The Early Church: Baptism

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2007
Key Words to Learn

- **Sacramentalism**: The notion that God actually and really imparts or transmits grace through religious rituals, or “sacraments”.

- **Sacerdotalism**: The notion that God’s grace comes only through the administration of sacraments by an ordained clergy, controlled by a single Church.
Background: Jewish Mikveh Baptisms

• Jews and Jewish groups performed ritual immersion ("mikveh") for purification purposes and imitation of converts.

• The deep pools they built for this purpose were called *Mikvaot*, or ritual baths basins, sometimes in or near synagogues, are distinguished from cisterns by their size, large surface area and steps.

• Ritual baths are found very early at Jericho, at a synagogue at Gamla, at Herodium and Masada (all pre-70 AD).

• Immersion pools are also found at private homes in Sepphoris and Jerusalem and at the recently discovered synagogue at Sepphoris.
Background: The Baptism of John

- John the Baptist baptized where there was "much water". John 3:23.
- Those baptized by him went "down into and came up out of" the water. Mark 1:9-10.
- Consider whether this baptism acted as a substitute for circumcision or not, since those who were called to baptism were already circumcised.
“Cultus: The worship or veneration of a deity, and correct observance of religious obligations. Roman religion was one of cultus (cult) rather than pietas (piety). …For the Romans it was more important to observe the correct rituals: the gods were venerated by the strict observance of rituals to make them favorably disposed, irrespective of the ethics and morals of the worshippers.”

From: A Dictionary of Roman Religion

Use of Shallow bowls of “holy water” used in ritualistic washings or for pouring of libations.

Roman practice of publicly acknowledging a child, and agreeing to raise it, not expose it.
When did the Early Church Baptize?
Immediately after a Profession

- The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.
As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?“ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.
- Acts 8:34-38
Earliest Baptisms were Immediate

• Acts 9:17:
• “Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”
Earliest Baptisms were Immediate

- Acts 16:33
- At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds, then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

- Acts 22:16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'
Later, Early Church Delayed Baptisms

Baptism and Salvation in the Early Church

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Titus 3:5

3-YEAR PROCESS

Private Instruction

“Hearer”

“Kneeler”

Allowed to attend the ministry of the Word

Allowed to stay after the ministry of the Word for prayer

Examination by bishop and preparation for baptism

Spiritual rebirth

SAVED

Water and spiritual baptism

Regeneration (conversion)

church member

Eucharist

Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*

Chart 40
Baptism as a washing of sins led to purposeful delays in baptism

• Baptism: Power to wash away sins?
  Virtually all of the fathers in the first two centuries of the church recognized some kind of special significance for baptism, many referring to a mystical significance and others claiming forgiveness of sins and necessity for salvation.

• Because the notion was spreading that one had ones sins washed away by baptism but afterwards penance was required, many people purposefully delayed their baptisms in order to have as many sins as possible washed away. Based on the views at the time, this was essentially equivalent to delaying becoming a Christian.
Who Did the Early Church Baptize? Believers, Not Babies

- In scripture - immersion administered to those who confess faith in Christ: believers only.
- 5 Household passages: those baptized performed actions babies could not do – believing, devoting, rejoicing
"I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ . . . As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, "Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

(First Apology 61),
Approx AD 150
Public Professions of Faith were Required

The Old Roman Symbol: A Baptismal Confession

I believe in God the Father Almighty (pantokratora): and in Christ Jesus His only-begotten Son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried, in the third day rose from the dead, ascended unto the heavens, and sat at the right hand of the Father, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, the remission of sins, and the resurrection of the flesh.

Chart 52
The Lord does indeed say, “Forbid them not to come unto me.” Let them “come,” then, while they are growing up; let them “come” while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the “remission of sins?” More caution will be exercised in worldly matters: so that one who is not trusted with earthly substance is trusted with divine! Let them know how to “ask” for salvation, that you may seem (at least) to have given “to him that asketh.” ... If any understand the weighty import of baptism, they will fear its reception more than its delay: sound faith is secure of salvation.

(On Baptism 18).
"We who have repented of our sins, renounced our faults, and are purified by baptism run back to the eternal light, as children to their father"
When Did Infant Baptism Start?

• The practice of baptizing infants (by immersion) evidently began in the 3rd century and became dominant by the fifth century.
• Obviously, the practice of baptizing adult converts, even in Roman Catholicism, never ended.
Hippolytus: Infant Baptism

"Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them"

- *The Apostolic Tradition* 21:16
- About A.D. 215.

Hippolytus was a condemned “schismatic” rival bishop of Rome. It is doubtful his opinion mattered at the time but he is cited today by the RCC as evidence that the early church “Fathers” supported infant baptism.
Cyprian: Infant Baptism, 240 AD

- ... our age may have a difference in the increase of our bodies, according to the world, but not according to God; unless that very grace also which is given to the baptized is given either less or more, according to the age of the receivers,....

- For in respect of the observance of the eighth day in the Jewish circumcision of the flesh, a sacrament was given beforehand in shadow and in usage; but when Christ came, it was fulfilled in truth. For because the eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, was to be that on which the Lord should rise again, and should quicken us, and give us circumcision of the spirit....

- But if anything could hinder men from obtaining grace, their more heinous sins might rather hinder those who are mature and grown up and older. But again, if even to the greatest sinners, ...when they subsequently believed, remission of sins is granted — and nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace — how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins — that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another.
"Every soul that is born into flesh is soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin. . . . In the Church, baptism is given for the remission of sins, and, according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants. If there were nothing in infants which required the remission of sins and nothing in them pertinent to forgiveness, the grace of baptism would seem superfluous"

- *Homilies on Leviticus 8:3*
- A.D. 248.
The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of the divine sacraments, knew there are in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit"
"Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith! ...‘Well enough,’ some will say, ‘for those who ask for baptism, but what do you have to say about those who are still children, and aware neither of loss nor of grace? Shall we baptize them too?’ Certainly [I respond], if there is any pressing danger. Better that they be sanctified unaware, than that they depart unsealed and uninitiated"

Oration on Holy Baptism 40:7, 28
AD 399

This Gregory was a student of Origen and considered the founder of The “Byzantine Church”
"You see how many are the benefits of baptism, and some think its heavenly grace consists only in the remission of sins, but we have enumerated ten honors [it bestows]! For this reason we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be his [Christ’s] members"

*Baptismal Catecheses in Augustine, Against Julian 1:6:21*

A.D. 388
Augustine: Infant Baptism

"The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic" (The Literal Interpretation of Genesis 10:23:39 [A.D. 408]).

"By this grace baptized infants too are ingrafted into his [Christ’s] body, infants who certainly are not yet able to imitate anyone. Christ, in whom all are made alive . . . gives also the most hidden grace of his Spirit to believers, grace which he secretly infuses even into infants . . . . It is an excellent thing that the Punic [North African] Christians call baptism salvation and the sacrament of Christ’s Body nothing else than life. Whence does this derive, except from an ancient and, as I suppose, apostolic tradition, by which the churches of Christ hold inherently that without baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal? This is the witness of Scripture, too . . . . If anyone wonders why children born of the baptized should themselves be baptized, let him attend briefly to this . . . . The sacrament of baptism is most assuredly the sacrament of regeneration" (Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants 1:9:10; 1:24:34; 2:27:43)

A.D. 412.
Church Councils Sanction Infant Baptism

• Council of Carthage V, AD 401

"It seemed good that whenever there were not found reliable witnesses who could testify that without any doubt they [abandoned children] were baptized and when the children themselves were not, on account of their tender age, able to answer concerning the giving of the sacraments to them, all such children should be baptized without scruple, lest a hesitation should deprive them of the cleansing of the sacraments. This was urged by the [North African] legates, our brethren, since they redeem many such [abandoned children] from the barbarians" (Canon 7)

• Council of Mileum II, AD 416

"[W]hoever says that infants fresh from their mothers’ wombs ought not to be baptized, …or say that they are indeed baptized unto the remission of sins, but that they draw nothing of the original sin of Adam, which is expiated in the bath of regeneration . . . let him be anathema [excommunicated]. Since what the apostle [Paul] says, ‘Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so passed to all men, in whom all have sinned’ [Rom. 5:12], must not be understood otherwise than the Catholic Church spread everywhere has always understood it. For on account of this rule of faith even infants, who in themselves thus far have not been able to commit any sin, are therefore truly baptized unto the remission of sins, so that that which they have contracted from generation may be cleansed in them by regeneration" (Canon 3).
Baptism in the Early Church

Believers

SECOND CENTURY
110 Barnabas—“Those who place their hope in the cross” (Epistle of Barnabas 11.8)
160 Justin Martyr—“Those who are persuaded and believe” (First Apology, chapter 61)

THIRD CENTURY
220 Tertullian—opposed infant baptism (On Baptism 18)
220 Hippolytus—only believers (The Apostolic Tradition v. 13)

Infants

220 Irenaeus—earliest reference to infant baptism (Against All Heresies II. 22.4)
230 Origen—earliest to claim apostolic custom (Homily on Luke 14.5)
250 Cyprian—earliest explicit defense for newborn babes (Epistle 58)

FOURTH CENTURY
350 Apostolic Constitutions—the first explicit command (VI.15)

FIFTH CENTURY
430 Augustine—used as an argument for original sin against Pelagius

Infant baptism is by this time a general practice
Why the change from believer’s baptism to pedobaptism?

– Bad Theology—salvation through baptism
  "The prescript is laid down that without baptism, salvation is attainable by none .” Tertullian, On Baptism, I,XII.

"Yea, again I say, great indeed is Baptism, and without baptism it is impossible to obtain the kingdom." John Chrysostom, Homily III.6.14, on 1Cor 1:10]

– Sacramentalism: Baptism itself being viewed magically, as imparting grace
– Decline of emphasis on personal faith in Christ replacing it with ritual and concepts of membership, sacerdotalism.
– Addressing the doctrine of original sin, infant mortality
– Roman practices
Why the trend toward Infant Baptism?

- **Sacramentalism**: A trend toward viewing the rite itself as imparting grace and washing away sins, apart from faith or repentance. If a profession of faith is not required, then no reason infants cannot be baptized. If baptism washes their sins and imparts grace, they are better off.
- **Roman Pagan Cultural Influences**: Notion of ‘Cultus’
- **Original Sin**: As the doctrine of Original Sin developed in the west, theologians were greatly troubled by the occurrence of infant mortality. By prompt baby baptisms, their salvations could be assured. Those who didn’t baptize babies were prone deny the doctrine of Original Sin as relating to guilt for Adam’s sin, and view it as only relating to a tendency to sin after an age of innocence.
- No evidence during this era of any prevailing arguments that baptism was like circumcision. This is a protestant argument that came 1000 years later.
- No evidence during this era of a concept of a “covenant community. This is another protestant argument that came 1000 years together.
- Even today, the RCC does not base it’s doctrine of infant baptism on either circumcision analogies or covenant community notions.
How did the Early Church Baptize?

- MODE
- Immersion Primarily, but apparently some pouring
New Testament References

a. The Greek verb "baptizo" (baptize) means "to dip, plunge, or submerge." (but it can also just mean “to wash” see, e.g., Luke 11:38 and Mark 7:3–4a refer to washing hands before eating, but it never refers to “pouring” or “sprinkling”

b. John baptized people at Aenon "because there was much water there" (John 3:23).

c. When Philip baptized the Ethiopian official, "they both went down into the water" and then "they came up out of the water" (Acts 8:38-39).

d. Paul calls baptism a burial: "When we were baptized, we were buried with Christ and shared his death. We were buried with Christ so that we could be raised up and live a new life" (Romans 6:4) and "When you were baptized, your old self died and you were buried with Christ" (Colossians 2:12).
Clear Archaeological Evidence of Immersion
(But was it Submersion?)

Clearly Standing in water
Early Church Immersion Baptisteries
Dura Europa, Syria

This one is like a big bathtub

I myself was baptized in a portable aluminum cattle trough about these same dimensions by a pastor standing outside the trough, that is not in the water with me.

3rd Century Baptistery in Syria.
Immersion Baptistery in Italy

You clearly step down into the water but can you be completely submerged?

In this case, yes, but barely.

Third Century Baptistery In Italy
Immersion Baptisteries in Turkey

- Baptistery in Ephesus, 12 feet long, and four feet deep, with stairs leading down on both sides

- Another baptistery in Asia Minor
The Immersion Baptistery in Ephesus
Immersion Baptistry in Greece
Baptisms in the Jordan River

- But in contrast, recently, a Jordanian team of archaeologists excavating the region of Bethany beyond the Jordan, where Jesus was probably baptized somewhere on the east bank of the Jordan River, uncovered an intriguing marble staircase that descends from a major early church complex to an area below the water level of the Jordan River. The fact that the steps descend below the Jordan River water level leads the director of the Department of Antiquities team at the site, Dr Mohammad Waheeb, to speculate that the staircase may have been designed for pilgrims to descend into the waters of the Jordan River for baptism or other religious ceremonies.
"Consider how he has joined both the cross and the water together. For this he saith: Blessed are they who put their trust in the cross, descend into the water, for they shall have their reward in due time; then, saith he, I will give it them. * * And there was a river running on the right hand, and beautiful trees grew up by it; and he that shall eat of them shall live forever. The signification of which is this: That we go down into the water full of sins and pollution, but come up again bringing forth fruit; having in our hearts the fear and hope which is in Jesus, by the Spirit."

About AD 130
Shepherd of Hermas: Immersion

• "And I said unto him, 'I have even now heard from certain teachers that there is no other repentance besides that of baptism; when we go down into the water and receive the forgiveness of our sirs'"

• *Commands* 4,31:1-2

• Approx. AD 120
Didache: Immersion \textit{and} Pouring when lacking water

- But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, \textit{baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water}. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then \textit{pour water on the head} thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let him that baptizeth and him that is baptized fast, and any others also who are able; and thou shalt order him that is baptized to fast a day or two before.

- \textit{Didache 7:1 -4}

- \textit{About AD 150}
"As many as are persuaded and believe that the things taught and said by us are true, and promise to ... live accordingly, these are taught to fast, pray, and ask God for the forgiveness of past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then, they are led by us to where there is water, and ... they are born again."

[Speaking to Typho the Jew] "But the cisterns which you have dug for yourselves are broken and profitless to you. For what is the use of that baptism which cleanses the flesh and body alone?"

Dialogue with Trypho, 14.1

about A.D. 150
"Baptism itself is a bodily act, because we are immersed in water. ...there is no difference whether a man is baptized in the sea or in a pool, in a river or in a fountain, in a lake or a canal; nor is there any difference between those whom John baptized in the Jordan and those whom Peter baptized in the Tiber."

On Baptism, VII and VIII about A.D. 200
There is absolutely nothing which makes men's minds more obdurate than the simplicity of the divine works which are visible in the act, when compared with the grandeur which is promised thereto in the effect; so that from the very fact, that with so great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty of preparation, finally, without expense, a man is dipped in water, and amid the utterance of some few words, is sprinkled, and then rises again, not much (or not at all) the cleaner, the consequent attainment of eternity is esteemed the more incredible.... while, through the benediction, we have the same (three) as witnesses of our faith whom we have as sureties of our salvation too—how much more does the number of the divine names suffice for the assurance of our hope likewise!

In the name of the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit

About AD 203
Hippolytus of Rome: Immersion and Pouring?

- "If water is scarce, whether as a constant condition or on occasion, then use whatever water is available"

- The Apostolic Tradition, 21
- A.D. 215
Novation: Pouring

Novation was apparently about to die of a threatening disease, so he was baptized in bed by pouring: "he received baptism in the bed where he lay, by pouring"

(Letter to Fabius of Antioch [A.D. 251]; cited in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 6:4311)

Later, when he recovered, he was criticized for not having been baptized properly.

Novation was later declared a heretic.
“[no one should be] disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord’s grace”

- Letter to a Certain Magnus 69:12.

A.D. 255

This is the same Cyprian we’ll see later that promoted “penance” and extreme Sacerdotalism.
"You were asked, 'Do you believe in God Almighty?' You said, 'I believe'; and thus you were immersed. That is, you were buried"
Sanctioned Pouring Came Much Later

The first official statement favoring the practice of pouring water on the head was made in A.D. 753. Pope Stephen II was asked if, in a case of necessity due to illness, it was lawful to baptize by pouring water on the head. He replied, "If such a baptism were performed, in such a case of necessity, in the name of the holy trinity, it should be held valid."
Why the trend toward Pouring?

- **General “gentile-ization” of the church.** The original immersion baptism was understood in Jewish terms and practiced in a manner consistent with the Jewish rite.

- **Influence of Roman pagan practices** of basins of holy water and ritualistic washings. Pouring also resembled the pagan pouring of libations.

- **Mass Conversions:** The third through 6\(^{th}\) centuries were a time of mass conversions of whole armies or barbarian tribes, tens of thousands at a time. Immersion just wasn’t practical.

- As we’ll see later, though, immersion did survive, even in the RCC for centuries to come.
Early Church Baptisms in the Nude?

- Archaeological evidence some baptized naked but separated men from women (remember, public nudity was much more common then) with clothing in new white robe afterwards

- “The [baptism] candidates were completely naked, the men separated from the women. On emerging from the waters, the neophytes were given white robes, as a sign of their new life in Christ. They were also given water to drink, as a sign that they were thoroughly cleansed, both inside and out. Then they were anointed, making them part of the royal priesthood, and were given milk and honey, as a sign of the Promised Land into which they were now entering.”

- The Story of Christianity, Justo Gonzalez.

- See also evidence from Catacombs

- Jewish baptisms were thought to be in the nude also.
Questions to Consider

• Is “pouring” an acceptable substitute for immersion? Ever, even if no river or tub or swimming pool is available?

• Should baptisms take place immediately upon confessions or only after a training and evaluation period? How long of a period?

• Should we re-baptize those baptized as infants?