

The Development of Baptismal Doctrine in the  
Writings of the Apostolic Fathers

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### **Prefatory Note**

Citations in this paper are taken from the following sources:

1. Greek and English citations from the writings of the Apostolic Fathers are taken from J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).
2. Citations from other sources are taken from the translations noted in the bibliography, part I.

Throughout the history of the church, the doctrines surrounding the sacrament (or ordinance, in baptist<sup>1</sup> circles) of baptism have often served more to keep Christians apart than to promote unity. On the one side, pedobaptists assert that baptists ignore the historical predominance of infant baptism; on the other, baptists respond that pedobaptists ignore the plain teaching of the Scriptures. Such a debate, in addition to an appeal to New Testament teaching, must also examine the historical practice of baptism in the earliest days of the church. It is apparent to proponents of either viewpoint, in any such examination, that the doctrine of baptism has undergone a great deal of change from the earliest days of Christianity. Therefore, it is necessary to determine the extent and origin of changes in the church's teaching on such a vital topic as baptism.

It is not necessary to move through generations of church history in order to find the beginnings of doctrinal development concerning baptism. Diversity in doctrine can be seen as early as the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. In the generation or two that immediately succeeded the apostolic era, we find that New Testament concepts about baptism are subtly modified, and new elements are added to this teaching, by the authors of these writings. There is no intent to alter or subvert apostolic teaching; I believe it is fair to say that these writers are merely attempting to understand and explain what the New Testament (and, using an allegorical approach, the Old Testament) teaches about baptism.

It is to be expected that, given the conditions that existed in the Roman Empire of that period, the leaders of the major centers of Christianity would maintain contact with one another. This would ensure the preservation of the apostolic teaching and an essential commonality of practice. Despite this, the various church centers, as represented by the

various authors of the Fathers, seem to have developed doctrinal viewpoints which, while not contradictory, emphasize different aspects of a teaching.<sup>2</sup> In a discussion of the development of the doctrine surrounding baptism, we must examine both those areas that are held in common, and those on which one part of the church placed a greater emphasis than did her sister centers. This will not only clarify what the church at large believed at that time, but also point out areas in which controversy might (and, indeed, ultimately did) take place, and set the stage for future developments in baptismal doctrine.

In examining these documents, it also appears that doctrinal development occurred more rapidly in the major urban centers (notably Rome) than in rural settings. Such cannot be claimed too dogmatically, given the limited number of writings extant from this period. However, once Christianity reached the major centers of scholarship in the empire, and began to see the more highly educated among its converts, it is natural to expect that new ways of looking at Biblical and theological teaching would crop up in these locations. Given a strong desire to preserve the teaching of the apostles, the rural areas of the empire, especially those close to Palestine, would be expected to tend toward theological conservatism; the sophisticated urban centers, conversely, would be expected to retain as much of the apostolic content as possible, while making concessions to the scholarship of the day that would make Christianity more acceptable to their educated pagan counterparts. While this tendency probably began slowly, it can already be seen in the doctrinal teaching concerning baptism in the Apostolic Fathers.

In this paper we will examine the process of doctrinal change. First, we will look at the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, and determine what each writer contributes to an understanding of baptismal doctrine in the early second century. Next, we will place the

various teachings in chronological and geographic context, so that we may see in which church centers and at which times certain changes took place. Finally, we will briefly sketch the ways in which the doctrinal changes that took place in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers affected the teachings of their successors later in the second century.

In order to facilitate our examination of what processes actually took place, we may here place the writings of the Apostolic Fathers in their chronological and geographical contexts. As far as the development of baptismal doctrine is concerned, little is gained from a study of four of these works, since they make no reference to baptism: the *Epistle of Polycarp*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Epistle to Diognetus*, and the fragments of Papias, This leaves us with six works. Placed in a chart reflecting their chronological and geographic origin, we have something like this:

Date	Rome	Egypt	Syria
100	1 Clement		
110			Epistles of Ignatius
120			
130			Didache
140		Barnabas	
150	Hermas 2 Clement		

(These lines cannot be drawn quite a strictly as the chart might suggest. There is some question as to the provenance of the *Didache*, for instance; while Syria is now generally

regarded as the location of its origin, it certainly had its major influence in Egypt, and may reflect teachings found there. The dates of some of these books may also be disputed, but the general time frame will not be affected greatly overall.)

Placed like this, we see the paucity of information with which we have to work. Entire segments of the early church are left out, and some substantial chronological gaps appear. Urban centers, not surprisingly, dominate. Still, we have enough information to draw some tentative conclusions about the state of baptismal doctrine in the early second century, particularly from c. AD 125 to 150. Within each geographical grouping there is one work which discusses baptism directly, not merely allusively: *Hermas* in Rome, *Barnabas* in Egypt, and the *Didache* in Syro-Palestine. This, then, is the raw material from which we may begin to construct the views of the Apostolic Fathers concerning baptism.

While our chief concern here is doctrine, a brief discussion of the mode employed in the early church is helpful. It is now generally (although by no means universally) agreed that immersion was the mode of choice in the apostolic and immediate post-apostolic church. The first exception to this practice of which we have a record is found in the *Didache* (7:2), and while it may reflect earlier practice, it is an exception for necessity only: “But if thou hast neither [cold, running or warm, standing water], then pour water on the head thrice....” Likewise, despite the bold assertion of Jeremias that infant baptism is ‘already taken for granted’ by the second century<sup>3</sup>, we have no direct evidence for the practice prior to the beginning of the third century, although its roots may possibly go back into the second<sup>4</sup>.

More significantly for our discussion here, there seems to be no connection made between the mode and meaning of baptism by the Apostolic Fathers (such as is made by modern-day Baptists, for instance). Immersion seems, contra Jeremias, to be taken for granted in the *Didache*, and its prescription for baptism appears to be simply a straightforward recounting of what was common in the Syro-Palestinian church. This is the only place in the Apostolic Fathers that directly discusses mode (although some traces may be found in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 11:1<sup>5</sup>), and there is no intimation that the mode has any deeper significance, such as the Pauline conception of baptism as union with Christ in His death and resurrection<sup>6</sup>. If there is anything new here, it is the lack of doctrinal significance accorded to the mode of baptism.

The most striking new practice connected with baptism in the second century, which was possibly also the most widespread, is the rise of a pre-baptismal catechumenate. This is most evident in the *Didache*, in which the instructions for baptism (ch. 7) are preceded by an extensive ethical treatise based on the “Two Ways” (chs. 1-6). The “Two Ways” instruction is also found, in a slightly different form, in Barnabas (chs. 18-21)<sup>7</sup>, indicating that it was used in a variety of locales, and so suggesting that pre-baptismal instruction may have occurred in both urban and rural churches. In the New Testament, baptism is seen primarily as a conversion rite, and, while the order of events may vary somewhat, is closely tied to the time of one’s conversion<sup>8</sup>. Thus, a major change in perspective has been made by the generation following the apostles. It is therefore necessary to determine the factors which could have brought about this change.

One factor certainly was the change in the nature of the audience to which Christianity addressed itself. In the New Testament narratives, we find missionary

activity centered primarily on the synagogue; thus, most converts were either Jews or “God-fearers,” those familiar with Jewish teachings and practices. Even during the time of the missionary travels of Paul, however, we see the Gospel begin to be proclaimed in settings further removed from the Jewish ethos, and this soon became the norm, not the exception. As this change in audience took place, a familiarity with Jewish teachings and standards by new converts could no longer be taken for granted. The ethical standards of pagan societies were considerably lower than those of the Jews. Therefore, it was necessary for Christian teachers to inculcate a higher standard of conduct in their converts<sup>9</sup>.

It may seem peculiar that the emphasis in the early church is placed on ethical standards, not on doctrinal ones. Perhaps this doctrinal minimalism reflects an early state of theological concern and creedal development in the second century. Although traces of an incipient creed may be found in the *Didache*, we have no evidence of any standardized form of a creed prior to the end of the second century<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore likely that in the early church a close connection between faith and morality was maintained<sup>11</sup>. The confession made by the initiate at baptism was a sufficient creed to ensure his or her faith, provided external conduct remained within the boundaries of accepted Christian norms.

At this point, although baptism has lost its strong connection with conversion, it still remains predominantly an initiatory rite. The *Didache*'s discussion of the Eucharist contains this warning: “But let no one eat or drink of this eucharistic thanksgiving, but they that have been baptized into the name of the Lord...” (9:5). Thus, one is not acknowledged as a full member of the church until they have undergone baptism<sup>12</sup>. The



catechumens remained on the periphery of church life, much the same as the unconfirmed in many modern churches. Baptism invested the member with full status as a part of the church. This initiatory character probably remained the emphasis in the rural settings in which the *Didache* wielded its greatest influence.

In contrast, by the middle of the second century, we see a change in the character of baptism from initiatory to salvific begin to develop in the urban settings of Rome and Alexandria. This led to a change in the doctrine of the nature of baptism, with baptismal regeneration replacing initiation as the predominant view. This does not appear to have arisen early on; although the New Testament indicates a variety of gifts associated with baptism, the indication is that these come through the work of Christ, not through some magical application of water<sup>13</sup>. Likewise, there is no indication in the earliest writings of the Apostolic Fathers that regeneration is inextricably linked with the act of baptism.

The earliest indications of a doctrine of baptismal regeneration appear in the *Epistle of Barnabas*. At the beginning of chapter 11, in which baptism is specifically discussed, the author notes that Israel “would not receive the baptism which bringeth the remission of sins” (11:1). More specific is the reference in 11:11: “...we go down into the water laden with sins and filth, and rise up from it bearing fruit in the heart, resting our fear and hope on Jesus in the spirit.” The last phrase would seem to indicate that there has been little departure from the views of the New Testament writers, but v. 1 seems conversely to tie remission strongly to baptism. Taken in connection with the author’s earlier discussion of the remission of sins (particularly 6:11f), it is likely that he is dealing with a tension between the two views, the result of the unsystematic way in which theology was handled in the days immediately following the time of the apostles<sup>14</sup>.

It is in the *Shepherd of Hermas* that we find a strong case for baptismal regeneration first being made. In the fourth Mandate, the question of repentance arises, and it is stressed that baptism brings remission of sins on such terms that sinless living should follow. Remission of “former sins,” which comes with baptism, is not equated with repentance, which comes to those who have already received remission. In mid-second century Rome, then, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration has already gained a foothold, although it has not yet developed into the forms that would come to dominate later thought.

In connection with this, we find the question of what happens to those who lapse into sin after baptism arise. This question may have roots that go back further, but it does not become a major controversy until the rite of baptism is accorded a greater significance than as a simple initiation into the faith, This issue appears only in *Hermas* and *2 Clement* among the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, which indicates that this issue probably first arose in full form in the Roman church of the mid-second century. Essentially this was a question concerning church discipline, not especially baptismal efficacy<sup>15</sup>. This embryonic controversy would erupt later in the century, most notably in North Africa, with serious effects on the church; in *Hermas* and *2 Clement*, however, we have only the rumblings of a future rigorist shock.

With baptism being increasingly seen as bringing remission of sins, the question of the state of children within the church also begins to come to the fore. *Barnabas* 6:11 implies that children are in a state of innocence: “Forasmuch then as He renewed us in the remission of sins, He made us to be a new type, so that we should have the soul of children, as if He were recreating us.” The clear implication of this passage is that

children, reflecting the original creation, are considered (if not actually) sinless before God. The *Shepherd of Hermas* also states the innocence of children (M. 2; S. 9:29). This belief continued to grow throughout the patristic period<sup>16</sup>, and indeed is widely accepted in baptist (and even many pedobaptist) circles today.

It might have been expected that this question would have been answered by administering baptism to infants (or at least children). but, as we noted above, such is not the case at the time of the Apostolic Fathers. The belief in an age of innocence, in fact, is used by Tertullian later in the century to combat the idea of infant baptism (*De baptismo* 18). While this suggests that the baptism of children may have become an issue by the turn of the century, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers do not seem to make any such commitment to the practice. The fact that the question is raised and answered on these terms tells against assigning too early a date to the practice of pedobaptism.

Another area of baptismal doctrine often held by modern pedobaptists but peculiarly absent in the Apostolic Fathers is the connection of Christian baptism with Jewish circumcision. The first attempt by a post-Biblical Christian author to deal with this issue is found in the *Epistle of Barnabas*.<sup>17</sup> The author, utilizing allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, attempts to explain how circumcision is carried over into the church era. This discussion is found in chapter 9, where circumcision is related to the heart, in contrast to the flesh. This would appear to carry through the New Testament teaching on the subject, despite the allegorical extremes to which the author goes.

*Barnabas* also adds a new concept in the “circumcision of the ears” (9:4). In his thought, this is closely tied to the circumcision of the heart. The author uses the word *akoav*, rather than *ouv*, indicating that it is the activity of hearing that is his primary

focus. It is through hearing the word that we believe (9:4), which is apparently equated with the circumcision of the heart. This use of the term “circumcision with the ears” may only be an analogy for the removal of an impediment to membership in the covenant community. It is certainly the less significant of the two; *Barnabas* focuses on the New Testament idea of the “heart, not the flesh” as the place for true spiritual circumcision.

Since the discussion of baptism in chapter 11 closely follows this passage, and since the author mentions circumcision as a “seal” in 9:6, some, notably Lampe, have concluded that the writer of *Barnabas* is the first Christian author to relate the two initiatory rites<sup>18</sup>. This requires providing a rather technical definition of “seal” which is essentially equivalent to baptism. This is found in a reading of *Second Clement*, where such a connection may fairly be made<sup>19</sup>. However, there is no evidence that such a connection is made in *Barnabas*, or in any of the Apostolic Fathers prior to *Second Clement* and *Hermas*. Thus, it is probably only a secondary association of the two ideas here<sup>20</sup>. Even if the assumption of a strong association is permitted, however, it remains to be proven whether the “seal” of baptism is intended to be the Christian equivalent of the “seal” of circumcision.

Taking the *Barnabas* passages in their context, it seems unlikely that the author intends any such equivalence. The interposition of the moral injunctions of chapter 10 between the two chapters, while not in itself decisive, indicates that the author did not identify the two as closely as some suppose. The language of circumcision does not reenter the discussion when the subject of baptism is taken up in chapter 11, as would be expected if the author is trying to make an explicit between the two. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that we have the first connection between baptism and circumcision here

in Barnabas; indeed, such a connection appears to be absent from the entire corpus of the Apostolic Fathers. It will remain for Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho* to explicitly bring these two ideas together<sup>21</sup>

The connection of baptism with “seal,” however, is certainly made in the later Apostolic Fathers. In addition to the possible connection in Barnabas we find references in *Second Clement* and *Hermas*, implying that this was a connection first made in the Roman church of the mid-second century. Of these two, *Second Clement* appears to make the stronger connection. In 6:9 there is a reference to the maintenance of baptism: “...with what confidence shall we, if we keep not our baptism pure and undefiled, enter into the kingdom of God?” This is followed in the next paragraphs by two references to the seal that bear some resemblance: “For concerning them that kept not the seal... (7:6); “So He meaneth this, Keep the flesh pure and the seal unstained, to the end that we may receive life.” (8:6), While the verbal parallels are not exact, there is enough resemblance, especially considering the closeness of the context, to suggest that the author equates baptism with a seal on the believer<sup>22</sup>.

The references in *Hermas*, while more oblique, provide us with some understanding of what this seal signified. In Similitude 8.6, the seal and loss thereof are connected with the remission of sins and repentance, in much the same way baptism is in Mandate 4 (as noted above). This seems to imply that to the author the seal is baptism, although the connection is not as explicitly made as appears in *Second Clement*. Given this, the purpose served by the seal of Similitude 9 (17.4) would also be the purpose, or at least a purpose, of baptism. In this passage it is seen as the factor that brings together

those of various nations into a unified whole, signified by a tower of one color. Thus, baptism is seen as the event that brings one into the unified kingdom of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of being baptized “into the Name” also appears in *Didache* 9:5: “But let no one eat or drink of this eucharistic thanksgiving, but they that have been baptized into [eiv] the name of the Lord...” Such a baptism is necessary to become part of the church. There is an implication of ownership in this; the candidate belongs to the Lord by taking on His Name.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the baptizand is no longer his own, but Christ’s, perhaps reflecting a Pauline idea found in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.”

The question that some have raised here is, “In whose name were the early Christians baptized?” The predominant view has been that a Trinitarian formula was generally used at this time.<sup>25</sup> The only direct evidence we have in the Apostolic Fathers is the reference to such a formula in *Didache* 7:3. The author here is probably dependent on the wording of Matthew 28:19. Such is to be expected, given the fact that the gospel of Matthew and the *Didache* in all likelihood share a common provenance, Syro-Palestine. That this Trinitarian formula was used beyond the region of Palestine cannot be determined from the Apostolic Fathers, although a reference in Justin’s *First Apology* (chapter 61) suggests that it was known in Rome in the first half of the second century.

However, a few scholars have questioned this. Matthew 28:19, it is said, poses certain textual difficulties, and this in turn brings the reference to the Trinitarian formula in the *Didache* into question. If Matthew’s gospel makes no prior reference of such a formula, it may be possible to see *Didache* 7:3 as an interpolation by a later hand, given the broader context of the passage.<sup>26</sup>

All of this hinges on the textual problem in Matthew, not specifically on the *Didache*. Many scholars, responding to the critics proposing this, find that this question is vastly overstated. Neither of the two major critical Greek texts (NA26 and UBS 3c) even mentions a possible textual problem. Likewise, few commentaries on Matthew deal with any textual problem here.<sup>27</sup> One who does, the Dutch commentator Herman Ridderbos, puts the question in its proper perspective quite succinctly: “The words stand on firm text~critical grounds, and it is only on the basis of a priori assumptions that some commentators have argued that they are unthinkable in context of the early church and have to be an interpolation from the second century.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Matthean problem is virtually nonexistent, which eliminates the need to question the *Didache*. We can therefore be reasonably confident that baptism was performed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the second century church, at least in the vicinity of Palestine.

The *Didache* also provides the only reference in the Apostolic Fathers to the concept of baptism in “living waters” (7:1). This is most likely a carryover from Jewish baptismal and cleansing practices, reflecting a rabbinical classification of various kinds of water and their propriety for a variety of purposes. In the case of the *Didache*, the prescription of “living water” refers to cold, running water, which best signified to the Jewish mind an appropriate means of cleansing. There are provisions made in the following verses for other waters if “living water” is not available, and even for affusion if immersion is not possible. These concessions move down the scale of rabbinical classification.<sup>29</sup> However, “living water” is strongly preferred; perhaps in addition to Jewish practice, this reflects Christ’s designation of Himself as the water of life (John 4:14).

One additional note on the water of baptism is found in Ignatius' *Epistle to the Ephesians* 18:2. The passage reads, ". . .and He was born and was baptized that by His passion He might cleanse water." The passage as it stands is somewhat puzzling, but it has been suggested that Ignatius is referring to the water of baptism. In some way, Christ by His baptism and soteriological work had made the water clean, thus making it a proper means of cleansing.<sup>30</sup> Such an interpretation seems quite likely, particularly in considering the growth of this kind of teaching in the following years.

The Ignatian epistles also provide us with two further references that give us insights into baptismal doctrine in the early second century. The first of these is in *Polycarp* 6:2, where Ignatius encourages Polycarp to "Let your baptism abide with you as your shield...." This verse and the following remind one of Paul's discussion of the "armor of God" in Ephesians 6:11-17 in spirit; although Ignatius does not cite any of Paul's specific connections, he may well be making his own application of armor to spiritual warfare. Baptism is the Christian's shield, providing a continuing strength to stand and not desert.<sup>31</sup> Such a reference is more pointed by Ignatius' own circumstances; he is soon to face martyrdom, and requires all the strength he can muster to face his fate. He finds strength in his baptism, which, in connection with his later experiences, assures him of a place with Christ and His church.

The second element added by Ignatius is the role of the bishop in the administration of baptism. In *Smyrneans* 8:2 he denied the legality of baptisms performed *coriv tou episkopou*, "apart from the bishop." Ignatius probably does not imply that the bishop must perform all baptisms, nor even be present at all; the language suggests that it is only necessary for baptisms to be performed under the authority of and



with the approval of the bishop.<sup>32</sup> Such a central role for the bishop is in keeping with Ignatius' teaching on episcopal authority elsewhere in his epistles. This kind of a role for the bishop may not yet have arisen outside the area over which Ignatius had authority, since his writings are our sole source in the Apostolic Fathers (or any in any other extant documents from this early a date) to stress this teaching. This is, however, the first indication of the bishop's role in a valid baptism, which will become a major issue in the church by the turn of the century.

These, then, are the major doctrinal issues with which the Apostolic Fathers wrestled. In some aspects, they are quite apart from New Testament (particularly Pauline) teaching. In other ways they resemble the apostolic teaching strongly. Placing them in their chronological and geographic context will permit us to examine the locales and times in which the changes take place, Utilizing the chart from p. 3 and substituting doctrines for the titles of the works in which they appear will permit us to gain a quick overview of the contexts of change:

Date	Rome	Egypt	Syria
100			
110			Bishop's role Baptism as shield Christ purifies water
120			
130			Instruction Initiation Trinitarian formula "Living water"
140		Instruction Regeneration Age of innocence (Baptism as seal?)	
150	Regeneration Question of lapsed Age of innocence Baptism as seal		

We can see from such a chart that the major areas of doctrinal divergence occur in the cities of Alexandria and Rome toward the middle of the second century, nearly a century after the apostolic era. Where change has occurred in Syro-Palestine, it is primarily seen in the *Epistles of Ignatius*, who was bishop of the major city of Antioch. How much this influenced the rural areas is uncertain, but the *Didache* suggests that the rural areas of Syro-Palestine (and probably of Egypt as well) retained a more conservative doctrine. Even where doctrinal novelty may be observed, such as in the use of “living water” in connection with Christian baptism, the influence that led to that novelty appears to be a residue of Jewish teaching, not theological speculation. Thus, as might be anticipated, it is the cosmopolitan urban centers of the Roman Empire which are home to most doctrinal development, and such development is seen at a relatively late date.

However, this conclusion is based on the examination of a rather sparse amount of documentary evidence. We have little (other than some inscriptions) that tells us what popular Christianity in the cities was like. We also are forced to assume that our authors here are representative of their particular socio-geographic communities. Therefore, the conclusion reached here, by itself, can be at best tentative, unless and until future evidence is brought forth. However, I believe that it is both feasible and in keeping with what else we know of the development of Christian thought in its early stages.

We may also gather some evidence of the provenance of change by observing its continuation into the years immediately following the time of the Apostolic Fathers. By doing so, we may determine whether these doctrinal developments were simply the aberrant notions of a particular, isolated author, or whether they gained a foothold in the teachings of the church at large. To do so, we will examine doctrinal developments in three later works: The *First Apology* of Justin, Tertullian's *De baptismo*, and the *Apostolic Constitutions* of Hippolytus. These works cover three geographic areas

(Palestine, North Africa, and Rome) and a span of about sixty years (c. A.D. 155-215). This will allow us with a brief survey to obtain some idea of the spread of various baptismal doctrines throughout the church of the late second century.

Justin's description of baptism occurs in chapter 61 of the *First Apology*. He shows little concern to define the mode, which would probably be irrelevant to the pagan audience he is addressing anyway. However, like the *Didache*, he notes that baptism is done in the name of the Trinity: "...there is named at the water...the name of God the Father and Master of all...The illuminand is also washed in the name of Jesus Christ... and in the name of the Holy Spirit...." This may still reflect only Syro-Palestinian practice, with which Justin might be familiar as he came from that region, but, addressed as it is to pagans (perhaps in Rome, since it is addressed to the emperor and his sons), it may possibly indicate a wider usage of this formula.

Justin may also reflect the practice of pre-baptismal instruction, while suggesting that baptism was given only to those of an age to consent: "Those who are persuaded and believe that the things we teach and say are true, and promise that they can live accordingly, are instructed to pray and beseech God with fasting for the remission of their past sins...." The "instruction" here may merely be a brief explanation of conversion, but it is possible, given Justin's Palestinian origins, that this reflects the practice outlined in the *Didache* of catechetical instruction.

This same passage shows that the idea of baptism as bringing the remission of sins can be found in the *Apology*. As we saw above, this concept took root in the church at Rome, and it is probable that it was from this locale that Justin picked up the idea. He uses language reminiscent of the discussion in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, speaking of a "rebirth" of the one being baptized. It is likely that a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, which appears to be developing in Rome at about this time, has influenced Justin, who continues to develop the theme.<sup>33</sup>

In chapter 66 of the *Apology* Justin notes that only those who have “received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth” may participate in the Eucharist. This again reflects the prohibition laid down in the *Didache*, as well as the language of regeneration. This is necessary, in his view, because of the mystical significance of the bread and the wine.<sup>34</sup> This is an expansion of the *Didache*, providing a reason for such a prohibition.

Justin therefore reflects the teachings of the two centers with which he was familiar. While he may not be directly influenced by the documents we find in the Apostolic Fathers (although it seems that he may be familiar with the *Didache*), he is certainly familiar with the teaching which they espouse. He takes these doctrines a step further, often providing a rationale behind them. In this he demonstrates the acceptance of at least the Roman church view of these new teachings.

By the time Tertullian writes his treatise *De baptismo* (c. A.D. 200), we find more development of some of the themes outlined by the Apostolic Fathers. Perhaps most striking is the way Tertullian expands on the reasons that water is suitable for purification. Ignatius saw this happening in the baptism of Christ, and the *Didache* appears to be influenced by rabbinic concepts. Tertullian goes to much greater lengths to establish the validity of the use of water for baptism, using allegory from the Old Testament (chapters 3,4,9) and events from the life of Christ (chapter 9) to demonstrate the ways in which God in the past prefigured the use of water for this purpose.<sup>35</sup>

Tertullian also takes the doctrine of baptismal regeneration which the Apostolic Fathers began to elaborate one step further. Where the Fathers began to connect baptism with remission of sins, Tertullian goes on to teach that there is no salvation without baptism (chapter 12): “. . .the rule is laid down that salvation belongs to no one without baptism.’ Likewise, his language in chapter 2 gives more of an impression of the New Testament teaching on conversion than on baptism: “. . . a man is lowered into the water

and with intervals for a few words is dipped, and rises up again not much cleaner or no cleaner, and yet an incredible result in eternity is deemed to be assured. Tertullian teaches that an inward change occurs in baptism which guarantees salvation. Thus, baptism becomes not an initiation into the church, but the event that essentially brings the rebirth or conversion of the candidate.

Tertullian also reflects some of the other teachings we find in the Apostolic Fathers. He states that baptism should be done with due respect to the authorities in the church, notably the bishop, although he allows that any Christian may perform a baptism if such does not violate submission to authority (chapter 17). He also appears to favor catechetical instruction, since he urges postponing baptism in the case of children until they have had the opportunity to learn about Christianity (chapter 18). Tertullian also reflects, although he does not explicitly state, the use of the Trinitarian formula in baptism (chapter 6). While *De baptismo* also goes beyond the teachings of the Apostolic Fathers, there is certainly an influence wielded by the earlier writers upon Tertullian's baptismal doctrine.

The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (c. A.D. 215) follows the path blazed by the *Didache*. It sets forth the doctrine and practice of the church at Rome early in the third century. In Part II there is an extended discussion of baptism, which in many respects resembles the order set forth in the *Didache*, and was used in conjunction with the *Didache* as a basis for later Eastern church orders.<sup>36</sup> This document can be fairly said to sum up the state of baptismal doctrine at the beginning of the third century, at least as far as Rome is concerned.

Hippolytus sets forth a catechumenate, but provides more detail on its execution than the *Didache*. Those seeking baptism are brought before teachers for examination (II.16), undergo a three-year period of instruction (although some exceptions are permitted)(II.17), and then have their lives examined again prior to baptism (II.20).

During this time, they are to be kept apart from the faithful (II.18), a practice also indicated in the *Didache*. The content of this instruction is not specified, but two elements may be noted which give us indications of the course followed. The first is the extended questioning made by the officiant of the baptizand, which contains elements of an incipient creed.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that some theological content has been added to the course of instruction prior to baptism. The second is the fact that the major examination prior to baptism is into the life of the catechumen, This would seem to indicate that some form of ethical instruction also took place, much as that laid out in the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*, although perhaps not using the same format.

The use of a creedal statement divided into three parts<sup>38</sup> linked to a threefold baptism (II.12-18) also indicates the establishment of the Trinitarian formula in baptism. Linked with the comments of Justin and Tertullian, it may be fair to say that this formula is standard by the beginning of the third century. This may lead some to suggest that it is relatively late, and interpolated back into the *Didache* (see the discussion above), but it is more likely that the third-century usage reflects that of the second century.

Unlike the Apostolic Fathers, Hippolytus allows for baptismal sponsors to speak for those unable to answer for themselves (II.20-21). It is here that we first find the possible provisions for infant and child baptism. The intriguing element here is that, like the Fathers, Hippolytus has no theological basis for the practice. Where the earlier writers simply dismissed, or at least ignored, this practice, however, Hippolytus permits it, and provides the liturgical underpinnings. Thus, the early church's doctrine concerning children is beginning to give way to the practice of pedobaptism.

In examining Justin, Tertullian, and Hippolytus, we can see the extent to which doctrinal developments from time of the Apostolic Fathers have not only influenced them, but laid the foundation for further change. There are elements in each of these three later works that do not appear in their predecessors, and some common elements have

been expanded or altered. It is of some note that these more adventurous changes have occurred in major cities (Rome and Carthage), while some of the more conservative elements (notably in Justin's *First Apology*) may have their roots in the less cosmopolitan areas of Palestine, perhaps even in the *Didache*. This may be a continuation of the pattern we tentatively affirmed above.

It is not possible to draw many conclusions that are indisputable from the writings of the earliest Christians, simply because of the limited amount of material with which we have to work. Despite this handicap, I believe that it is demonstrable, within the confines of the literature which is currently extant, that changes in the doctrine surrounding baptism did take place within the first century following the age of the apostles. While some elements may have been held in common, it appears from the writings of the Apostolic Fathers that the various centers of Christianity did emphasize different aspects of baptismal doctrine.

These changes occurred over a period of time, and primarily in the urban centers of the empire, as far as we can tell from the writings we have. It is in the latter works of the Apostolic Fathers- the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Second Clement*- that we find the greatest development. Likewise, these works represent two of the major academic centers of the empire, Alexandria and Rome. Conversely, the *Didache*, which most likely describes the practices and doctrines of rural Syro-Palestine, is the most conservative of these works in regard to baptism. We also find some intriguing developments in the *Epistles of Ignatius*, who, although a bishop of a Syrian city, may have had contact with a more cosmopolitan atmosphere in the major Roman city of Antioch. Without too much dogmatism, I believe it may be said that it is in the urban churches that we find the greatest amount of theological discussion and diversity.

Doctrinal development was not confined to the period of the Apostolic Fathers. In the succeeding generations, we find some of the themes first expounded by them further

developed and expanded, sometimes beyond what the Fathers may have intended. Some of these writers and their teachings may not have been directly influenced by a particular source, but they show familiarity with the general theological atmosphere of their time. The Apostolic Fathers lay the groundwork for the future development of baptismal doctrine, or at least reflect the themes that will be carried through into the next century.

The Apostolic Fathers provide us with glimpses into the development of doctrine in the early second century, but their testimony is maddeningly brief. Nonetheless, we can trace the theological thought of these writers and gain some insight into the ways baptism was perceived and practiced in their time. We begin to find rationales given for particular practices that are already in place. We can also see that particular church centers demonstrate more of a proclivity toward change and diversity in doctrine than others. The thought of future generations found its seminal ideas in the teachings of these authors, and their moves beyond New Testament teaching lead to concepts and practices that seem far removed from apostolic thought.

It is not only the generations that follow the Apostolic Fathers that are affected by their work, however. The origins of doctrines that ultimately lead to beliefs in baptismal regeneration, and make possible an initial move toward pedobaptism, can also be seen in these writings. This has had a permanent effect on the history of the Christian church. By examining the teachings in these early documents, we may begin to recover not only the original New Testament understanding of baptism, freed from later accretions, but also the understanding of baptism held by the immediate successors of the apostles. Such an examination also makes it possible for modern proponents of both baptist and pedobaptist teaching to understand the ancient origins of each other's doctrine, and perhaps provide a point to begin to develop some understanding and tolerance of those holding a different viewpoint.



## Notes

1. I use the term baptist (without capitals) to indicate those groups who practice adult believer's baptism in contrast to infant baptism, not merely to those who use the denominational title Baptist (which will appear capitalized whenever I intend its narrower use).
2. W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 142-143.
3. Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 55.
4. George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, American paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 306.
5. The use of the Greek *katabainomen.* and *anabainornen.* in conjunction with the preposition *eiv,* may suggest that the author has in mind the picture of a candidate being immersed, but, while I believe this suggestion is strong, it is by no means necessary.
6. Arthur Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions in the Didache* (Stockholm: The Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1968), p. 27.
7. For a discussion of the origin of the "Two Ways," see Robert M. Grant, gen. ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*, 5 vols. (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964-67), vol. 3: *Barnabas and the Didache*, ed. Robert A. Kraft, pp. 4-12.
8. Aaron Milavec, *The Pastoral Genius of the Didache: An Analytical Translation and Commentary*, in *Religious Writings and Religious Systems*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and A.J. Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 122.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
10. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1: *The Beginning of Patristic Literature* (Utrecht, Holland: SPECTRUM, n.d.; reprint ed., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1992), pp. 25-26.
11. Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, pp. 137-138.
12. Jack P. Lewis, "Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 26 (1983), p. 4.
13. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, pp. 264-265.
14. Agnes Cunningham. "Baptism and Unity in the Early Church," *Mid-Stream* 18:4 (October 1979), pp. 422-424.
15. Donald W. Riddle, "The Messages of the Shepherd of Hermas: A Study in Social Control," *The Journal of Religion* 7 (1927), p. 572.

16. Dale Moody, "The Origin of Infant Baptism," in *The Teacher's Yoke: Studies in Memory of Henry Trantham*, ed. E. Jerry Vardaman and James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1964), p. 193.
17. Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988), p. 487.
18. G.W.H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit*, 2nd ed. corr. (London: SPCK, 1967), p. 104.
19. Ibid., p. 103.
20. Ferguson, *Spiritual Circumcision*, p. 491.
21. Ibid., p. 493.
22. Lampe, *Seal*, p. 103.
23. Ibid., p. 105.
24. Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions*, p. 21.
25. David R. Plaster, "Baptism by Triune Immersion." *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985), p. 385.
26. Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions*, pp. 34-39.
27. I surveyed 25 commentaries on Matthew, representing a wide spectrum of theological convictions and scholarship, and found just two that mentioned the textual question, neither of which found it to be a serious problem.
28. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtmand, *The Bible Student's Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), p 555.
29. Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions*, pp. 22~25.
30. Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 205.
31. Ibid., p. 207.
32. Lewis, *Baptismal Practices*, p. 11.
33. Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 235.
34. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1, pp. 215-218.

35. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2: *The Ante-Nicene Literature After Irenaeus* (Utrecht, Holland: SPECTRUM, n.d. reprint ed., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1992), pp. 278-279.
36. J.G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 170.
37. W. Robinson, "Historical Survey of the Church's Treatment of New Converts with Reference to Pre- and Post-baptismal Instruction," *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1941), p. 48.
38. This has been called the "Old Roman Creed," and is considered a precursor to the Apostle's Creed. See Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1, pp. 26-27 for more details.

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