

Believers' Baptism in the Patristic Writings¹

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Abstract: *This article examines the early Christian perspectives on the subject and purpose of Christian baptism, shedding light on its universal practice within the early Church and its significant role in the church's life. Although the article acknowledges the practice of baptizing children in the early church, it emphasizes that the key consideration was the individual's faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin, rather than their age. The writings from the third and fourth centuries reveal varying opinions regarding infant baptism, ranging from considering it a departure from traditional paedobaptism to resisting the innovation of infant baptism. Jeremias's work on infant baptism in the first four centuries highlights how the practice evolved, tracing its roots to Jewish proselyte baptism and incorporating Old Testament cultic language. However, debates persisted, with Tertullian presenting arguments against infant baptism and emphasizing faith as the basis for baptism. This article also explores how early church writings like the Didache, Justin Martyr's First Apology, and Aristides's Apology offer insights into baptism practices of the second century. Overall, the patristic writings reveal the evolving nature of baptism practices, influenced by theological considerations, views on sin, and the challenges posed by infant mortality.*

Key Words: *baptism, Baptists, Baptist theology, believers' baptism, dogmatic theology, early church fathers, Tertullian*

The purpose of this article is to present the early Christian views of who was to be the subject of Christian baptism. An examination of patristic writings in which the Church Fathers specifically addressed the ordinance of baptism, including the purposes for which baptism was to be administered, will be made to determine what the attitudes were to-

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ward the notion of baptizing only believers.²

Baptism was practiced universally in the early Church, from the New Testament forward. For those Christians who came after the New Testament period, baptism remained an essential component of the church's life and practice.³ Christians celebrated baptism to mark a new convert's confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. The rite of baptism also served as a means of initiation into the community of believers, the church. Use of the Triune Name in the administration of baptism assisted the church's faithful passing on of the faith once for all delivered to the saints by confessing the saving work of all three Persons of the Godhead.⁴ Baptism had special meaning not just for the believer but for the entire Christian community; it was an ordinance of the Church. Baptism's role in the early church was central to the formation and discipline of the body of believers.

Our purpose is limited in that our focus is on the early church's practice of believers' baptism. Some clarification of this purpose is in order as it relates to early Christianity. Believers' baptism is the practice of baptizing *only* those who profess faith in Jesus Christ for their salvation, having repented of their sins. An essential element of the practice is that baptism is subsequent to repentance and faith.⁵ Adherents narrowly de-

² In Christian history the time following the deaths of the Apostles until approximately AD 596 is called the patristic period. "Patristic" is derived from the Latin term for "father" and thus refers to the period of the so-called Church Fathers.

³ See S. A. McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 5–41. See also A. W. Argyle, "Baptism in the Early Christian Centuries," in *Christian Baptism*, ed. A. Gilmore (Philadelphia: Judson, 1959), 187–222; E. Ferguson, ed. *Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church (Studies in Early Christianity)* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); G. Kretschmar, "Recent Research on Christian Initiation," *Studia Liturgica* 12 (1977): 87–106; G. 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, 1952).

⁴ Jesus's command in Matt 28:19 to baptize "in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" became, for early Christians, the formula used in baptism ceremonies. This passage of Scripture, and its derived formula, played an important role in Athanasius of Alexandria's explication of the Trinity against the Arians (see Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*).

⁵ Generally ascribed to Peter's statement in his Pentecost sermon recording in Acts 2:38: "Repent, and be baptized ... for the remission of sins" (KJV). Some writers insist that baptism is inseparable from repentance.

fine baptism as an act that follows salvation. Consequently, believers' baptism excludes infant baptism. While both Baptists and paedobaptists may agree that the function of the ordinance is to outwardly profess faith, Baptists deny that the rite professes *future* faith.⁶

The question we are then seeking to answer is, "Is there a consensus opinion in the patristic writings that accepts believers' baptism as the ancient and normative practice of the church?" In other words, do we discover in early Christians an attitude toward baptism that in an ideal setting the church would baptize children and adults who have *first* repented of their sins and professed faith in Jesus Christ? Does baptism follow salvation or precede (or even produce) it?

A Debate over *Infant Baptism*

We can readily dismiss the notion that normative baptism was *adult* baptism. As our investigation will demonstrate, the early Church baptized children, but these children had at least some understanding of the faith, and had accepted Christianity's tenets. What we know of baptism from the patristic writings is that the question was really not about the age of the one being baptized. Rather, the question was about that person's state in relation to faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin. We will see that the debates in the early church were not over adult baptism versus child baptism, but believers' baptism versus paedobaptism.⁷

Christian writings from the third and fourth centuries show a difference of opinion over the practice of baptizing infants. There is no doubt that infant baptism was practiced quite early in the church's history, but the prevalence of the practice, its significance, and its origin are a matter of contention. The sources are, in many ways, themselves unclear. Two questions emerge from an examination of the documents, as we shall see. First, does the existence of infant baptism, with or without claim to apostolic precedence, necessarily imply that the practice is ancient? That is, does the fact that Christians baptized infants without necessarily arguing that the tradition has a biblical origin mean that the practice is derived from the earliest church's practice? Second, do the debates regard-

⁶ Many forms of paedobaptism exist, each with different opinions regarding the purpose and the effect of baptism. Suffice it to say that believers' baptism requires the ordinance follow active, saving faith.

⁷ See D. F. Wright, "The Origin of Infant Baptism—Child Believers' Baptism?" *SJT* 40 (1987): 1–23; and "At What Ages Were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?" *StudPat* 30 (1997): 389–94.

ing infant baptism in the fourth and fifth centuries indicate a rejection of the ancient practice of paedobaptism in favor of something novel, or do the documents show a continued resistance to the innovative practice of infant baptism over and against a more ancient believers' baptism? These questions will be crucial to our investigation.

To lay a foundation for the discussion of believers' baptism in early Christianity, we will briefly survey the classic debate regarding the origin of paedobaptism in early Christianity; an exchange between Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland.⁸ Three short volumes, the first by Jeremias, a challenge by Aland, and a final reply by Jeremias, comprise the scholarly debate. Jeremias's first volume, *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten*, appeared first in 1938, then in a revised German edition in 1958. An English translation was published as *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* two years later. Much of the study is concerned with baptism in the apostolic period and the New Testament. Important elements of Jeremias's conclusions from the first century merits some discussion here due to the direct correlation he sees between first century practice and later practice.

Jeremias's purpose is to examine the practice of infant baptism in the first four centuries of the church's existence. His study breaks down nicely into two chapters addressing the apostolic period, which form the foundation for the remainder of the book, one chapter on developments in the second and third centuries, and one on infant baptism in the fourth century. He begins with the question, "Were the children of converts [in the New Testament period] baptized along with their parents?" To answer this question Jeremias turns to the New Testament statements regarding the baptism of converts and to the origin of Christian baptism.

In the first instance Jeremias focuses his attention on the *oikos* formula found in several New Testament passages.⁹ In these passages one finds that converts and their households are baptized. Jeremias contends that these "households" include all the children of the house, regardless

⁸ J. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); Jeremias, *Origins of Infant Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963); K. Aland, *Did the Early Christian Church Baptize Infants?*, trans. and an introduction G. R. Beasley-Murray (London: SCM Press, 1963). See also E. Ferguson, "Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism," *JTS* 30 (1979): 37–46; A. N. S. Lane, "Did the Apostolic Church Baptize Babies? A Seismological Approach," *TynBul* 55.1 (2004): 109–30.

⁹ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 19–24.

of age. To support his conclusion Jeremias reads the New Testament *oikos* statements in the light of Old Testament references to a “household” meaning all those living in the home, including infant children. He concludes, “[T]he New Testament *oikos* formula was adopted from the Old Testament cultic language (and in particular, we may say, from the terminology of circumcision) and introduced into the formal language employed in the primitive Christian rite of baptism.”¹⁰ A second argument for Jeremias’s reading of the *oikos* passages is his view of “family solidarity” in the ancient world.¹¹ In the Jewish-Christian church, Jeremias contends, unbaptized members of the family are not allowed to join in table-fellowship. He finds it highly unlikely that parents would not baptize their children and thus exclude them from family meals! When the New Testament states that because of the faith of one member of the family the entire family, including any infant children, is baptized (e.g., his reading of Acts 16:30–34), it is because, “The faith of the father who represents the household and the faith of the mother also embraces the children.”¹²

The second part of Jeremias’s answer to the question of whether or not the infant children of converts were baptized along with them is his examination of baptism’s origins. In summary, Jeremias concludes that Christian baptism is derived from Jewish proselyte baptism in its terminology, its outward administration, and its theological understanding.¹³ The final point is most appropriate for our discussion: When Gentile adults converted to Judaism, “the children, even the smallest children, were admitted with their parents to the Jewish faith.”¹⁴ Jeremias contends that because Jewish proselyte baptism is the progenitor of Christian baptism then “with the admission of Gentiles to Christianity children of every age, including infants, were baptized also.”¹⁵ Jeremias concludes that infant baptism was the normal practice in the Christian church from the apostolic period onwards. His argument is predicated on the belief that Christian baptism is strikingly akin to Jewish proselyte baptism. In fact, he concludes that Christian baptism is the offspring of proselyte baptism, claiming about their relationship, “the only possible conclusion is that the rites are related as parent [Jewish proselyte bap-

¹⁰ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 21.

¹¹ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 22–23.

¹² Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 24.

¹³ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 24–40.

¹⁴ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 39.

¹⁵ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 39.

atism] and child [Christian baptism].”¹⁶ Having first concluded that Christian baptism was taken over from proselyte baptism, Jeremias then argues that the infant children of Gentile converts to Judaism were baptized along with their newly-converted parents.¹⁷

These two conclusions—that the *oikos* formula for baptism in the New Testament necessarily included infants and that proselyte baptism, which included infants, is the progenitor of Christian baptism—drawn at the beginning of his study form the basis for his reading of the later evidence. Jeremias reads the Church Orders, inscriptions, and other documentation from this perspective, and the remainder of his study is based on these conclusions.

Chapter 3 moves beyond NT times and up to the “crisis” of the fourth century. Jeremias surveys evidences for infant baptism in both East and West. He finds references in the accounts of martyrs’ lives written in the second century in which believers were said to be faithful to Christ from childhood to be indirect evidence of infant baptism. Polycarp, having been born in the first century, claimed to have served Christ for over eighty years. Jeremias conjectures that he must have been baptized as an infant even *before* the second century.¹⁸ Aland demonstrates that the evidence need not be read as indirectly affirming the practice of infant baptism.¹⁹ It is just as likely that the references are to *child* baptism, but not infant baptism.

Jeremias’s reading of the inscriptions and patristic writings is guided by his belief that this is a difference in early Christianity between “missionary” baptism and the baptism of believers’ children. Missionary baptism, reflected almost exclusively in the New Testament baptism accounts, entailed the entrance of converts into Christianity from non-Christian religions. These instances of baptism involved adult converts and their now-Christian children, including infants. Jeremias reads the catechetical instructions regarding baptism as intended for these converts to Christianity. In addition to this missionary baptism, Jeremias contends that the church, from the New Testament on, baptized the infant children of believers in a practice parallel with Jewish circumcision. He then reads later evidence in the light of this two-fold purpose for baptism.

¹⁶ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 36.

¹⁷ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 37–38.

¹⁸ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 62–63.

¹⁹ Aland, *Did the Early Christian Church Baptize Infants?*, 70–74.

Who Was Baptized in Early Christianity

In this section of our chapter we will survey chronologically the relevant discussions of baptism in the patristic writings. We will discover a shift in the discussions in the third century, when the question of infant baptism arises. There is no defense of infant baptism prior to the third century. In fact, each instance of instruction regarding baptism supports a conclusion that the baptism of believers only was the normative practice in the second century, with the possible exception of emergency baptisms of mortally ill infants later in the century.²⁰ This novel practice became widespread in the third century, leading Origen to conclude that, at least in Palestine, infant baptism was the standard practice of the church. The debate over the innovation of infant baptism continued into the fourth century where Gregory, Bishop of Nazianzus, allowed infant baptism in emergency situations but otherwise rejected it on the grounds that infants have no sins to confess and therefore do not need a baptism which is rightly related to repentance.

There are several types of documents that inform us of early Christian attitudes toward baptism. There are works dedicated to the topic, such as Tertullian of Carthage's *On Baptism* or Cyprian of Carthage's *Epistle 58* announcing an African synod's decision regarding baptism. There are also references to the Christian practice of baptism that are intended to clear up misunderstandings or instruct those who are perhaps outside of the church about the practice. An example is a paragraph in Justin Martyr's *First Apology*. A third type of writing, and one very important for us, is the Church Manual, such as the late first- or early second-century *Didache*. These manuals tell us about prevailing contemporary attitudes toward practices in the church while also giving us a glimpse into liturgical tradition. What is most helpful is the fact that church manuals are intended to project current practice onto the past church while also influence future church practice. These works are important both for what they do say and for what they omit.²¹ Finally,

²⁰ Ferguson has argued that these instances, deduced from funerary inscriptions, demonstrate that Christians who believed in the importance of baptism began to baptize infants in emergency situations as an accommodation (see Ferguson, "Inscriptions and Origin of Infant Baptism").

²¹ As an example, were a manual in the second century to mandate one element of practice that is missing from a later manual, one might reasonably conclude that the practice fell out of favor, particularly if a competing description of the practice is given in the later work. As this type of writing intends to make current practice normative, it may or may not be helpful in conveying accurately

there are works intended to offer instruction to the catechumen, or believer who is preparing for baptism. Normally, new believers, including children, would spend a considerable amount of time being taught the fundamental beliefs of Christianity, including the meaning of the baptism for which they were preparing. These writings, such as Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*, are enlightening.

Second Century

Three sources from the second century are significant for our study: the *Didache*, Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, and Aristides's *Apology*.²² A church manual written just after the turn of the second century, *The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles*, known usually by the first word of the Greek title, the *Didache*, detailed contemporary practice regarding the ordinance of baptism.²³ First, the manual states that the Triune Formula is to be used in baptism: one should be baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Second, the church is to use running water when available, though standing water, such as a pool, is acceptable. Presumably, this instruction is to make current Christian baptism parallel to Christ's baptism, which was in a river of running water. The candidate should be immersed in water, provided enough is available. Where there is not water deep enough for immersion, water can be poured over the baptizand's head three times. Most important for our study is the requirement that the person being baptized [along with the one doing the baptism and the rest of the church] is to fast for one or two days before the baptism. In fact, the *Didache* states that the one being baptized should be instructed in this regard. The necessary implication of the statement that the church should "Instruct the one being baptized to fast one or two days before," is that the one being baptized is of the age and mental capacity to comprehend and obey the instruction. It would seem entirely unlikely that an infant would be able to obey this command. Moreover, had the *Didache* conceived of an instance in which infant baptism would be practiced the instructions

past practice. However, this fact makes Church Manuals all the more important to our study: they tell us what was happening at a given time in a given area.

²² See J. Lewis, "Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church," *ResQ* 26 (1983): 1–17.

²³ *The Didache* 7 in *ANF*, vol. 7 ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), See A. H. B. Logan, "Post-Baptismal Chrismation in Syria: The Evidence of Ignatius, the *Didache* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*," *JTS* 49.1 (1998): 92–108.

for such a ceremony would most certainly have been included in the manual. The absence of specific instructions for baptizing infants in the baptismal liturgies and church orders long into the fourth and fifth centuries imply that the infant baptism was a liturgical innovation that did not find universal acceptance.

In his *First Apology*, written in the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr concerns himself with an explanation of the rite of Christian baptism. His interest is to ensure that his readers understand the meaning of the ordinance. Consistent with the command of the *Didache*, Justin claims that Christian baptism was done in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁴ Four elements of Justin's exposition deserve comment, as they relate directly to the topic at hand. First, Justin, like the *Didache*, states that those who are to be baptized are those who are "persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to live accordingly."²⁵ Clearly, believers are in mind here. They already believe the truthfulness of Christianity. Baptism comes subsequent to their being persuaded regarding Christianity. Moreover, they have offered their own commitment to live a Christian life. Justin presents these candidates for baptism as already having begun to live according to their faith. Infants cannot be included in Justin's description of those coming to baptism on either of these counts. Infants do not possess the rational capacity to believe the truths of the faith nor can they have committed to live according to them.

Second, they were to fast and pray for the remission of past sins.²⁶ As with the *Didache* one is hard-pressed to consider infants fasting and praying for the remission of their past sins. In fact, as will become clearer, many of the patristic writers denied that infants were guilty of any sins that needed forgiving. Once again, Justin appears not to be calling infants to preparing for their baptisms by fasting and praying. These are instructions reserved for older children and adults.

Third, Justin describes candidates for baptism as those who "choose and repent."²⁷ This is consistent with the command in Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:38) to "repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins." Justin is in a long line of patristic writers to follow the New Testament lead of linking repentance and baptism. As was previously the case with Justin, he cannot be referencing infants who have chosen to

²⁴ In fact, this Triadic Confession is referenced twice in the same chapter.

²⁵ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.

²⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.

²⁷ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.

become believers and who repented of their sins. Even if one accepts the need for infants to receive forgiveness for original sin (a theme in the third century and in the West even after), the subjects of baptism for Justin cannot be infants.

Finally, Justin says that those who are illuminated in their understandings are those who are washed in baptism.²⁸ Were Justin an advocate of paedobaptism, he would have at least allowed for one to be washed and then, at a later time, illuminated. This is the argument of later writers who advocate infant baptism. Their claim is that the washing precedes the awakening to faith, and perhaps even aids its coming. For Justin, though, candidates for baptism are those who have been awakened already to their need for salvation.

A passage in the *Apology* of Aristides is important for a second-century picture of baptism.²⁹ The passage, in which the apologist describes Christian behavior as superior to others in the empire, speaks of how Christians act toward the servants and children of Christians who themselves are persuaded to become Christians. After the servants or the children become Christians they are called "brothers and sisters without distinction." In other words, it is only after their conversion that the children of believers are considered a part of the community of faith. Such a bold statement appears to contradict directly the notion of "household" baptisms, for clearly Aristides does not have "missionary" baptism in mind. These are the children of believers. As Aland rightly notes, Aristides's *Apology* "indirectly excludes infant baptism."³⁰

Even Jeremias acknowledges no *direct* evidence of infant baptism in the second century. However, he does assert that patristic references to believers who have served Christ faithfully from a young age qualify as indirect evidence of infant baptism.³¹ These references, mainly from biographical statements about martyrs such as Polycarp, who is said to have served Christ for 86 years, can all be grouped together as efforts by patristic writers to highlight a believer's faithful devotion to Christ from "youth." Such statements do not necessarily mean, however, that the subject was baptized as an infant. It is just as likely that the martyr, or other believer, was baptized as a young child, or even an older child, as it

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.

²⁹ Aristides, *Apology* 15, in J. R. Harris, *The Apology of Aristides* (Cambridge: 1891).

³⁰ Aland, *Did the Early Christian Church Baptize Infants?*, 58.

³¹ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 59–61.

is that she or he was baptized as an infant. Such “evidence,” important as it is to Jeremias’s cause, does not appear to pose a serious threat to the notion that infant baptism was not the norm in second century Christianity.³²

In the second century, then, there is no direct reference to baptism for the infant children of converts or believers. Even the indirect evidence cited by Jeremias, such as Polycarp and the other martyrs who had served Christ for nearly their entire lives, is open to other, more plausible interpretations. In the absence of any direct reference to the baptism of infants, one might consider interpretations other than infant baptism to be more likely. In fact, the evidence that does exist from the second century argues more convincingly for one common practice of baptizing believers after their repentance of sin. The methods described in patristic writings along with the description of those who were to be baptized are direct evidence of believers’ baptism as the normative practice of the church in the second century. Even Jeremias’s “missionary baptism,” having no direct evidence supporting its supposed existence, appears to be a construction that fits a presupposed conclusion regarding infant baptism rather than evidence supporting the conclusion that paedo-baptism was the norm. For Jeremias to categorize the direct references to believers’ baptism in the patristic writings to some sort of missionary baptism seems to be a reach.

Third Century

Tertullian of Carthage, apologist and the founder of Western Theology, wrote the earliest extant treatise on the subject of baptism. In fact, his work entitled, appropriately, *On Baptism*, is the only surviving treatise on the ordinance of baptism from the time before the First Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, AD 325). The treatise is written prior to his conversion to the Montanist sect and in response to the innovative practice of infant baptism. Tertullian claims that the church’s act of baptism is remarkable because of its simplicity. The rite itself is a simple act: a person

³² Anecdotally, for many years my own description of my conversion (or testimony) began, “I was raised in a Christian home.” Someone writing of my view of baptism a hundred years from now would be mistaken to conclude either that I was baptized as an infant or that I believed in household baptisms. A lifelong Baptist, I was baptized as a twelve year old believer, and have never intended by my earlier statement to imply that I was a Christian prior to my conversion.

is simply immersed in water.³³ Once baptized, the individual is no cleaner than before the baptism. However, the result is a spiritual cleansing that far exceeds any physical cleansing one might desire. While the washing with water is a mere external act, the cleansing from sins is spiritual and eternal.³⁴

Tertullian advises patience when determining to whom the ordinance is to be administered.³⁵ The apologist offers an alternative to a practice already in existence of baptizing infants. The practice, Tertullian argues, is fraught with danger. In the first place, the message conveyed by paedo-baptism is that the infant is in need of salvation; which Tertullian denies. Moreover, those who serve as “sponsors” for the infant being baptized might not be able to ensure that the baptized will grow up to live in accordance with the promises made at baptism.³⁶ In other words, Tertullian recognizes that inherent in the ordinance of baptism is both a repentance for sins and a commitment to right living. Infants have not sinned and therefore are not responsible for the former. The “sponsors” are incapable of keeping the latter and cannot therefore be responsible for it. Why should the church do something that is both unnecessary and irresponsible? “Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the ‘remission of sins?’”³⁷ Tertullian also asked, “Why should sponsors be thrust into danger if baptism is not necessary for salvation?”³⁸ Clearly, for Tertullian, baptism is not a requirement for salvation. Were that to be the case, indeed one might argue for the validity of paedo-baptism.

Tertullian continues his exposition of baptism by arguing that infants are not given adult responsibilities in “worldly” matters, so why should they be given the responsibility of living a Christian life, the presumed result of baptism, when they are not ready? As we saw earlier with Justin Martyr, the baptizand was expected to commit to live a Christian life. A child cannot be expected to either make or keep such a commitment.

He concludes chapter eighteen with two strong statements. The first is “If any understand the weighty importance of baptism they will fear its reception more than its delay.”³⁹ By this Tertullian clearly refers to

³³ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 2, in *ANF* vol. 3.

³⁴ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 7.

³⁵ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.

³⁶ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.

³⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.

³⁸ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.

³⁹ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.

the great responsibility of post-baptismal Christian living. Baptism is not to be taken lightly, for a grave responsibility comes with it.

Second, and most importantly, Tertullian claims that "sound faith is secure of salvation."⁴⁰ No stronger statement could be made to divorce the rite of baptism *in se* (inherently) from saving faith. Salvation is not procured by baptism, and faith is the sure indicator of salvation. In other words, for Tertullian salvation is by faith alone, even when devoid of a subsequent baptism. What can we glean from this text about the role of baptism for the believer? First, it should come subsequent to agreement with Christian belief and commitment to Christian practice, as with Justin. Second, baptism is not the means to salvation, faith is. Third, the baptized is held to a higher standard of Christian moral practice, presumably because of his or her identification with the church. While catechumens possess salvation because of their saving faith, they are not "Christians" in the sense of being identified with the church. This identification comes with baptism.

In the following chapter Tertullian turns to the purpose of baptism. Passover is the best time for baptism, he argues, because we are baptized into the death of Christ (Rom 6:1). Interestingly, Tertullian refers to Jesus's statement to his disciples to watch for a man carrying water as a reference to baptism, as water is associated with the Passover. The second most solemn occasion for baptism is Pentecost because it was at that time that the promised Spirit descended on the disciples. Tertullian is quick to end with a statement that every day is the Lord's, and every hour is apt for baptism. Though the solemnity might differ, the significance does not.

In the next chapter Tertullian describes what is to be done at the baptismal ceremony itself, and how one should prepare for it. In preparation, the candidate for baptism is to "pray with repeated prayers, fasts, and bending of the knee."⁴¹ None of these acts of preparation are appropriate for infants. Only older children and adults can respond to these instructions.

More significantly, however, is Tertullian's statement that in preparation "there should be vigils all through the night accompanied by the confession of all past sins."⁴² Obviously, infants, even if one accepts that they are guilty of sins, are not going to be holding a vigil throughout the night and confessing those sins. As Tertullian has already mentioned,

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.

⁴¹ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 20.

⁴² Tertullian, *On Baptism* 20.

though, he believes infants are innocent of sins and thereby not in need of their remission. What "past sins" do infants have to confess?

Baptism is tied inextricably to "satisfaction of former sins" and to a defense against "temptations which will closely follow."⁴³ The catechumen, already possessing saving faith, comes to the fount having confessed former sins. But baptism, besides its role relative to past sins, also serves as a source of strength for the believer to overcome future sins. Baptism is the foundation, or beginning point, of the Christian's life of obedience in the sense that its sins prior to saving faith have been "washed." Those temptations that come subsequent to repentance and baptism are like those of Christ, who was baptized immediately following his own baptism. What is the lesson to be learned? At Christ's baptism the Spirit is said to descend on him "as a dove." So too the anointing following baptism is representative of the Spirit anointing the believer. Tertullian emphasizes not only the Spirit's work in the remission of sins, but also in the overcoming of temptation following conversion.⁴⁴

Tertullian's primary concern is that infant baptism negates the church's practice, already seen clearly in the documents from the second century, of a time of preparation for baptism which would include repentance of sin, fasting, and prayer. None of these necessary precursors to baptism are possible for infants. Each is possible, however, for young children. Tertullian argues that the practice of triple immersion has long-standing tradition but is not commanded in Scripture or handed down from the apostles⁴⁵ For him to defend this practice as traditional, yet reject infant baptism without making a similar argument, leads one to conclude that he did not know it as a traditional practice, but as a novel one.

Following chronologically from Tertullian is the mid-third century *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus.⁴⁶ In chapter 42, Hippolytus states that there is to be a three-year period from conversion to baptism in which the catechumen is to be tested regarding his or her faith and Christian lifestyle. This period is also to be a time of instruction in the faith of the church. In the following chapter the *Tradition* instructs that catechumens

⁴³ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 20.

⁴⁴ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 20.,

⁴⁵ Tertullian, *On the Chaplet* 3 in *ANF* vol. 3.

⁴⁶ See C. M. Edsman, "A Typology of Baptism in Hippolytus Romanus," *Stud Pat* 2 (1957): 35–40.

are to attend worship and participate fully in the life of the church, with the exception of taking the Eucharist, from which they were excluded.⁴⁷ The next chapter is concerned with catechumens who are martyred before they are baptized. Their martyrdom serves as their “blood baptism.”⁴⁸ Chapter 45 details the final preparation for the baptism, including the use of witnesses to verify their faithfulness during the catechumen period, Scripture reading, fasting, and praying. Then, in chapter 46, Hippolytus instructs that the children who are catechumens are to be baptized. Clearly, he intends those children who have gone through the process described in the preceding chapters. Next, he makes allowance for those little ones who cannot speak for themselves to profess their faith. The allowance is for a believing parent or other believing family member to confess on behalf of the child. Following the children, the adult catechumens are baptized.

What is one to make of Hippolytus's allowance for children who cannot speak for themselves? It is possible that the text is a later interpolation.⁴⁹ Even if it is original to the third century, it only confirms that infant baptism was permissible in Hippolytus's context, and nothing more. It certainly cannot be an example of Jeremiah's missionary baptism, as the children were baptized *before* the adults. These children must be the children of believers if their parents are to speak on their behalf. So why is no distinction made between children who speak for themselves and children who do not, if paedobaptism is the norm? It appears that paedobaptism was the exception, provided the text in question is not an interpolation. Hippolytus describes the baptism of believers who had previously demonstrated fidelity to Christianity and the Christian community during the period of instruction preceding baptism, with an allowance for the baptism of infants.

Cyprian of Carthage's *Epistle 58* was written to announce the decision of an African synod in AD 253 to require the baptism of infants. Cyprian relays to his readers disagreements among the bishops at the synod over the relationship between baptism and circumcision. The addressee of the letter believed that baptism should be performed on the eighth day, commensurate with the practice of circumcision. The synod did not make a pronouncement on this because of the disagreement

⁴⁷ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 42, in G. Dix *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr* (London: Alban Press, 1992). See also chapters 48, 50, 62.

⁴⁸ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 43.

⁴⁹ Aland, *Did the Early Christian Church Baptize Infants?*, 49–50.

over the relationship. One might inquire as to whether some of the bishops rejected the belief that infant baptism is the Christian replacement of Jewish circumcision. Cyprian's announcement does not state this categorically, simply claiming that the “law of circumcision” was not required. However, it might equally be surmised that were the bishops united in their belief that baptism is a replacement for circumcision, they would have been much more prone to follow instructions regarding its application much more closely.

What is apparent is that while church leaders in this part of North Africa might have disagreed over circumcision as the origin of infant baptism, they affirm *in solidum* (on the whole) that infant baptism was proper for the church. That a synod would even need to meet to decide this matter shows that paedobaptism was not universally practiced. In fact, were it merely a few who opposed it, such as Tertullian, would an African synod be necessary? Whatever the background to the council, its decision is significant. “No one,” the council decided, “should be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God.”⁵⁰ Baptism, for Cyprian and the council he reports on, believe that baptism is a means of grace; that its recipients receive “divine mercy.”⁵¹ Moreover, baptism is even more important for infants, Cyprian argues, because they enjoy the help, mercy, and grace of God from the very beginning of their lives, helping them to overcome sin.⁵² A shift from Tertullian to Cyprian is quite obvious. Whereas Tertullian emphasizes baptism's relationship to our past sins as well as future ones, Cyprian emphasizes only its relationship to future need.

Writing in the middle of the third century Origen of Alexandria, on three occasions, defended the practice of baptizing infants.⁵³ In each instance Origen has one purpose in mind: to explain how infant baptism could be the practice of the church without infants needing the forgiveness of sins. In other words, Origen is responding to the challenge, it appears, that infant baptism is unnecessary, as infants have committed no sins.⁵⁴ Origen concludes that while infants themselves have commit-

⁵⁰ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle* 58.2, in *ANF* vol. 5.

⁵¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle* 58.6.

⁵² Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle* 58.6.

⁵³ The works in view date from Origen's time in Caesarea in Palestine (C. 231–250).

⁵⁴ Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 7, in *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 83, trans. G. W. Barkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

ted no sins, they share in the universal stain of Adam's sin and are thus benefited by baptism.⁵⁵ It is for this reason that infant baptism is the "custom of the Church,"⁵⁶ a custom Origen claims was handed down from the Apostles.⁵⁷ Origen makes two arguments for infant baptism. One, it is the current practice of the church, which he believes is an apostolic practice. Of course, had infant baptism arisen in Palestine in the late second century, it could have easily found widespread acceptance in the churches of the region by the time Origen writes around 250.⁵⁸

In the third century we see the obvious beginning of paedobaptism as normative for parts of the church. The practice is certainly not universal, as Tertullian's aggressive defense of believers' baptism and Origen's need to mount an apology for infant baptism, both attest. Despite Origen's statement that paedobaptism is an ancient practice in the church, his argument rests on its intended outcome rather than its apostolic origin. In other words, we can conclude that in the third century a debate rages between those who desire infant baptism and those who resist it. Ardent defenders of baptizing infants rely primarily on their argument that the sacrament is needed to cleanse infants of the stain of original sin. The evidence from the third century points to the origin of infant baptism in the practice of baptizing mortally ill infants due to an increasing belief that baptism was necessary for the salvation of the child. The opposing viewpoint, found in Tertullian's argument against paedobaptism, was that faith was sufficient for salvation, despite his equivocation in allowing infant baptism in times of "necessity."

Fourth and Fifth Centuries⁵⁹

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, written near the end of the fourth century, is a compilation of portions of earlier church manuals including the *Didache* and Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition*. Christ's command in the Great Commission to baptize served as the explicit basis for the practice in the

⁵⁵ Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.9 in Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5*, in *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 103, trans. T. P. Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

⁵⁶ Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 7.

⁵⁷ Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.9.

⁵⁸ Aland, *Did the Early Christian Church Baptize Infants?*, 48–49.

⁵⁹ See T. M. Finn, "Baptismal Death and Resurrection: A Study in Fourth Century Eastern Baptismal Theology," *Worship* 43 (1969): 175–89; E. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century*, 2nd rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

church.⁶⁰ Regarding the ceremony itself, the bishop was to anoint the head of the one to be baptized, both the men and the women. A presbyter then was to immerse them into water in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If the baptized is a man, then a male deacon was to receive them out of the water. But if it was a woman, then a deaconess was to receive her to preserve modesty (as baptism was done in the nude).⁶¹

One is baptized into the death of Christ, using water instead of a burial. An anointing that follows the immersion is a "confirmation of the confession." Importantly, the author states that "the descent into the water represents the dying together with Christ, and the ascent out of the water the rising again with him."⁶² This is the clearest example thus far of the symbolic character of baptism, though we have seen it implicitly elsewhere. Faith is the means to the true sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁶³ Baptism is a graphic representation of that death and resurrection.

The representative character of baptism is sensible considering that the one being baptized is to "be free of all [past] iniquity."⁶⁴ As we have seen in the predominance of earlier writings, baptism is contingent upon the confession of past sins. The rite is subsequent to repentance and faith. Moreover, he is to be already a "son of God."⁶⁵ Later, the author reiterates the point that baptism follows conversion, when he says that "the water is the symbol of the death of Christ."⁶⁶ The one being baptized has already repented, has been cleansed of sin, and has died with Christ. Baptism symbolizes the conversion of one who already possesses faith.

Before baptism he is to fast.⁶⁷ Jesus fasted after his baptism, but the author explains this difference by stating that Jesus has no sins to confess; no cleansing was needed. Moreover, Jesus was not baptized into his own death and resurrection, as his baptism looked forward to these events. Thus, fasting followed the baptism. For the believer, baptism looks back to one's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ

⁶⁰ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.2.22, in ANF vol. 7.

⁶¹ *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.2.16.

⁶² *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.2.17 (emphasis added).

⁶³ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.3.41.

⁶⁴ *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.2.18.

⁶⁵ *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.2.18 (cf. 7.3.41).

⁶⁶ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.2.22.

⁶⁷ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.2.22.

by faith. Fasting thus precedes baptism. Jesus's baptism was for the purpose of confirming John's message while the believer's baptism is in recognition of one having received the message of Christ.

Church manuals such as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and its constituent documents, indicate both current church practice and what a given author or set of authors wishes to see remain standard practice, and are thus invaluable to our study. But just as important are those theologians who seek to justify or explain the church's practice or challenge certain practices. Gregory of Nazianzus is one of those fourth-century pastor-theologians who both explains the church's baptismal practice and joins those third century opponents of the innovation of infant baptism who had challenged the practice earlier. Gregory is one of the Cappadocian Fathers, along with Gregory of Nyssa and his brother Basil the Great.⁶⁸ Interestingly, none of the three, despite being the children of Christian parents, were baptized while infants. Nazianzus, whose father was a bishop, was not baptized until he was about 30 years old.⁶⁹ He dedicated his *Oration* 40 to the topic of baptism. He explains that in baptism one symbolizes outwardly what is an inward reality.⁷⁰ Baptism is an outward type of the inner cleansing of the soul. Water is an outward cleansing of the body, but the inward cleansing of the soul occurs "apart from the body."⁷¹

Regarding infant baptism, Gregory is basically opposed to the practice, except where there is a danger of death.⁷² Where this imminent danger exists, he says it is better for them to depart "unconsciously sanctified" than "unsealed and uninitiated."⁷³ But what does he mean by "uninitiated"? While it is possible that he means by this "unsaved," it is also plausible to read "not initiated into the life of the church." With the emphasis on the corporate and initiatory effects of the act of baptism on the believer, transferring the believing catechumen from "outsider" to "insider" status, one might plausibly find Gregory accommodating infant baptism as a pastor leading the community into closer communion with grieving parents.

⁶⁸ See E. Ferguson, "Preaching at Epiphany: Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom on Baptism and the Church," *CH* 66.1 (1997): 1–17.

⁶⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Romana*, 4.39, ed. L. Mendelssohn (Leipzig, 1887).

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.8, in *NPNF*, series 2 vol. 7, ed. W. Sandy (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

⁷¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.8.

⁷² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.28.

⁷³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.28.

Reading Gregory's allowance for infant baptism as a pastoral accommodation is supported by his immediate appeal to avoid the practice in other than emergency circumstances.⁷⁴ Only children who are old enough to understand the "basic outlines" of the faith should be baptized. Children are responsible for their lives only when their reason has matured to the point that they recognize a need for forgiveness. Until then, Gregory says, they have no account to give for sins of ignorance.⁷⁵ His instruction is consistent with the contention that paedobaptism arose among Christians in response to infant mortality, a conclusion clearly supported by evidence from the inscriptions.⁷⁶

In preparation for their initiation by baptism into full participation in the life of the church, Cyril of Jerusalem delivered a series of *Catechetical Lectures* to explain Christian belief and practice to catechumens.⁷⁷ In lectures 19 and 20 he described for them the baptism ceremony in which they would participate, explaining the various elements of the ceremony. The description is detailed, instructing the one being baptized to face west, to renounce Satan and his ways, and to commit to live an obedient Christian life.⁷⁸ The emphasis is on the ceremonial display of one's conversion, repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ. The second message on baptism explained that those being baptized would be naked, "imitating Christ, who was stripped naked on the cross."⁷⁹ Immersion into the water symbolized death and burial. Arising from the water pictured the believer's sharing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁸⁰ All of these instructions are clearly intended for those old enough to understand, believe, and obey them. Cyril has believers in mind.

Augustine of Hippo is one of the most revered theologians in the Western Christian tradition. He has influenced Protestants and Catholics, paedobaptists and Baptists in similar and strikingly different ways. He spoke of baptism in writings directed against two of his staunchest opponents, Pelagius and the Donatists. In his *On Baptism against the Donatists*, Augustine argued that the practice of baptizing infants is "the

⁷⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.28.

⁷⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.28.

⁷⁶ See Ferguson, "Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism."

⁷⁷ See H. M. Riley, *Christian Initiation: A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of the Baptismal Liturgy in the Mystagogical Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1974).

⁷⁸ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 19.1–6, in *NPNF* 2.7.

⁷⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 20.2.

⁸⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 20.2, in *NPNF* 2.4.

invariable custom of the church handed down from the apostles."⁸¹ Augustine defends the practice on the grounds both of its antiquity and its supposed meaning. He argues that the apostles instructed the church to baptize infants because baptism is "a parallel of circumcision."⁸² God's covenant with the church is both symbolized and effected through the administration of baptism to the children of believers, themselves heirs of the promise of God's salvation.

But Augustine's primary defense of the practice of baptizing infants is the work which baptism accomplishes in the life of the one being baptized. In his *Enchiridion* Augustine writes, "From the newborn infant to the elderly man bent by age, no one is closed off from baptism, so there is none who in baptism does not die to sin."⁸³ Baptism's effect—the remission of sins—is available to infants just as adults. This is needed because infants, as well as adults, are in *need* of the forgiveness of sin. Unlike advocates of infant baptism in the East, Augustine rejects the innocence of infants; even newborns need forgiveness, though one of original sin, not sins "added to the sin they brought with them."⁸⁴

What one finds in the fourth century is that the church remains conflicted, as in the third century. Some writers, such as Augustine, argue that infant baptism is to be the rule and requirement of the church. Those writers from the West who defend infant baptism typically do so because of the need to deal with original sin. Baptism cleanses the infant from original sin, thus establishing their salvation.

In the East, however, writers defend paedobaptism without attributing to infants sinfulness that needs addressing. Instead, infants, though innocent and without need of the forgiveness of sins, still benefit from baptism through a reception of "sanctification, justice, filial adoption, inheritance, that they may be brothers and members of Christ, and become dwelling places of the Spirit."⁸⁵

However, even writers such as Gregory of Nazianzus, himself not baptized until an adult despite being the son of a bishop, allowed for infant baptism in extreme, emergency situations and attributed some benefit to the practice. Nevertheless, he preferred believers' baptism

⁸¹ Augustine, *On Baptism Against the Donatists* 4.32, in NPNF 2.7.

⁸² Augustine, *On Baptism Against the Donatists* 4.32.

⁸³ Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.43.

⁸⁴ Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.43.

⁸⁵ John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instruction* 3.6, in NPNF 1.9.

because of the proper connection of baptism with repentance.

In the East there is a clear picture of baptismal practice and theology for believers being adapted for infants. Importantly, though, in the East baptism is not believed to remit the sins of the infants. There are other benefits articulated by theologians, however. Gregory of Nazianzus does not attribute original sin or guilt to infants.⁸⁶ Rather, he argues that infants who die without baptism are not punished.⁸⁷ Chrysostom⁸⁸ similarly assumes the innocence of newborns, stressing numerous blessings beyond merely the forgiveness of sins.⁸⁹ The infant receives sacramental membership in the body of Christ, the indwelling presence of the Spirit, etc. In the West, things are much different. As seen with Cyprian, "The infant approaches that much more easily to the reception of the forgiveness of sins in baptism because the sins remitted are not his own, but those of another."⁹⁰

Conclusions and Implications

There are several conclusions we can draw from our investigation of baptism in the patristic writings. Baptism in the patristic writings has less to do with age than with the role of repentance, profession of faith, and entrance into the full life of the church. In each period we surveyed, the emphasis was invariably on the catechumen who began a new stage in her or his life as a believer. Having demonstrated a commitment to the teachings and lifestyle of the church, the catechumen was initiated into full communion with the church through the rite of baptism. The normal order of conversion, preparation for church life, and baptism is reflected not only in direct references from the second and third centuries, but in the church orders both ancient and later. The practice of infant baptism, arising most likely in the second century, required accommoda-

⁸⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 22.13, in NPNF 2.7.

⁸⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.

⁸⁸ Ferguson, "Preaching at Epiphany"; T. M. Finn, *The Liturgy of Baptism in the Baptismal Instructions of St. John Chrysostom* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967); T. Harjunpaa, "St. John Chrysostom in the Light of his Catechetical and Baptismal Homilies," *LQ* 29.2 (1977): 167–95; L. L. Mitchell, "The Baptismal Rite in Chrysostom," *AThR* 43 (1961): 307–403; P. Pleasants, "Making Christian the Christians: The Baptismal Instructions of St. John Chrysostom," *GOTR* 34.4 (1989): 379–92.

⁸⁹ Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instruction* 3.6 (see list on p. 14).

⁹⁰ Cyprian, *Epistle* 64.5, in ANF 5.

tion of the church's baptismal liturgy to the innovative practice and is not reflected in the manuals.⁹¹

Prior to the third century there is no voice found in the patristic writings that rejects the baptism of only believers. Even if the inscriptions are to be read as reflecting a quite early practice of emergency baptism, which they most certainly do, that accommodation does not constitute an explicit rejection of a normative practice of believers' baptism.

In the West particularly the patristic writings show a defense for infant baptism that corresponds with a more refined view of original sin. In Augustine, for example, baptism is the means by which original sin is removed. Because infants are guilty of this sin, and in need of forgiveness, baptism is quite logically to be extended to them. Tertullian is aware of this in the third century, but rejects the notion on two counts. First, infants are innocent, guiltless, and not in need of forgiveness. Second, faith alone is sufficient for salvation. Baptism is subsequent to faith. As children are neither in need of forgiveness nor able to possess faith, baptism is unnecessary.

Missionary baptism seems to be an idea generated to make allowance for a position already held by Jeremias. There is nothing in the patristic writings prior to the third century that either states or implies that the church conceived of two different baptisms: paedobaptism for the infant children of believers and missionary baptism for converts from Judaism or paganism.

The ceremony appears to be adapted to suit infants, seeing that it does not give any specific instruction about their baptism. It would seem that an existing practice of baptism of adults and children old enough to believe was adapted to the baptism of infants in time. It would seem that emergency baptism and the rise of the doctrine of original sin drive the desire to institute paedobaptism. It is hard to imagine how the patristic descriptions and instructions regarding baptism would have developed within a church that already and regularly practiced infant baptism. Why is there no description of how this would happen? Why, even in the fourth and fifth centuries, do the documents not even hint at how infant baptism might be performed? It seems more likely that the ancient practice of baptizing only believers was adjusted slightly to allow for the baptism of non-believing infants in addition to believing children and adults.

Jeremias's conclusion of a "crisis" in the practice of infant baptism in

the fourth century is not the only, or even most plausible, explanation of the evidence. Rather, the most plausible conclusion is that the debate which ensues in the third century continues into the fourth. While paedobaptism is allowed in emergency situations and even functions as a rule in some churches, it is not the universal practice of the church. Tertullian's position seems to have supporters even into the fourth and fifth centuries. There is no legitimate reason to dismiss such a conclusion so easily, as Jeremias does.

We can say then with some confidence that the patristic writings demonstrate a challenge to the ancient practice of baptizing only those who had repented of sin, placed their faith in Jesus Christ, and committed to live a faithful Christian life following a time of instruction and testing. Catechumens were Christians, but were not considered fully participating members of the church. They were not allowed to participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for instance.

Due to the dual pressures of infant mortality and evolving views of the sinfulness of even newborn infants, the novel practice of baptizing infants became widespread by the third century. This practice was not accepted as universal even by the fourth century, as infants' need for forgiveness continued to be questioned. In both the third and fourth centuries theologians continued to argue for only the baptism of believers. These writers ended up where Peter, in his Pentecost sermon began: "Repent and be baptized." The account in Acts then records, "Those who received his word were baptized."

⁹¹ A possible exception is Hippolytus, but even this evidence is debatable.