



### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

Almighty God, you have built your Church on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the chief corner-stone: grant us to be so joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may grow into a holy temple, acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

--Book of Common Prayer, Simon and Jude

### **Class #2:**

- **Conversion and Baptism in Early Christianity**
- **The Organization of the Christian Community (Church Order) from the New Testament to the Early Third Century**

### **Opening Questions:**

(1) In reading through the material assigned for this week, what features of primitive Christianity did you find to be the most different from your own experience of the Church in the modern period? Why? What specifically was different?

(2) How did the practice of baptism function within the early Christian community? (See Stevenson, 10, 62-63; Hall, pp. 14-24)

(a) How was baptism understood theologically? Was baptism in this period understood to include some features or have some associations that would not necessarily be found in the baptisms performed by a contemporary Baptist church?

(b) How did baptism function sociologically? In what ways did it alter social boundaries or change one's identity? How? In what ways? To what extent? Why is this relevant?

## **I. Baptism in Early Christianity**

### *Christian Baptism as the Fulfillment of All the Old Testament Types That Foreshadowed It*

Early Christians believed that the many ceremonial washings of the Old Covenant had found their fulfillment in and were replaced by a single washing which was efficacious in removing sin and guilt and need not be repeated. They believed that various events in the Old Testament had functioned as types (cf. Heb. 9:24) that foreshadowed (in a veiled way) the advent of Christian baptism, e.g.

- the Spirit hovering over the water in Gen. 1:2,
- the Flood and the Ark (cf. 1 Pet. 3:20-21), and
- the passage of God's people through the Red Sea, being saved from death and entering into a covenant relationship with God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-2)

### *The Elements of Early Christian Baptism*

Baptism was often preceded by one or more exorcisms and normally involved the following elements:

(a) repentance of sins and a renunciation of the Devil (and his angels and worldly power) (cf. modern example in APB, p. 508)

- In the New Testament, baptism is always connected with repentance and is done *eis aphêsin hamartiôn* (for, i.e. with the goal of, the forgiveness of sins).
- Compare Acts 22:16: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”
- In Rom. 6:3-4 and Col. 2:12-13, baptism is baptism into the death of Christ (being united with him by being buried with him through baptism into his death, thus putting sin to death and raising us to life with Christ).
  - Since, in the New Testament, no one can be saved without the forgiveness of sins, it is hardly surprising to find in 1 Pet. 3:21 “baptism now saves you” and in the longer ending of Mark (16:16), “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

(b) assent to the faith of the Church as set forth in a creed. This could either be

- a creed that one repeated [declaratory] or
- a creed which was put to the candidate in the form of questions, to which one assented [interrogatory] (cf. modern example in APB, p. 508)
  - For the importance of verbal confession of faith in the New Testament, Rom. 10:9-10; Phil. 2:11; 1 John 2:23; 4:2-3,15; 2 Jn. 1:7; and for the public context of this confession, see also 1 Timothy 6:12.

(c) The candidate's clothing was removed.

- Candidates were normally baptized naked, with provisions made to preserve women's modesty.
- This symbolized the putting off of one's old life (Col. 3:9; Eph. 4:22; cf. Col. 2:11).

(d) The candidate was baptized either by

- immersion or
- a threefold pouring of water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (cf. the baptismal formula in Mt. 28:19, which shows the full divinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the one true God (cf. Dt. 6:4).
  - Compare the interpretation of the Trisagion [Is. 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts”] as referring to the Trinity in Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 10)
  - Note also that any baptism performed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God was generally regarded as valid, even when performed by dubious or unsavory persons/groups (heretics, schismatics, persons of questionable morals)—it is Christ who presides at baptism.

(e) immediately after baptism, the candidate was anointed with oil, typically by making the sign of the cross on the candidate's forehead (this was traditionally associated with the "putting on" of Christ (cf. Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27; cf. Col. 3:10) and the receiving of the Spirit and his gifts.

- For the connection of baptism with receiving the Spirit, see Mt. 3:11,16 (reaffirmed in Acts 1:5; 11:16).
  - Even in the exceptional cases of the Samaritans and the disciples of John at Ephesus, the descent of the Spirit on the baptized is not absent, but merely deferred (see Acts 8:15-17; 19:6).
- For the anointing/sealing accompanied by the gift of the Spirit, see 2 Cor. 1:22.
- For the clothing in white garments which sometimes followed after baptism, particularly at Rome, see the imagery in Rev. 3:5,18.

### *The Effects of Baptism*

The effects of baptism were generally agreed to include

- (a) the forgiveness of sins (cf. Acts 2:38; 22:16)
- (b) the receiving of the Holy Spirit and his gifts (cf. Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:13)
- (c) regeneration (i.e. new birth and inward renewal; cf. Tit. 3:5; Jn. 3:5)
- (d) adoption as children of God (compare Jn. 1:12; Rom. 8:15), so that we become co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17) and are able to pray, "Our Father..."

### *The Subjects of Baptism*

Normally the persons baptized were adults who

- expressed repentance;
- were able to confess and assent to the faith (as represented in a short baptismal creed) and
- were not earning their living by a profession that was immoral (e.g. actors, musicians, dancers, prostitutes, etc.) or involved bloodshed (soldiers or gladiators).

At the same time, the practice of baptizing infants or small children was already an old practice in North Africa and Egypt by the end of the second century A.D. It was often thought to date back to the time of the Apostles themselves but does not seem to have had an agreed theological rationale in these early authors.

- The earliest possible witness to the baptism of infants may be Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* 2.22.4, which speaks of "infants and children and boys" being born again to God and sanctified.
- Origen is more explicit about the baptism of infants as an ancient practice, assumed to go back to the time of the apostles
  - *Hom.8.3 in Lev.*
  - *Comm.in Rom. 5.9* : ecclesia ab apostolis traditionem suscepit, etiam parvulis baptismum dari ("The Church received a tradition from the Apostles, to give baptism also to children")
- Some later evidence suggests that the "infants" that were being baptized were actually children 2-3 years old and were baptized at the same time as their mothers received baptism (possibly the origin of this custom in North Africa; children were not conceived to have an identity apart from the parents and the family unit).
  - It appears from Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 40.28; Asia Minor; middle of the fourth century) that children were normally around 3 years old when

baptized (unless they were in immediate danger of dying, in which case they were baptized immediately). Ecclesiastical writers of the fourth to tenth centuries seem to have been in general agreement with this position, although Nicephorus Uranus (*Vita Symeonis junioris* 9; tenth century) seems to believe that children as young as 2 years old could be baptized.

- Tertullian (c. 200 A.D.) argues that baptism should normally be deferred in the case of little children so that their faith could be examined (*On Baptism* 18).

*The Motive for Baptism:*

- *Baptism Addresses the Problem of Original Sin, Which Causes Everyone Descended from Adam To Have a Certain Bias Toward Sin and Attraction to Sin as Something Pleasant and Desirable*

Origen (*Hom. 8.3 in Lev.*) believed that all those who are physically descended from Adam enter this life with a certain soiling (ρύπος [Job 14:4]) or defilement (μολυσμός [2 Cor. 7:1]) which they had inherited as a result of Adam's sin. (Though Adam was incorrupt before his transgression, he became corrupt when he transgressed; since his union with Eve took place after the transgression, his descendants were likewise corrupt in character.) This inherited corruption consisted in being deprived of the indwelling presence of God and condemned to have an indwelling power of sin and death, which through ignorance and deceit, provided opportunities for sinful choices and actions to arise (cf. Rom. 7). This taint of inherited corruption within one's body (the "sinful flesh" of Rom. 8:3) thus caused one's desires to be disordered and created a certain bias toward sin, that could not be removed until the coming of the Savior and the institution of baptism (*Hom. 14 in Lc.*; ed. Rauer, GCS 9, p. 98.16), which the New Testament describes as "the washing of regeneration" (Tit. 3:5) which is conducted "for the remission of sins."

This remained a common view in the later Greek fathers (esp. fourth to sixth centuries).

A somewhat similar view was held by Cyprian of Carthage, who wrote in Latin in the early third century and this was further developed by Augustine in his controversy with the Pelagians at the beginning of the fifth century, subsequently becoming the normative understanding of baptism in the Latin-speaking West up until the time of the Reformation.

- Cyprian, *ep. 64.6*: "The only thing that [the infant] has done is that, being born after the flesh as a descendant of Adam, he has contracted from that first birth the ancient contagion of death. And he is admitted to receive remission of his sins all the more readily [than an adult] in that what are being remitted to him are not his own sins but another's."
- Augustine, *gr. et pecc. or. 2.17*: "the Catholic Church...truly baptizes infants for the remission of sins--not, indeed, sins which they have committed by imitation owing to the example of the first sinner [i.e., Adam], but sins which they have contracted by their very birth, owing to the corruption of their origin." (Baptism removes the guilt of original sin and begins the process by which the Lord breaks the power of its effects [i.e. inclination to evil] within the individual believer.)

- Augustine is also suspicious of the Pelagians' claim that infants and small children are sinless and that those dying in infancy or early childhood pass immediately to heaven. To Augustine, this seemed to take much away from the uniqueness of Christ's person (there are others who have completed their lives without sin) and the universality of human need for salvation in Christ (children who have not sinned would have no need for Christ as savior; contrast Rom. 3:23; 5:6):
  - *pecc. mer.* 1.18.23: "If they [i.e., infants] were not stricken by the disease of original sin, how is it that they are brought to Christ the Physician, for the purpose of receiving the sacrament...by the pious anxiety of those who run to Him?"

#### *Baptism and Fear of Post-Baptismal Sin*

- Inasmuch as baptism involved the forgiveness of sins and the entry into a new life of righteousness and purity, the Christian life was seen as a commitment to unremitting spiritual warfare.
- There was even discussion of whether major sins committed after baptism could be forgiven, baptism being non-repeatable (cf. the "one baptism" of Eph. 4:5).
  - See Mt. 12:24-32 on the sin (blasphemy) against the Holy Spirit as unforgivable
  - On the impossibility of restoring those who have fallen away from the faiths, see Heb. 6:4-6, which follows after a mention of elementary teachings about repentance and baptisms (vv.1-2); cf. also Heb. 12:17,
- The seriousness with which these questions were discussed led some high-ranking figures from the fourth century onward (e.g. the emperors Constantine, Constantius and Theodosius I) to defer baptism until their deathbed.



When you went down into the water, it was like night, and you could see nothing. But when you came up again it was like finding yourself in the day. That one moment was your death and your birth; that water was both your grave and your mother.

--Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 11.4