

## The Baptism of Children in the Early Church: Who Was Baptized and Why?

It is clear that already by the end of the second century (the date of the earliest reports concerning baptismal practice), the baptism of infants or small children was a familiar practice and regarded as a long-standing tradition traceable to the primitive churches of the apostolic period. See

- Origen (Greek writer; Alexandria [Egypt] and Caesarea [Palestine])
  - *Hom. in Lev.* 8.3.
  - *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")
- Tertullian and Cyprian (Latin writers; North Africa)
- Possibly an even earlier incidental reference in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3

Age at Baptism: 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.

Motive for Baptism: The real question, of course, is *why* children were baptized. Most likely the rite originated from mothers bringing their children to the baptism when they themselves were baptized. In Greco-Roman society, the identity of children was determined by the family into which they were born. (The child, in other words, was not seen as having an independent identity). As a result, there was probably little dissonance felt concerning the baptism of a child together with its mother or concerning the baptism of a household (including both children and servants).

- Whether the Church should continue to baptize small children in societies where the solidarity of the family has broken down and the child's identity is largely determined by external forces (TV, videos, and the behavior of their peers in day care) is a question worth asking.

### 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. in Lev.* 8.3 believed that all those who are physically descended from Adam enter this life with a certain soiling (ῥύπος [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?"