Cyprian in the third century as constituting valid baptism. Tertullian proposed that Jesus himself confirmed the validity of martyrdom as a form of baptism:

We have indeed a second washing, it too a single one, that of blood, of which our Lord said, 'I have a baptism to be baptized with,' (Luke 12:50) when he had already been baptized . . . he sent forth these two baptisms from out of the wound of his pierced side, because those who had faith in his blood were to be washed in water, and those who had washed in water would also need [to be washed] in blood.⁴⁶

In the estimation of Cyprian, martyrdom was the highest means of baptism, for he spoke of "the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood."⁴⁷ Martyrdom, then, is the participation in the death of Jesus Christ, not symbolically as water baptism, but in reality. Baptism in blood was

⁴⁵ Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Tertullian, On Baptism, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Cyprian, Epistles, p. 272.

participation with Jesus by imitation and reproduction and not through the intermediary symbol of water baptism.⁴⁸

Hippolytus, also mentions the legitimate existence of a baptism in blood.⁴⁹ Thus, three of the major writers in the early third century--Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Cyprian--all accepted martyrdom as a realistic mode of baptism. This harmony of writers and the absence of any contrary writings on baptism in blood, would indicate a universal acceptance of this practice.

Rebaptism

Within the early church, baptism was often delayed until late in a person's life, so that the sins accumulated during a lifetime would all be forgiven. Once an individual became a Christian through baptism, later sins would be inexcusable. Tertullian, in his work On Purity, explained the danger of sinning following baptism:

Thus, in as much as he excuses those sins which are committed before baptism, by just so much does he make those irremissible which are committed after it, since a second baptism is not permitted.⁵⁰

However, by the mid-third century in the time of Cyprian, a controversy arose over the validity of baptisms

⁴⁸New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Theology of)," by Teresa Marie Deferrari.

⁴⁹Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition, p. 30.

⁵⁰Tertullian, On Purity, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers, 38 vols. (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1959), 28:99.

by heretics.⁵¹ A difference of opinion existed between Cyprian of Carthage in North Africa, who strongly supported the practice of rebaptism, and the Bishop of Rome (Stephen), who refused to sanction rebaptism and threatened to excommunicate the North African bishops if they did not cease in this practice.⁵² Stephen commanded that those former heretics entering the church only needed to receive the imposition of hands and claimed to be upholding the primitive custom which considered Christian baptism administered by a heretic as valid. Whereas, Cyprian admitted to be advocating rebaptism against tradition, yet he maintained it to be "a human and unlawful tradition."⁵³ The controversy did not arrive at any widely accepted solution because Stephen and Cyprian died in A.D. 257 and A.D. 258 respectively, with each following continuing in its own custom. Infant baptism, the baptism in blood and rebaptism all indicate a significant conceptual change in baptism and indicate a number of additions noted by the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

⁵¹A heretic is one who professes a religious belief in a doctrine which opposes the orthodox position of the church.

⁵²The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 2nd ed., ed. F. L. Cross (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 126-128.

⁵³Catholic Encyclopedia, 1907 ed., a.v. "Baptism," by William H. W. Fanning.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have tried to answer the two questions put forth in the introduction. Namely, to what extent did the rite of baptism develop over the period A.D. 90-258 and did the ritual of the third century maintain the New Testament tradition of baptism? Moreover, if the role of baptism did change, why? Within the first three centuries of the history of Christianity, baptism experienced substantial expansion in all areas of the rite. The features were enlarged to meet the needs of an expanding church. The areas of expansion were not the intentional efforts by some unorthodox believers to destroy or change the rite, but were the work of Christian leaders, desiring a baptismal rite corresponding to the organizational needs of a growing church.

The entire idea of a standardized ceremony appears contradictory to the spontaneous rite administered in the New Testament. In the first century, the Ethiopian eunuch, coming upon a body of water, said to Philip, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"¹ Immediately, he was

¹Acts 8:36 (NASB).

led into the water and baptized. Yet, by the end of the second century, Tertullian and later still Hippolytus, write of an orderly and fairly uniform practice of baptism.

Kirsopp Lake, a noted authority on early Christianity, cites the transition of the rite of baptism toward complexity as being gradual rather than a noticeable radical transformation:

As might have been expected, the rite gradually became more and more complicated. The earliest form, represented in Acts, was simple immersion (not necessarily submersion) in water, the use of the name of the Lord, and the laying on of hands. To these were added at various times and places which cannot be safely identified, (a) the trine name (Justin), (b) a moral vow (Justin and perhaps Hermas, as well as already in the New Testament in I Peter), (c) trine immersion (Justin), (d) a confession of faith (Irenaeus, or perhaps Justin), (e) unction (Tertullian), (f) sponsors (Tertullian), (g) milk and honey (Tertullian).²

Yet, because the Ante-Nicene Fathers recognized the contributions to the rite of baptism as appearing to complement the central act of baptism, there was little apparent opposition. Also, since the expansion occurred through internal change within the Christian movement, rather than from external force, the growth was not as noticeable. However, the development which had occurred by the third century had gone far beyond the New Testament tradition of baptism.

²Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 1928 ed., a.v. "Baptism (Early Christian)," by Kirsopp Lake.

The original simplicity of the rite of Christian baptism began to fade early in the second century being replaced by a far more involved and complicated rite of initiation. The expansion from simplicity to complexity is plainly evident from a simple chronological observation of the rite beginning in New Testament writings and proceeding to the Didache, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. The very words of Tertullian concerning the basis for trine immersion clearly demonstrates the existence of a composite synthesis. "Here upon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel."³ Nor is Tertullian merely speaking of the practice of trine immersion for, as he concluded a rather lengthy section upon the practice of baptism, he made this admission:

If for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer.⁴

Indeed, the rite of Christian baptism had expanded. However, excluding Tertullian, none of the early Fathers cite in their works how the expansion of baptism came about. Four major areas of development are evident from the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, from Clement of Rome A.D. 90 to Cyprian A.D. 258. Baptismal preparation, the actual administration of the rite itself, the understanding of the

³Tertullian, De Corona, p. 336.

⁴Ibid., p. 337.

rite and the existence and growth of variations in baptism are all areas showing the expansion of baptism by the third century.

The New Testament mentions little or no physical preparation before the actual baptism could take place. For example, the Philippian jailor was baptized immediately, ". . . in that very hour of the night."⁵ The Didache required one or two days of fasting to precede the baptism, whereas, in the writings of Justin, a period of probation or instruction was implied. By the early third century in Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition, a three-year catechumenate was advocated before the candidate should consider baptism. Yet, all of these developments had a purpose. With the rapid growth the church was experiencing, a period of baptismal preparation was deemed necessary by the early church Fathers. The probational period shows an attempt to limit those who would join the church for the wrong reasons, while at the same time providing a time of instruction to precede the rite of baptism.

By the third century the actual rite of baptism included many complementary and additional ceremonies, such as exorcisms and anointings, which are not to be found in the New Testament or early Apostolic writings. Pentecost and Easter had become the two significant occasions on which most baptisms were administered. The New Testament mode of

⁵ Acts 16:33 (NASB).

baptism by immersion was by the third century accompanied by affusion and aspersion as alternate legitimate means of baptism. These two other modes originated as a means to baptize those unable to be totally immersed, but over a period of time grew to compete with immersion as the most recognized mode of baptism. However, adaptations, such as in the mode of baptizing, assume much liberty in adjusting the former New Testament directives to conform with the organization and growth of the third-century church. I agree with A. T. Robertson, noted twentieth-century Baptist New Testament scholar, in viewing the lack of restraint by the Ante-Nicene Fathers in expanding the legitimate modes of baptism, as destroying the symbolism of the act:

Baptists insist on the maintenance of primitive New Testament baptism because it alone is baptism, it alone proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus, the spiritual death and resurrection of the believer, the ultimate resurrection of the believer from the grave. The disciple is not above his Lord, and has no right to destroy this rich and powerful picture for the sake of personal convenience, nor because he is willing to do something also which Jesus did not enjoin and which has no association with Him. The long years of perversion do not justify this wrong to the memory of Jesus, but all the more call upon modern disciples to follow the example of Jesus who himself fulfilled righteousness by going into the waters of the Jordan and receiving immersion at the hands of John the Baptist.⁶

Besides the expansion in the modes of baptism, is the expansion of the very meaning of the rite itself. From New Testament and early second century literature the rite is

⁶The International Bible Encyclopedia, 1979 ed., a.v. "Baptism," by A. T. Robertson.

described as giving certain spiritual benefits, such as the initiation into the fellowship of the local church, forgiveness of sins, the imparting and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. However, by the third century, many of these spiritual benefits were no longer associated with the rite of baptism. Baptism could no longer be the initiation rite into the local church, since it was delayed in fear of post-baptismal sin. Also, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit by the third century was beginning to be associated with the laying on of hands. It is evident that Lampe, a foremost contemporary scholar in early Christian baptism, correctly assesses the role of baptism in the third century when he wrote:

In the post-apostolic writers there is a tendency for the grandeur of the New Testament theory of baptism to begin to fade; it ceases in some degree to find its focus and center in the saving works of Christ, and the spiritual gifts bestowed in it begin to be thought of in isolation of the focal point of the atonement in which they ought to co-inhere.⁷

The expansion of the Christian initiation rite became clearly apparent with the rise of infant baptism in the third century. No longer were the New Testament standards for believer's baptism applicable. The theology of original sin arose to legitimize the baptism of infants and infant baptism by the third century had become an established practice.

⁷Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit, p. 15.

Why the development of the standardized baptismal service emerged by the third century represents a paradoxical discovery. For along with the efforts of the Ante-Nicene Fathers to preserve and maintain baptism as a distinct Christian rite, came the necessity of standardizing the rite because of the extensive expansion of Christianity. Many of the Fathers made a conscious effort to identify how the rite of baptism should be administered and to identify the spiritual benefits, yet in so doing the spontaneous act of belief no longer was practiced.

In summary, an examination of the contributions of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, from Clement of Rome A.D. 90 to Cyprian A.D. 258, to the rite of baptism, shows that the New Testament practice of immediate and spontaneous baptism was far different from the standardized ritual observed in the third century. Baptism grew into the complex and demanding rite of the third century through a slow and gradual process. The act of Christian baptism, as one of the central rites of Christianity, did not remain the simple, spontaneous act it had originally been in the first century, for in expanding to enclose a formidable geographical region, a concrete, standardized rite had to be laid out, if a uniform ritual were to be universally understood. Therefore, its mode was enlarged and standardized, its administration was scrutinized and glorified, and its importance was modified and specialized. Whether the Ante-Nicene Fathers were correct in assuming the liberty to expand the rite of baptism is a question

of theology, whereas, the fact that they did contribute to the development of baptism is evident from a study of the history of baptism in the first three centuries of the Christian era.

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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS
TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM,
FROM CLEMENT OF ROME A.D. 90 TO CYPRIAN A.D. 258

by

JOHN ROYAL SCHNELLE III

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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The Ante-Fathers contributed greatly to the doctrine and practice of Christian baptism when compared with the description of the rite as found in New Testament literature. By the third century, baptism had become a standardized ritual, with a prescribed baptismal service being followed. From this study the central reason for standardization appears to be the phenomenal growth and expansion of Christianity. To give a cohesive and organized appearance to their beliefs, the early church Fathers wrote about what was involved in administering the rite of baptism.

A brief, yet comprehensive, survey of New Testament teachings on baptism is necessary to form a foundation by which one can observe the contributions of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, from Clement of Rome A.D. 90 to Cyprian A.D. 258, to the doctrine and practice of baptism. The practice of baptism in the third century is largely described in the works of two men, Tertullian's On Baptism and Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition.

The ceremony in c. A.D. 200 contained a number of preparational practices leading up to the momentous event of baptism. By the early third century these additional ceremonies gained importance and were magnified by attributing special significance to them. In New Testament and early Christian literature, baptism conferred upon the candidate a number of spiritual blessings. However, by the third century some of these benefits, such as the bestowal and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, were not gained solely

through the act of baptism. The bestowal of the Spirit had begun to be associated with the imposition of hands by the overseer.

The mode of baptism expanded from immersion to include affusion and aspersion. Variations in baptism became popular and accepted. For instance, by the third century infant baptism slowly began to replace immersion as the dominant means of baptism.

The rite of baptism changed immensely over the course of approximately 200 years. Yet, the reason why this change occurred seems rather paradoxical. The Ante-Nicene Fathers in an effort to organize the ritual of baptism because of the massive expansion and growth of Christianity, standardized the more immediate and spontaneous act of baptism as found in the New Testament.