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INFANT BAPTISM VIEW

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“I’M FIRST A CHRISTIAN, NEXT A CATHOLIC, then a Calvinist, fourth a Paedobaptist and finally a Presbyterian. I cannot reverse the order” said John (“Rabbi”) Duncan, in one of his many Talmud-like aphorisms.¹ What follows is written with a similar sense of priorities. Paul’s statement “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17)² expresses a mindset which prioritized gospel preaching over baptismal administration without thereby minimizing the important role of the latter.³

Nevertheless our understanding of the gospel inevitably comes to expression in our theology and practice of baptism. Consequently these do sometimes reflect very different perspectives on how the gospel is understood and proclaimed and on what its implications are for biblical hermeneutics and church and family life. Baptism is, after all, an ordinance *of the gospel*. Its theology and practice can never be

¹William Knight, *Colloquia Peripatetica*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1879), p. 8. The wise and eccentric Duncan (1796–1870) was professor of Hebrew in New College, Edinburgh.

²All Scripture quotations unless otherwise indicated are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

³Five letters in the Pauline corpus contain explicit reference to various facets of baptism (Rom 6:1–11; 1 Cor 1:13–17; Gal 3:27; Eph 4:5; Col 2:11–12). Many scholars detect additional allusions in his letters.

divorced from our understanding of its evangelical matrix.

The discussion of different baptismal theologies labors under the immediate difficulty of the misleading nomenclature of baptist and paedobaptist (or infant baptist). In fact we are all baptists. Furthermore paedobaptists baptize *believers* and their children, including infants (*infantes*, literally those who do not speak).⁴ Indeed with the collapse of Christendom we baptize believers today probably more frequently than at any time since the Reformation. This is as it always should have been in the church as God's evangelistic agent in the world. It would have been so were it not for the disastrous combination of belief in baptismal regeneration and the Constantinian church-state settlement which led to indiscriminate infant baptism.

On whatever side of the dividing waters of baptism one stands, difficult and as yet impenetrable historical-theological questions arise. Among them are the following:

- If the apostolic churches practiced infant baptism, why are we not able to trace easily in postapostolic literature an unbroken and unquestioned testimony to it from the time of the apostles to the third century?
- If, however, only believers' baptism was practiced in the New Testament church, how is it that infant baptism arose without apparent record of serious theological protest before Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200)?
- Is it in any case wise for evangelicals to appeal to the baptismal *practice* enshrined in the documents of the postapostolic church if, by and large, they are distinctly uncomfortable with the baptismal *doctrine* of the church fathers?

In what follows we will briefly set the scene by tracing the evidence for infant baptism in the postapostolic church (the historical perspective), thereafter provide a biblical-theological perspective on baptism as a whole (the redemptive-historical perspective), before

⁴It might be nearer the mark to speak of covenantal-family-baptists and credobaptists in order to stress that different theological *grounds* for baptism are in view, since every year I baptize numbers of believers on profession of faith.

drawing some conclusions about the baptism of the infants of believers (the ecclesiastical perspective).

BAPTISM IN THE POSTAPOSTOLIC CHURCH

The witness of early church history to the practice of baptism is frustratingly patchy. Evidence comes essentially from three extant sources. Moving backward in time through them provides us with a snapshot album of baptismal practice in the first three centuries of the church's existence.

Records of mortality. The death inscriptions of early Christianity breathe a remarkable spirit of hope in a world of pagan hopelessness. Some, dating back to the turn of the third century, chronicle early mortality and provide testimony to the faith—and the sadnesses—of Christians.⁵ Numbers of mortally ill children were baptized and thus (in the language of the inscriptions) were “made believers” or “obtained the grace of the glorious font.” In some cases baptism preceded death by only a matter of hours. Infants were among those who received “clinical” baptism in this way. These infants and children had not already been baptized. This might seem to be proof negative against the idea that the early church already practiced infant baptism. Professor Everett Ferguson has suggested that these death inscriptions give a substantial hint that widespread infant baptism actually grew out of the practice of clinical baptism. However, this strand of evidence belongs to the period when baptism was already being postponed through fear of the risk of postbaptismal sin. It is doubtful if any concrete, rather than speculative, conclusions can be drawn from it.

⁵See the discussions and contrasting conclusions in Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM Press, 1960); idem, *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1963); and Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). See also Everett Ferguson, “Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 30 (1979): 37–46; idem, *Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian University Press, 1987), pp. 55–65. Unfortunately Professor Ferguson's *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) appeared only as these pages were going to press.

Works of theology. The church's transition to the postponement of baptism stands in marked contrast to apostolic example (e.g., Acts 2:41; 8:34-39; 9:18; 10:48; 16:33), but is detailed in postapostolic teaching. Thus Tertullian (ca. 160/70-215/20), in his *De Baptismo*, argues that baptism should be delayed lest it be received without a serious appreciation of its meaning.⁶ This reaction—in his case set within the context of perceived laxity in the church—would eventually drive him into the arms of the Montanist sect. But his arguments indicate that already by his time the practice of infant baptism was widespread, even if they do not by themselves indicate how long that had been the case.

Statements prior to this are consistent with infant baptism and fit well with its practice, but fall short of proof. Into this category fit the well-known words of Polycarp at the time of his martyrdom (155/160) detailing 86 years of Christian life.⁷ Irenaeus (fl. 175-195) speaks of infants being “born again” to God, in a context in which “regeneration” and baptism appear to coalesce in his thinking.⁸ Certainly Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254) believed that the church had received the tradition of infant baptism from the apostles.⁹ In contrast to Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200/10-258) affirms that baptism should be administered as early in life and as soon as possible.¹⁰

⁶Tertullian argues that both the baptized person and his or her sponsors (in the case of an infant) may lapse and thus be placed in a perilous condition in view of, e.g., Heb 6:4-6: “If any understand the weighty import of baptism, they will fear its reception more than its delay.” Hence he affirms, “the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children.” *On Baptism* 18 (ANF 3:678). Cf. also Tertullian *On Repentance* 7 (ANF 3:663). His *Against Marcion* 1.28.2 (ANF 3:293) contains probably his clearest statement on the effects of baptism.

⁷“For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The words are, however, inconclusive with respect to the actual timing of his baptism (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9 [AF, p. 139]).

⁸*Against Heresies* 2.22.4. His language elsewhere underlines the intimacy of the connection, cf. 3.17.1.

⁹*Commentary on Roman* 5.9.11 (FC 103, p. 367). “It is on this account as well that the Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children.” The context (Origen has cited Ps 51:5) implies a reference here to *infant* children.

¹⁰In a letter to Fidus. *The Epistles of Cyprian* 58 (ANF 5:353-54).

Prior to this point the extant evidence in, for example, *The Epistles of Ignatius* (ca. 100), *The Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 70–130) and *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 150) remains silent. No certain answers to the historical questions delineated above are provided.

Evidence from liturgy. The practice of infant baptism is confirmed by the *Apostolic Tradition*.¹¹ Like similarly named pieces (e.g., The Apostles' Creed), this is *postapostolic* in origin and was probably compiled by Hippolytus of Rome (d. ca. A.D. 236). It details a three-year preparatory class required for new communicants and describes their subsequent baptism. Noteworthy are several elements in the extended liturgy. One is the observation that martyrdom serves as baptism in one's own blood.¹² Others include the extrabiblical practice of the prebaptismal all-night vigil, exorcism, sufflation, the laying on of hands and anointing.¹³

Candidates for baptism were received in a fixed order: first, children, then men and finally women (possibly because all were baptized after the removal of clothing). For our purposes the liturgy for the children is especially interesting: "And first the little children are to be baptized; and if he is able to speak for himself, he is to speak [i.e., make the confession of faith in accordance with the Creed of the church in Rome—an early form of the Apostles' Creed]; and if they are not able, their parents are to speak on their behalf or one of their relatives." The confession was made in connection with the trinitarian structure of the creed, and in that connection triune baptism was administered.¹⁴

The controversial Hippolytus certainly regarded himself as a conservator. There is no adequate reason to doubt that he is detailing an already well-developed tradition in the church of Rome (and elsewhere) by the end of the second century A.D. Several features are noteworthy:

¹¹See Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. H. W. Attridge, Hermenein (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 104–7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 112–17.