

# De Baptismo

## Baptism in the Early Church

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

#### INTRODUCTION

#### THE FATHERS

Barnabas

The Teaching of the Apostles

Constitution of the Holy  
Apostles

Hermas

Irenaeus

Tertullian

Hippolytus

Cyprian

Dionysius

Methodius

Hippolytus

#### A DESCRIPTION

#### CONCLUSION

Bibliography

---

## ***I. INTRODUCTION***

The study of the rite of baptism is very interesting for reasons historical, theological, liturgical and philosophical. This paper, while touching on as many of the topics mentioned as the various works illustrate, will look specifically at how the rite of baptism, as emblematic of the whole of Christian Theology, took on unnecessary and wholly unwarranted rites, due to whatever reason, though the primary seems to be an inability of the mind of man, even those closely associated with the apostles, to totally comprehend the absolute simplicity (albeit, absolute commitment) resident in the phrase "by faith alone you are saved, and not of works . . . ." History shows that as years go by, the simple, wooden Cross of our Lord was early on, and continuously, covered over by the decorations and ornamentation of men and with it, (that is, the artistic aspect of the Cross)

theology too was developed from the simple original to a grossly, overly decorative man-made imitation of God's message. An eye to such a view will be the investigative aim of his work.

The standard that the historical evolution of the rite of baptism will be shadowed against will be the New Testament model of baptism found in Acts 8:37-38. This passage was chosen for in it is the most complete description of an Apostolic Baptism. What is to be noted is that Philip preached (or more precisely, explained and taught), the eunuch believed, and Philip baptized him. Nothing more is seen to be implied or required. Nothing more should be if serious enough attention is given to the preaching and the believing. The rest is up to the Spirit, and His work is not to be doubted, usurped, or added to.

As this is a work on the Patristic period, the starting point is post Apostolic; and Apostolic pre-Christian practice is not in the scope of this paper. The New Testament reference is given as a standard to which history is to be measured and considered. We will follow an orderly study depicting what the patristic writers presented concerning baptism in a chronological order, and then we shall end with a short overview of what the early fathers did with the New Testament ordinance.

---

## ***II. THE FATHERS***

### ***Barnabas***

The first in the patristic period to discuss baptism is Barnabas (ca. 100). He does so in a delineation of Old Testament types that could be applied to the rite. Barnabas dwells primarily on the water of baptism and how, in the Christian era, this is to be found in Christ. Barnabas is very typological in his discussion and is concerned mainly with the effects that the water has on a Christian in a spiritual sense and how this was foreshadowed in the various O.T. passages. He speaks of "a living fountain," "that baptism that leads to the remission of sin," "a river flowing."<sup>1</sup> Though some of the passages may be strained and his typology questioned, his treatment of the effects of baptism are generally on the mark and without too much addition.

### ***The Teaching of the Apostles***

Next, chronologically, is *The Teaching of the Apostles*. Its historical value is not so much theological as it is liturgical. It is thought that the first six chapters of this work are designed as pre-baptismal instruction for the new catechumens. The later portions of this work contain a description of baptismal guidelines that are thought, by some, to be accurate depictions of the rite as it was in the second century.<sup>2</sup> The Triune formula is given (no doubt, following Matthew); cold (living?) water is to be preferred to warm (though the latter is allowed if the former is not available), immersion is preferred but sprinkling is allowed if it is all that is available, and fasting for one to two days is required prior to the rite.<sup>3</sup>

There is not very much addition to the rite in this work except the reference to the need for fasting and instruction. They are, however, not to be found in our original example. Something interesting to note concerning the mentioning of the types of water; it would seem to imply or give more credence to the water than to the form of its administration. Is this taking away (thus

the opposite of this thesis) from the original tradition or is it the writer's view of what is most important to be considered when baptizing the new believer; for given the amount of instruction (and the time involved to give it), that seems to be required by the first part of the *Teaching*, the "proper" type of water that would be needed for an immersion baptism would be easy enough to produce if it was so important to adhere to a strict reliance on immersion. This is not to imply that this writer disagrees with modern denominational practice, it only goes to say that the Fathers have to be carefully used to enforce contemporary concepts. Though fasting, however, could be seen by some to be not much of an addition to the original, it is something.

### ***Constitution of the Holy Apostles***

Without going into too much detail (the work is extensive), mention must be made of the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*. This very interesting work resembles the *Teaching* in that it is without known date or author and much discussion has been done in the critical field regarding these questions. (Portions of it have been identified, in recent years, to be of Hippolytus' *Apostolic Traditions*).<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy in the study of baptism and early church polity in that it makes a recommendation concerning deaconesses. The basis of the recommendation is concerning the baptism of women. The context of this section<sup>5</sup> gives the impression that baptism is done in the nude and that propriety suggests that a woman administrator of the rite would be more appropriate for female candidates. Two important subjects are broached in this discussion; first the fact that a supposedly early work makes a recommendation concerning the ordination of women; secondly, though not mentioned previous to this in any other work so far, an allusion is made to nude baptism, and given the early date some have ascribed to this writing, it could have been a common practice from early on.

If the date of this work is as early as some have implied, then additions have entered into the church from the beginning. This is shown in the extent of the ceremony surrounding the baptism described in the *Constitutions*. Much is given to fasting, to recitations, to renunciations of Satan before and after the rite, and for the anointing of oil, also before and after. What was simple just a few decades before this writing has already acquired a heavy encrustation.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Hermas***

Hermas (ca. 160) speaks of a vision of a tower built out of water and tells of his life having "been, and will be, saved through water." Besides himself, the church (identified by the Lady of the vision as herself) is built out of and saved through the water. In this way he implies the necessity of water baptism for admission into the church. In the third part of his vision, Hermas, while questioning the Shepherd, learns that the only way to the Kingdom of God is through the gate, that Jesus is the gate and that baptism is the seal of one having passed through the gate.<sup>7</sup> There is also resident in this vision a description of baptism for the dead.<sup>8</sup> All in all, Hermas' work speaks in an interesting sense (a vision) of the necessity of belief in Jesus for entrance into the Kingdom and of baptism as the necessary seal of that belief.

### ***Irenaeus***

Irenaeus, in his *Against Heresies* (ca. 182), speaks but briefly on baptism and this only to note it as a reference in time for the Lord's ministry.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Tertullian***

The next writer to take up the subject of baptism is Tertullian. He is notable concerning the subject of baptism for by him we have the first work devoted entirely to it, *De Baptismo*, (ca. 200). This piece is very interesting and helpful; both concerning the history of the liturgy of the rite and because of his explanation of the theological significance of it.

In the first section, he deals at length on the significance of the water, coming close to making this rather a treatise on water. He notes on his own exuberance, "I fear I may seem to have collected rather the praises of water than the reasons of baptism;" and checks himself.<sup>10</sup> He assigns veneration to the water because of its age and the dignity that was conferred upon it from the beginning because of the Spirit's abiding over it at the time of creation. The importance of this should not be taken too lightly, for later he assigns sanctifying power to the water, and in a reference to the heathen practice of blessing houses, towns and county seats with water, in a sort of baptismal rite, he prefigures the Roman practice that was perhaps adopted from it.<sup>11</sup> For those familiar with the Roman rite, his whole description of the properties of water shed much light on modern ritual.

This piece gives light to the third century practices associated with baptism in that he gives some good detail concerning procedure. Tertullian tells us that after the recipient had been washed in the water and had come forth, they are then anointed with oil based on the anointments from the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Here then we have another record of additions to the New Testament ceremony. What then follows the oil is the laying on of hands. This too is addition. The high points covered, the nature and length of this work necessitates just a brief description of what else he taught in this writing; he said that baptism was necessary for salvation; he allowed the laity to baptize under the guidance or approval of the bishop; he would not allow women to baptize; he advised that Passover and Pentecost were the most solemn times for the rite, although he allowed that these times are just a matter of ceremony and not required. He could, at times, discover what was indeed necessary, and allow, without insisting, what was not, and so maintain a proper perspective.

Although he started the subject defending the divinely instituted simplicity of baptism and how that simplicity is hard for some to grasp, he nevertheless showed that even he has made additions to the original. Even those who insist on the purity of the practice have already added ceremonial tradition to simple scripture.

### ***Hippolytus***

Hippolytus (170-236) touches only lightly on baptism and this only in reference to Christ's, in his *Discourse on the Holy Theophany*. He maintains that baptism is the gateway to heaven for he says, "For when Christ the Bridegroom was baptized, it was meet that the bridal-chamber of heaven should open its brilliant gates."<sup>13</sup> In addition to this brief mention of baptism on Hippolytus' part, Mr. Lewis mentions that in his *Apostolic Traditions* Hippolytus gives a much more detailed account in the procedures and qualifications that precede baptism, to include a

catechumenate of three years and a list of forbidden occupations.<sup>14</sup>

### *Cyprian*

Cyprian (220-258) in council with sixty-six other bishops, in his letter to Fidus defends infant baptism, giving the rite of circumcision as a type and pleading that the baby's cry is its entreating for mercy and forgiveness.<sup>15</sup> On this one point he misses the mark and adds to what was ordained originally. In another work he ties baptism with the receiving of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

In several of his works, especially the letter in which he sets forth the judgment of the eighty seven bishops assembled in council at Carthage to dispute Stephen, Bishop of Rome, Cyprian speaks very strongly against the baptism of heretics and takes exception to the notion that those who come to the Church after involvement in a heretical sect are "rebaptized." He declares that they were not baptized in the first place and so by their baptism in the true church, they are for the first time baptized and did not receive a second. Here we find a strong patristic argument against the idea that it is the rite that confers the sanctity separate from the administer of that rite.<sup>17</sup>

Cyprian, in reference to the saving work displayed by baptism as being the believing faith therein displayed, allows that one who is merely sprinkled because of an infirmity has the same salvation as one who is totally immersed.<sup>18</sup>

### *Dionysius*

The question of "rebaptizing" heretics comes up again in the letter of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (200-265) to the Bishop Sixtus. It seems to involve Stephen of Rome with Dionysus siding with Cyprian.<sup>19</sup>

### *Methodius*

A very interesting discourse is presented by Methodius (260-312) in his discussion on the resurrection in that he delves into the subject of sinning after baptism (from a position counter to the thought of Tertullian, et. al.). With the use of a very good analogy of a plant he argues that we cannot help but sin after we are baptized but the effects of that sin is lessened due to the change wrought by the ordinance.<sup>20</sup>

It can be seen that from the earliest writings adornment was heaped on baptism. Much attention is given to prebaptismal instruction to the point of a lengthy period being required by Hippolytus. Besides the instructions that had to be learned, he also required daily exorcisms, baths, fasts (longer and more frequent as time goes on), and meetings with the Bishop.<sup>21</sup> For some of the writers, Tertullian for example, preparation of the water was given nearly as much attention as the candidate.

---

## **III. A DESCRIPTION**

A compilation of the rite is given to demonstrate what had grown onto the original:

Prayer over the water to invoke the Holy Spirit to sanctify and empower it.

Removal of clothing and other apparel for nude baptism.

Exorcism of the "oil of exorcism."

Renunciation of "Satan, his pomp and his service" by the baptized-facing west.

Anointing with oil of exorcism (over the entire body) by an elder.

Re-clothing and entering the assembly. [Foot washing in some churches.]

Laying-on-of-hands by the bishop, invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Anointing with concentrated oil sealing on the forehead and giving the kiss of peace by the bishop.

Prayers with the whole assembly and exchanging the kiss of peace.

Observance of the Eucharist, including in some instances the giving of milk and honey.<sup>22</sup>

---

## IV. CONCLUSION

The church, which was originally unadorned and splendid in natural beauty and radiant in her Bridegroom's light took to cosmetics to embellish what was apparently seen to be too plain. Individuals, and later, the Reformation, made an attempt to remove what had built up and been added to the original. They began a process, which even now, has to be continually worked at to be sure that what does build up and becomes encrusted is quickly chipped away and removed.

Of the works referenced in this paper, that of Mr. Lewis gives the best delineation of the historical development of baptism and draws, what I believe, to be the correct conclusion, "Tradition rather than explicit teaching of Scripture became dominant."<sup>23</sup> This then is the place of the Fathers, to be noted and studied, and perhaps followed, but always, in areas of doctrine, the Scripture is the rule and all is to be judged by it.

---

## Bibliography

Hinson, Glenn E. "Baptism in the Early Church History." *Review and Expositor*. LXV (no. 1, Winter, 1968): 28.

Latourette, Kenneth S. *A History of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975.

Lewis, Jack P. "Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church." *Restoration Quarterly*. 26 (no. 1, 1983):1-17.

Quasten, Johannes. *Patrology*. 4 vols. Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum, 1984.

Roberts, A., J. Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325*. (American edition, ed., by A. C. Coxe, 1896, ff.; 10 vols., reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 1:144.
- <sup>2</sup> Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975) 1:194
- <sup>3</sup> ANF 7:379.
- <sup>4</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 4 vols. (Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum, 1984) 2:181.
- <sup>5</sup> ANF, 7:431.
- <sup>6</sup> ANF, 7:475-477.
- <sup>7</sup> ANF, 2:13-14.
- <sup>8</sup> ANF, 2:48-49.
- <sup>9</sup> ANF, 1:390.
- <sup>10</sup> ANF, 3:670.
- <sup>11</sup> ANF, 3:671.
- <sup>12</sup> ANF, 3:672.
- <sup>13</sup> ANF, 5:234.
- <sup>14</sup> Jack P. Lewis, "Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 26 (no. 1, 1983) :1-17.
- <sup>15</sup> ANF, 5:354.
- <sup>16</sup> ANF, 5:360.
- <sup>17</sup> ANF, 5:401.
- <sup>18</sup> ANF, 5:565-572.
- <sup>19</sup> ANF, 6:102.
- <sup>20</sup> ANF, 6:365.
- <sup>21</sup> Lewis, "Baptismal Practices" 26:17.
- <sup>22</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, "Baptism in the Early Church History," *Review and Expositor*, LTV (no. 1, Winter, 1968) :28.
- <sup>23</sup> Lewis, "Baptismal Practices" 26:17.