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On the Proper Recipients of Baptism

I. Infant Baptism in the Ante-Nicene Period

In determining whether the teaching of scripture is to baptize the children of believers, it will be helpful to determine whether or not paedobaptism was a standard practice in the early church. It is important to note that determining this would not answer the question of whether or not scripture teaches paedobaptism. Indeed, the church could have begun baptizing infants immediately after the death of the last apostle, yet if scripture teaches credobaptism, it must not be done. Yet, the practice of the early church (one way or the other) does serve as a crucially important key in determining the proper recipients of baptism. For if the practice of the early church was to baptize infants from the beginning, it now becomes much more feasible that this was the instruction of the apostles to the continuing church. On the other hand, if the historical evidence shows that paedobaptism was a practice that originated *after* the apostles and was not widespread among the early church congregations, we should take great caution in practicing something that was seemingly not taught by either the apostles or the earliest church fathers.

This, however, is easier said than done. Unfortunately, the existing documents from the ante-Nicene period, specifically the late 1st and early 2nd centuries, do not give enough information to say beyond the shadow of a doubt whether the widespread practice of the early church was the baptism of infants or exclusively believers. Furthermore, it is important to remember that there is no such thing as a neutral interpretation of history, especially when it comes to baptismal practices in the early church. Thus, paedobaptists, with the presupposition that the clear teaching of scripture is the baptism of believers *as well as* their children tend to assume that the early church baptized infants and find that the existing evidence confirms their already held beliefs. Credobaptists, meanwhile, are much more prone

to view any *potential* reference to infant baptism with great scrutiny and interpret the historical evidence in light of the presupposition that the church was never instructed to baptize infants at all and are therefore more likely to interpret references to infant baptism as a novelty. Thus, as I (at the time of writing this paper) am a credobaptist, I recognize that my temptation will be to presuppose that the early church did *not* practice infant baptism in the time immediate after the apostles.

Another important thing to clarify is the subject of this paper. As various documents from church history are analyzed, two other sources of controversy will have the tendency to arise, those being the proper mode of baptism and the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Though both are of great importance when considering baptism *as a whole*, this paper is not attempting to investigate either of these. Perhaps they shall be addressed in a future paper in harmony with this one, but for now the exclusive focus shall be the subject of paedobaptism.

This all being said, a few key documents from church history will be analyzed in an attempt to understand what the widespread practice of the early church was.

The Didache

The first early church document to be analyzed is known as the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Apostles*. This particular document is possibly the earliest extra-biblical church document that has been discovered. With estimates on its composition ranging from 60-150 AD.¹ It seems most likely that it was intended as both “a brief manual of morals designed for the instruction of candidates for Holy Baptism;” and “a Church Order of a primitive type, giving directions for Baptism, Fasting, Prayer, and other ecclesiastical institutions”² Though the *Didache* speaks with respect to a variety of Christian practices, it notably gives the following instructions for baptizing.

1 Robinson, J. Armitage. *Barnabas, Hermas, and the Didache*. Donnellan Lectures, 1920. London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Company, 1920. 43.

2 Ibid. 43–44.

And concerning baptism, baptize after this manner: Having first recited all these precepts baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost in living water; but if thou hast not living water, baptize into other water; and if thou canst not in cold water then baptize in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour out water upon the head thrice, into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. And before the baptism let the baptizer and the baptized fast, and any others that are able; but thou shalt order the baptized to fast one or two days beforehand.³

Not much more with respect to baptism in general is seen here, however it does pose an important question when considering infant baptism in the church. *If infant baptism was the widespread practice of the church, why are no instructions for baptism given beyond that of baptizing believers?*

Indeed, this would seem to suggest that infant baptism was not a practice or consideration of the early church. This, however, should not be a quickly embraced conclusion. It is important to remember that the *Didache* functioned as a “manual” for new converts to the faith and this could then explain the lack of instruction regarding paedobaptism. Furthermore, it is effectively an argument from silence to make the claim that the *Didache* proves that infant baptism was not present in the early church. If the it was indeed written as a manual for new converts, it wouldn’t need to include instructions on how to baptize infants. However, it must also be conceded that the lack of instructions for baptizing children could suggest that infant baptism was not practiced by the early church. The *Didache* gives instructions for many other church practices, such as fasting, praying, and the Lord’s Supper. Why then, would infant baptism be excluded from the instructions about the practice? Additionally, if it was indeed a manual for new converts, why would it exclude instructions for baptizing households of converts? Ultimately, no firm conclusions about infant baptism should be drawn from this document. While it

³ Allen, G. C., trans. *The Didache or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles Translated with Notes*. London: The Astolat Press, 1903, 5.

certainly does not support paedobaptism, it also does not disprove it, even if it does raise concerns about whether the practice existed in the early church.

A few other portions of early church documents are typically referenced, such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and writings of Justin Martyr, however these will not be looked at, for the simple reason that they do not decisively lean one way or the other and interpretation of them is heavily influenced by presuppositions with respect to infant baptism. A further look at these documents is certainly valuable, but given the strong presuppositional bias in interpretation, it is doubtful that they would be beneficial for the purposes of this paper.

Tertullian

Instead, a few more sources will be analyzed that *do* speak directly with respect to the baptizing of infants. The first to be analyzed comes from a treatise written by the early Christian apologist, Tertullian titled *De Baptismo*, translated *Concerning Baptism*. Of the early church documents, this perhaps contains the strongest argument against paedobaptism being the widespread practice of the early church, though it should be noted that this document is the *only explicit* disagreement with infant baptism in the early church. Thus, baptists have often appealed to Tertullian's treatise in support of their view that infant baptism was an innovation of the church fathers. As such, baptist historian Gregg Allison writes

It goes without saying that only people who were willing to break with their sins while learning the teachings of the Christian faith could be catechumens, preparing themselves for baptism. This practice seemed to rule out infants and little children from participating. Yet the church began to debate a conflicting practice at the same time. One of the most important developments in the early church's view of baptism was its switch from

baptizing people who could consciously participate in the rite to baptizing infants. At the end of the second century, Tertullian objected to involving children in baptism.⁴

Yet this claim as a whole is not without problems, as it presupposes that infant baptism did not already exist and was added to the church's practice after the times of the apostles. There is no indication that infant baptism *didn't* exist in the 1st and 2nd century, in fact, we will see that the opposite is true.

Furthermore, the only evidence of a "debate" is in the writing of Tertullian on baptism, which, as we shall see, can hardly be called a debate.

Tertullian wrote his treatise, not to address infant baptism, but rather in response to gnostics who had were asserting that water baptism was not necessary at all.⁵ In his treatise, he gives a broad overview of baptism, both what it is and what it accomplishes. After discussing a variety of topics surrounding baptism, Tertullian makes the following statement with respect to the baptizing of infants.

Consequently in view of the circumstances and will, even the age of each person, a postponement of Baptism is most advantageous, particularly, however, in the case of children. For what need is there, if it is not so urgent, that the sponsors also should be brought into danger, being as they are themselves also by reason of their mortality capable of falling short of their promises and being deceived by the development of an evil disposition? The Lord indeed says:* "Forbid them not to come unto Me." Let them come, then, while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are being taught whither to come; let them become Christians, when they have been able to know Christ. Why hurries the age of innocence to the remission of sins? Shall we act more cautiously in worldly matters? Shall one to whom earthly substance is not

4 Allison, Gregg, and Wayne Grudem. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine: A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. 618

5 Souter, Alexander, trans. *Tertullian's Treatises: Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism*. Translations of Christian Literature: Series II: Latin Texts. London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Company, 1919.

entrusted, be entrusted with heavenly? Let them know how to seek salvation, that you may be seen “to give to him that asketh.”⁶

This particular passage from Tertullian is used in a variety of ways by credobaptists, particularly to argue that believer’s baptism was the practice of the early church, as well as arguing that there was debate over whether infants should be baptized at all. It also should be noted that often when baptists quote this statement, they end it where I have, and not where the “thought” truly ends. As we shall see, a closer examination of Tertullian’s full statement reveals that it is problematic to use it in support of credobaptism, or at the very least to imply that there was a debate over the practice.

Tertullian’s statement does not in any way suggest that infant baptism was an emerging practice, but rather treats it as one that already existed. This does not mean that based on *De Baptismo* we should conclude that infant baptism was the widespread practice of the church from the apostles to the end of the 2nd century, but it also does not give any support to the idea that infant baptism developed over time as a practice. What follows from this is that Tertullian is not arguing against infant baptism as unbiblical or something that *needs* to be avoided (i.e a sinful practice or unbiblical way of administering baptism), rather he recommoneds that it *should* be avoided – that infants should grow up and become Christians before receiving baptism. Though this seems to be more consistent with the credobaptist view, it does not line up particularly well when other points are considered.

Crucial to understanding Tertullian’s argument is the phrase “remission of sins” as well as the sentences following his thought. Immediately after the above quote, Tertullian writes

For no less reason the baptism of the unmarried also should be postponed, for in them a testing has been prepared alike for virgins through their maturity and for widows through their freedom from the duty of marriage, until they either marry or are hardened for the

⁶ Alexander Souter, trans., *Tertullian’s Treatises: Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism*, Translations of Christian Literature: Series II: Latin Texts (London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Company, 1919), 69.

practice of continence. If any should understand the importance of Baptism, they will be more afraid of its consequences than of its postponement; unimpaired faith is sure of salvation.⁷

From this, a much clearer meaning emerges. Tertullian is *not* advocating for exclusive believer's baptism (at least not in the modern credobaptist sense), rather he is arguing that baptism be delayed in an individual until a time where they are less likely to fall into sin, thus why he argues that not only should baptism be delayed in yet unsaved infants, but also in the unmarried, *who likely would have been believers*. He does not reason that infants shouldn't be baptized because it is inherently wrong to baptize a child of a believer, but suggests that it should be postponed in babies, because like the unmarried, they have greater temptation and opportunity to fall into grave sin, which perhaps would have been assumed to have led to a person losing their salvation. Thus, while the practical conclusion of Tertullian and most credobaptists is similar (though certainly not identical), the premise is quite different. Tertullian is not arguing that baptism, as a sign of a regenerated heart, should only be given to believers, he instead seems to be arguing that baptism should be reserved for those who are unlikely to commit "grave" sins and thus postponed in infants who have a lifetime ahead of them to commit sinful acts. This perhaps then reveals more about Tertullian's views on baptismal regeneration and the possibility of a believer losing their salvation than it does infant baptism.

Another important consideration when looking at baptism in the ante-Nicene period is that Tertullian is the only voice who explicitly spoke against infant baptism (and even then he did not denounce the practice as inherently sinful), while many others advocated for the practice. If the typical baptist assertion that infant baptism "crept in" to the church during the 2nd century, it is extremely strange that there was no opposition to such a practice beyond the limited opposition of Tertullian. This

⁷ Alexander Souter, trans., *Tertullian's Treatises: Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism*, Translations of Christian Literature: Series II: Latin Texts (London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Company, 1919), 69–70.

does not disprove the idea that the early church was credobaptist in practice, but it does mean that baptists need to account for the lack of voices raised against the practice of infant baptism and the many sources that suggest it *was* the widespread practice of the early church.

Origen and Hippolytus

One such voice in favor of infant baptism was Origen of Alexandria. Origen, who is considered to be among the most significant theologians of the early church had traveled to various churches throughout the Roman empire, including Alexandria, Palestine, Caesarea, Nicomedia, Athens, and even Rome itself.⁸ Though he did not extensively write on paedobaptism (or baptism itself for that matter), there are a number of places where the topic is addressed. A few of these shall be analyzed.

First is Origen's 8th homily on the book of Leviticus. In this Homily, Origen is preaching on Leviticus 12:2, and reflecting upon why it is that a woman becomes unclean for seven days following the birth of a male child, specifically with respect to Christ being born of Mary. After considering the 51st psalm, where David says "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me,"⁹ Origen states "To these things [impurity from birth] can be added the reason why it is required, since the baptism of the Church is given for the forgiveness of sins, that, according to the observance of the Church, that baptism also be given to infants; since, certainly, if there were nothing in infants that ought to pertain to forgiveness and indulgence, then the grace of baptism would appear superfluous."¹⁰

Similarly, in his 14th homily on the book of Luke, Origen says the following (also with respect to Christ being born of Mary): "Little children are baptized 'for the remission of sins.' Whose sins are they? When did they sin? Or how can this explanation of the baptismal washing be maintained in the

8 Eusebius. "Book VI." Essay. In *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 217–70. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991.

9 [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 51:5.

10 Origen, and Gary Wayne Barkley. "Homily 8." Essay. In *Homilies on Leviticus*, 158. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005.

case of small children, except according to the interpretation we spoke of a little earlier? ‘No man is clean of stain, not even if his life upon the earth had lasted but a single day.’ Through the mystery of Baptism, the stains of birth are put aside. For this reason, even small children are baptized.”¹¹

It will be crucial at this point to properly understand Origen’s argument, as it is easily misconstrued. We therefore must differentiate between the premises and the conclusion in his argument, and only then can we make observations with respect to infant baptism.

Origen’s states three things, two of which are premises that lead to the third, which is the conclusion. They are

- A) Baptism washes away sin
- B) Infants are born with sin
- C) Infants are/should be baptized

The two primary ways that Origen’s argument is viewed are

1. $A + B = C$: If baptism washes away sin and infants are born with sin, infants should be baptized
2. $A + C = B$: If baptism washes away sin and infants are being baptized, infants must be born with sin.

In understanding the practices of the church in the early 3rd century through the lens of Origen, we must understand which line of reasoning he is making. If the first is correct, the implication would be that Origen is arguing for infant baptism on account of their original sin and that the practice did not originate with the apostles, but developed over time alongside ideas of original sin and baptismal regeneration, as has been stated by Gregg Allison¹² as well as Kurt Aland¹³. If the second view is

11 Origen, and Joseph T. Lienhard. Essay. In *Homilies on Luke: Fragments on Luke*, 58–59. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009.

12 See 4 above. It is also worth noting that Gregg Allison specifically quotes Origen in support of his view that infant baptism was introduced as a result of baptismal regeneration and original sin, thus viewing Origen’s argument as taking the first form mentioned above.

13 Aland, Kurt. *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2004. Specifically chapter 10: When and why was infant baptism introduced?

correct, the implication would be that infant baptism already existed and was likely widespread and uncontested enough (and possibly even the standard practice of the church) such that he could use it as an argument in a homily to prove a separate claim. Thus the first suggests that paedobaptism developed and was debated, while the second suggests that it had widespread acceptance in the early 3rd century.

Looking at the context of both statements, it becomes clear that the second option is clearly more accurate. In both homilies, Origen is speaking about passages that discuss uncleanness in newly born children and their mothers (Leviticus 12 and Luke 2:21-24) and uses them not to discuss infant baptism (which is, to my knowledge, discussed once in each homily), but to prove that all of us are born with sin. Thus, he argues not that the church *should* baptize infants because of original sin, but rather that the practice of infant baptism proves that we are born with original sin.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Origen understood infant baptism as the standard practice of the church. This is further confirmed by his 5th homily on the book of Romans. Origen there states that “[the] Church received from the Apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. For the Apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine mysteries, knew that there is in everyone the innate stains of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit.”¹⁴ Thus he claims that infant baptism was not a practice that developed over time, but instead is one that was given by the apostles themselves.

It is important to remember that Origen was not secluded in Alexandria, but traveled to many churches throughout the Roman empire. This suggests then, that infant baptism *at the very least* was both widespread and uncontested in the churches in Rome, Alexandria, Palestine, Caesarea, Nicomedia, and Athens (it also is worth noting that Tertullian’s writings would suggest that it potentially existed in Carthage as well as the surrounding areas) by the early 3rd century. This is further evidenced by

Hippolytus of Rome (not by any stretch an insignificant city or church), who in his work *The Apostolic*

¹⁴ Origen, Thomas P. Scheck, and Origenes. *Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans: Books 1-5*. Washington, DC: Cathol. Univ. of America Press, 2009.

Tradition (assumed to be written around 215 A.D., roughly 30 years before Origen's writings) wrote instructions for baptism, saying "Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them."¹⁵ This heavily implies that paedobaptism was the standard in the Roman church by the beginning of the 3rd century.

It would simply belabor the point to bring in other sources such as Cyprian of Carthage (who will be discussed in a future section, albeit for a different purpose), John Chrysostom, or Augustine, and for the sake of brevity, they will not be analyzed. Rather, a few conclusions will be drawn from the existing documents, specifically challenges that both sides of the argument need to consider.

Challenges to the Credobaptist Argument

If the credobaptist view of early church history is correct, it means that paedobaptism developed in many geographically diverse and important congregations over the first two centuries of the church (in a time when Christians were persecuted, information traveled slowly, and traveling was a long and difficult process), all of this without widespread controversy (Tertullian possibly being the sole exception), and early enough that there was likely little to no dissent in the congregations when they were visited by Origen. Though this is certainly not impossible, it simple does not seem to be consistent with the records of church history that have survived.

It is also important to note that the early church was very quick to call out practices and beliefs that were considered heretical. Tertullian's is the only document we have showing pushback against paedobaptism, and even then his argument was not truly against the practice of infant baptism itself, but instead based upon his views of baptismal regeneration and perhaps security of the believer. After Tertullian, there was not a significance push back against infant baptism until the rise of the Anabaptists in the 16th century. If the early church was quick to refute and fight against heresies in the first few centuries, why is it that so few (if any) voices were raised against infant baptism?

¹⁵ Hippolytus, and Alistair Stewart-Sykes. *On the Apostolic Tradition*. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015.

It also is worth considering the question: *why would God allow His church to falsely practice such an important ordinance for over 1000 years?* This is by no means a “smoking gun” that proves infant baptism, but it too is worth considering. If the Spirit was indwelling believers in the time period from Nicea to the reformation, why is it that no significant voice or group fought against infant baptism? If the credobaptist is correct, it means that for over 1000 years, very few true baptisms were performed by the church. One could argue that perhaps God kept a remnant of credobaptists until the reformation, but this is simply conjecture, without any historical basis.

A good summary of the challenges to the credobaptist view is found on the website of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. Speaking about the historical rationale for infant baptism, it is said

Were household (and consequently infant) baptism *not* the New Testament church practice, then the conclusion must be made that a full reversal of the early church’s practice occurred immediately following the death of the last apostle. Because there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence indicating so much as a debate about this issue in the first or second centuries, such a reversal is extremely unlikely. We conclude this in large part because there is a wealth of documentation about virtually every other theological debate and/or alleged ‘heresy’ in the early church.¹⁶

One final consideration will be explained more in depth in the conclusion of this section. It is important for the credobaptist to consider that the silence of the church fathers until the late 2nd century does not *necessarily* disprove infant baptism. It is entirely possible that the practice was, as Origen claimed, the instruction of the apostles and was uncontested until Tertullian, therefore *there was no need* to address it as extensively as other things. In short, the silence of the first few centuries only truly

¹⁶ Redeemer Presbyterian Church. “Membership & Baptism.” Membership and Baptism. Accessed April 17, 2023. https://downtown.redeemer.com/connect/membership_baptism#Baptism.

defeats paedobaptism if you believe that the early church was not commanded in scripture to baptize infants.

Challenges to the Paedobaptist Argument

Though it could be argued that the early church baptized infants without controversy until the early 3rd century, it is strange that no explicit reference to infant baptism appears in the earliest church documents, especially when records of other practices exist. *The Didache*, which as mentioned earlier does not *disprove* infant baptism in the 1st and early 2nd centuries, seems to have no mention of infant baptism at all, which is especially concerning when it does explicitly mention many other aspects of church life. If infant baptism is indeed commanded by scripture and was the practice of the early church, why is it that this early church document, as specific and thorough as it is, does not mention the baptism of infants *at all*?

Furthermore, roughly 200 years is a small part of the almost 2000 years since Christ gave the great commission, but it *by no means* is a small amount of time. Look at any mainline denomination in the United States and compare it with itself 200 years ago. Most look drastically different in theology and practice.¹⁷ It is well within the realm of possibility that a new baptismal practice was introduced into the church and became increasingly widespread over 2 centuries.

Many paedobaptists, specifically those who hold to reformed theology, would reject baptismal regeneration and hold to eternal security of believers. This would seem to clash with the church fathers who advocated for infant baptism, arguably on the grounds that it washes away original sin. The challenge for the reformed paedobaptist then, is that their view of baptism does not seem to be consistent with church history *beyond* the baptizing of children of believers.

¹⁷ This is not *at all* to deny that the evangelical counterparts very much resemble the mainline counterparts 200 years ago. It also does not suggest that the 3rd century church had a departure from orthodoxy or a descent into heresy as did the mainline denominations. It is only meant to show that in 200 years, much can change, even in the same institution.

Similar to the challenge for credobaptists, it needs to be acknowledged that the silence of the first few centuries does not *necessarily* prove infant baptism, nor does its widespread presence prove that it is biblical. If the apostles did not teach the baptism of infants, there is no reason that it would be addressed until the practice emerged. Thus, *if* paedobaptism is unbiblical, it would make sense that it was not explicitly addressed in church history until Tertullian in the late 2nd century. Like the credobaptism view, one's interpretation of church history very much depends on what they believe the scriptures teach.

Conclusion

The section on church history was intentionally placed first for this very reason. Though I, even as a credobaptist, must admit that the account of church history seems to be heavily in favor of the paedobaptist view, it also is quite clear that until Tertullian, there is not a clear consensus as to what the practices of the early church were. *The Didache*, Irenaeus, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and any other pre-Tertullian source that is used one way or the other can be easily explained away by the other side. Thus, the key is the presupposition. The key is one's view on scripture. If one believes that scripture teaches infant baptism, they will see it clearly in church history. On the other hand, one who believe in exclusive believer's baptism will see their view clearly reflected in church history. In my studies of church history, this was clearly confirmed with almost every source I analyzed.¹⁸ Baptists unanimously agree that the doctrine "crept in" over time, while paedobaptist (Presbyterian, Continental Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox) sources took the position that the early church practiced it from the start.

¹⁸ The lone exception being Kurt Aland in his book *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* Who argues that the early church did not baptize infants, but believes that the church should continue the practice. It therefore is unclear as to whether or not this truly counts as an "exception." If Aland does not believe that the practice of baptism needs to reflect the teaching of scripture, it is doubtful that he's carries with him a strong presupposition one way or the other.

God is, of course, sovereign over which documents from the early church survived, just as He is sovereign over any future ones to be revealed. In the present absence of any clear testimony from the 1st and 2nd century, it is therefore of the utmost importance that we seek to understand what scripture commands. Only then will we truly know who the proper recipients of baptism are.

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