

Baptism in the Early Church (Pentecost to AD 325)

[Minnesota District Spring Pastoral Conference;
Petra Lutheran Church, Sauk Rapids, MN; April 16-17, 1996]
Joel D. Leyrer

Let us begin with the customary setting of parameters, restatement of original assignment, and disclaimers...

This paper is the first of several on the subject of baptism that we'll be hearing the next couple of days. Combined they should give us a well-rounded historical – exegetical – devotional review of this blessed topic. The scope of the paper you now have in your hands will be isagogical and historical, which hopefully will keep me out of the territory of subsequent essayists.

It should be mentioned that it is not the intention of this paper to make a case for the practice of infant baptism in the early New Testament Church. The topic will turn up in some of the primary source material we'll be reading later on, but we won't devote much time to it. It is an assumption of this paper that infant baptism was accepted, promoted and practiced within the mainstream Christian Church of the first centuries, and that only those who approach this subject with a bias against infant baptism find the formidable historical testimony inconclusive. I would recommend the NPH book by Andrew Das, *Baptized Into God's Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today*, to those wishing to more fully educate themselves in this particular area.

It should also be stated that this paper will not delve into the various theological controversies and differing understandings of baptism within the ancient church. These differences existed then just as they exist now. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the early Christian Church understood baptism as we continue to understand it today—a means of grace through which God graciously washes away all sin through the creation of faith in the hearts of infants or confirms faith in the hearts of adults.

We'll be organizing our thoughts around this two point basic outline:

1. References to baptism in the early New Testament Church (Scriptural sources)
2. References to baptism in the early New Testament Church (non-Scriptural historical sources)

I.

Scriptural References to Baptism in the Early New Testament Church

This segment of the paper will be devoted to listing all the references to baptism that can be found in the New Testament beginning with the Book of Acts. We will not make mention of the particular Greek words used, nor will we limit the references to those which use the word in its sacramental sense. We also will not enumerate the clear allusions to baptism found in the epistles that we often use as proof texts in catechism class (Ephesians 5 and Titus 3, for example)...

What we will do is simply list the different places the average devout reader of Scripture will find a derivative of the word “baptism” used and, when necessary, briefly comment on the context. The point of this exercise is to show how central baptism was in the life of New Testament Church, the importance that is attached to it, and how frequently it is mentioned.

The Book of Acts

1:5 “For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be *baptized* with the Holy Spirit.”

1:22 “... beginning from John's *baptism* to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.”

2:38 Peter replied, “Repent and be *baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven...”

- 2:41 Those who accepted his message were *baptized*, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.
- 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were *baptized*, both men and women.
- 8:13 Simon himself believed and was *baptized*...
- 8:15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit,
8:16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been *baptized* into the name of the Lord Jesus.
- 8:36 ... and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be *baptized*?”
8:38 And he ordered the chariot to stop. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip *baptized* him.
- 9:18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was *baptized*...
- 10:37 “... You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning after the *baptism* that John preached...”
- 10:47 Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being *baptized* with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”
10:48 So he ordered that they be *baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ.
- 11:16 “Then I remembered what the Lord had said, ‘John *baptized* with water, but you will be *baptized* with the Holy Spirit.’...”
- 16:15 When she and the members of her household were *baptized*, she invited us to stay at her home.
- 16:33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were *baptized*.
- 18:8 Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were *baptized*.
- 19:3 So Paul asked, “Then what *baptism* did you receive?” “John’s *baptism*,” they replied.
19:4 Paul said, “John’s *baptism* was a *baptism* of repentance...”
19:5 On hearing this, they were *baptized* into the name of the Lord Jesus.
- 22:16 “‘ ... And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be *baptized* and wash your sins away, calling on His name.’”

Epistle to the Romans

- 6:3 Or don’t you know that all of us who were *baptized* into Christ Jesus were *baptized* into His death?
6:4 We were therefore buried with Him through *baptism* unto death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

First Epistle to the Corinthians

- 1:13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you *baptized* into the name of Paul?
 1:14 I am thankful that I did not *baptize* any of you except Crispus and Gaius,
 1:15 so that no one can say that you were *baptized* into my name.
 1:16 (Yes, I also *baptized* the household of Stephanas; beyond that I don't remember if I *baptized* anyone else.)
 1:17 For Christ did not send me to *baptize*, but to preach the gospel...
- 10:2 They were all *baptized* into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.
- 12:13 For we were all *baptized* by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.
- 15:29 Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are *baptized* for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people *baptized* for them?

Epistle to the Galatians

- 3:26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,
 3:27 for all of you who were *baptized* into Christ have been clothed with Christ (or have clothed yourselves with Christ).

Epistle to the Ephesians

- 4:4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one *baptism*...

Epistle to the Colossians

- 2:12 ... having been buried with Him in *baptism* and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.

Epistle to the Hebrews

- 6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,
 6:2 instruction about *baptisms*, the laying on of hands...

First Epistle of Peter

- 3:20 In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,
 3:21 and this water symbolizes *baptism* that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

II.

References to Baptism in Early Christian Literature (Up to AD 325)

In 1873 Philotheos Bryennios, then Head Master of the higher Greek school at Constantinople and later Metropolitan of Nicomedia, discovered a remarkable collection of manuscripts in the Library of the Most Holy

Sepulcher at Constantinople. This collection, bound in one volume and written by the same hand, bears the scribal name of “Leon, notary and sinner” and give as their date AD 1056.

Among the six writings of this volume is the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” or, as is it perhaps better known by the transliteration of the first word from the Greek, the *Didache*. Scholars differ as to the original date the *Didache* was written. Some have suggested as early as AD 80, others as late as AD 160. Most settle right in the middle, suggesting an approximate date of AD 120. No scholar attributes actual apostolic authorship to it, but all agree it is an ancient document which “contradicts nothing belonging to that age; corroborates some things which may henceforth be more strongly emphasized; and adds some things for which we may well be very profoundly grateful.”¹

The *Didache* is a short booklet made up of sixteen brief chapters. Chapter 7, devoted to the subject of baptism, gives us insight to the customs and practices followed by the Second Century Church:

Now concerning baptism, thus baptize ye: having first uttered all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if thou hast not running water, baptize in other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour water upon the head thrice, into the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer and the baptized fast, and whatever others can; but the baptized thou shalt command to fast for two or three days before.²

The authors of this particular edition of the *Didache* later follow with notes on this chapter, which we might find instructive:

“Now concerning baptism ... in running water,” literally “in living water,” water in motion, either as in a fountain, or as in a stream. A picture in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus, dating from about the year 200 AD, represents a youth standing ankle-deep in water, and receiving baptism by the pouring of water upon his head. The passage before us apparently recommends just this mode of performing the rite. If this should be impracticable, then fresh cold water might be similarly used [in a font]. If cold water could not be had, warm water would answer. If neither cold nor warm water in sufficient quantity (ankle deep) could be had, then pouring only (the feet resting on the floor or ground) would suffice. This last is now the Syrian mode of baptism, and probably always has been. This fact, ascertained by the Crusaders (in the third Crusade, 1189-92), and made known through them in Europe, would help to account for Aquinas’s definition of baptism, so different from that of Peter Lombard about a century before. Lombard’s definition requires immersion; Aquinas’s definition permits either immersion, pouring or sprinkling. The Seventh Book of the Apostolic Constitutions, at this point, says nothing about the mode, but prescribes anointing with oil, both before and after baptism. Fasting is enjoined in both documents.³

This last statement makes mention of another early Christian document, *The Apostolic Constitutions*. Discovery of the *Didache* provoked renewed interest in this document because of similarities and the apparent relationship between the two. Whereas the *Didache* is recognized as the earlier and seminal writing of its kind, *The Apostolic Constitutions* is much larger in scope and content. The English translation is well over 100 pages in small type.

There exists a diversity of opinion as to the author and date of the *Constitutions*. One nineteenth century scholar of some reputation in antiquities devoted a volume of work to prove that “they are the most sacred of canonical books of the New Testament;” for “these sacred Christian laws or constitutions were delivered at Jerusalem, and in Mount Sion [sic], by our Savior to the eleven apostles there assembled after His

¹ Hitchcock and Brown, *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, page v.

² *Ibid.*, page 15. Note: The version quoted is from the first published English translation of the *Didache* (1884), which came into my possession (unwittingly) via a Seminary book auction. You will find that subsequent translations are a bit less wooden.

³ *Ibid.*, pages 33-34.

resurrection.”⁴ General scholarship dismisses such an early date (along with any thought of divine inspiration) and assigns it anywhere from the end of the second century to the beginning of the fourth, sometime before AD 325.

The Apostolic Constitutions is divided into eight different books. As a whole, and no doubt as intended, this compilation was to serve within the early Christian Church as “a manual of instruction, worship, polity, and usage for both clergy and laity.”⁵ Consequently, what the *Constitutions* have to say about baptism (and there is quite a bit) will be of interest to us. What now follows lays no claim to be a comprehensive representation of everything mentioned within them on the subject. However, it should be more than enough to give us a clear idea of the importance of baptism in the early church, as well as the customs, canons, and practices that surrounded it.

We’ll proceed with the information on baptism in the order in which it is found in the *Constitutions*. Again, commentary will be added as needed, but by and large this collection of primary source material speaks clearly for itself...

These first four paragraphs address the issue of who was and was not to be involved in the baptism ceremony, and why:

Book III, Section I, §IX: *That Women Ought not to Baptize, because It Is Impious, and contrary to the Doctrine of Christ.*

Now, as to women’s baptizing, we let you know that there is no small peril to those that undertake it. Therefore we do not advise you to it; for it is dangerous, or rather wicked and impious. For if the “man be the head of the woman” (1 Cor 11:3), and he be originally ordained for the priesthood, it is not just to abrogate the order of the creation, and leave the principal to come from the extreme part of the body. For the woman is the body of the man, taken from his side, and subject to him, from whom she was separated for the procreation of children. For says he, “He shall rule over thee” (Gen. 3:16). For the principal part of the woman is the man, as being her head. But if in the foregoing constitutions we have not permitted them to teach, how will any one allow them, contrary to nature, to perform the office of a priest? For this is one of the ignorant practices of Gentile atheism, to ordain women priests to the female deities, not one of the constitutions of Christ. For if baptism were to be administered by women, certainly our Lord would have been baptized by His own mother, and not by John; or when He sent us to baptize, He would have sent along with us women also for this purpose. But now He has nowhere, either by constitution or writing, delivered to us any such thing; as knowing the order of nature, and the decency of the action; as being the Creator of nature, and the Legislator of the constitution.⁶

Book III, Section I, §X: *That a Layman Ought not to Do Any Office of the Priesthood; He Ought neither to Baptize, nor Offer, nor Lay on Hands, nor Give the Blessing.*

Neither do we permit the laity to perform any of the offices belonging to the priesthood; as, for instance, neither the sacrifice, nor baptism, nor the laying on of hands, nor the blessing, whether the smaller or the greater: “for no one taketh this honor to himself, but he that is called of God” (Heb. 5:4). For such sacred offices are conferred by the laying on of the hands of the bishop. But a person to whom such an office is not committed, but he seizes upon it for himself, he shall undergo the punishment of Uzziah (2 Chr. 26).⁷

⁴ Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume VII*, page 389.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 388.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 429.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 429.

Book III, Section I, §XI: *That None but a Bishop and Presbyter, None even of the Inferior Ranks of the Clergy, Are Permitted to the Offices of the Priest; That Ordination Belongs wholly to the Bishop, and to Nobody Else.*

Nay, further, we do not permit to the rest of the clergy to baptize,—as for instance, neither to readers, nor singers, nor porters, nor ministers,—but to the bishops and presbyters alone...⁸

Book III, Section II, §first: *On Deacons and Deaconesses, the Rest of the Clergy, and on Baptism.*

[Bishops are encouraged to be discriminating in whom they choose to ordain.] ... Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations toward women. For sometimes he [the bishop] cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. Thou shalt therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imaginations of the bad. For we stand in need of a woman, a deaconess, for many necessities; and first in the baptism of women, the deacon shall anoint only their forehead with the holy oil, and after him the deaconess shall anoint them: for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men; but only in the laying on of hands the bishop shall anoint her head, as the priests and kings were formerly anointed, not because those which are now baptized are ordained priests, but as being Christians, or anointed, from Christ the Anointed, “a royal priesthood, and a holy nation, the Church of God, the pillar and ground of the marriage-chamber” (1 Pe. 2:9, 1 Tim 3:15), who formerly were not a people, but now are beloved and chosen, upon whom is called His new name, as Isaiah the prophet witnesses, saying: “And they shall call the people by His new name, which the Lord shall name for them” (Isaiah 62:2).⁹

The need for deaconesses to oversee the baptism of women and concerns about the “imaginations of the bad” become understandable in light of this fact: “... Total nudity in baptism was the universal rule of the ancient church; this was to be no partial cleansing, and neophytes were to leave behind all shows of the old life and begin again as naked as at the first birth or in the garden of the first creation.”¹⁰

The next paragraphs address the symbolism involved in the baptism ceremony.

Book III, Section II, §XVI: *Concerning the Sacred Initiation of Holy Baptism.*

Thou, therefore, O bishop, according to that type, shalt anoint the head of those that are to be baptized, whether they be men or women, with the holy oil, for a type of the spiritual baptism. After that, either thou, O bishop, or a presbyter that is under thee, shall in the solemn form name over them the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit, and shall dip them in the water; and let a deacon receive the man, and a deaconess the woman, that so the conferring of this inviolable seal may take place with a becoming decency. And after that, let the bishop anoint those that are baptized with ointment.¹¹

Book III, Section II, §XVII: *What Is the Meaning of Baptism into Christ, and on What Account Everything There Is Said or Done.*

This baptism, therefore, is given into the death of Jesus: the water is instead of the burial, and the oil instead of the Holy Ghost; the seal instead of the cross; the ointment is the confirmation of the confession; the mention of the Father as of the Author and Sender; the joint mention of the Holy Ghost

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 429.

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 431.

¹⁰ Jensen, “The History of Baptism,” *Visible Words*, page 155, as quoted in a 1995 conference paper by Elton Bickel in the WLS Library essay file.

¹¹ Roberts and Donaldson, *op. cit.*, page 431.

as of the witness; the descent into the water the dying together with Christ; the ascent out of the water the rising again with Him. The Father is the God over all; Christ is the only begotten God, the beloved Son, the Lord of glory; the Holy Ghost is the Comforter, who is sent by Christ, and taught by Him, and proclaims Him.¹²

As for the individual who was to receive baptism, we read:

Book III, Section II, §XVIII: *Of What Character He Ought to Be Who Is Initiated.*

But let him that is to be baptized be free from all iniquity; one that has left off to work sin, the friend of God, the enemy of the devil, the heir of God the Father, the fellow heir of His Son; one that has renounced Satan, and the demons, and Satan's deceits; chaste, pure, holy, beloved to God, the son of God, praying as a son to his father, and saying, as from the common congregation of the faithful, thus: "Our Father..."¹³

Perhaps a word or two about sponsors should be mentioned in connection with this. No exact date can be affixed to the beginning of this custom, but it certainly was in place early into the time period under consideration and became an increasingly important aspect of baptism as persecution against the church intensified. The whole concept of sponsors was originally to testify to the sincerity of the one who was presenting himself to be baptized. The sponsor was to assure the bishop that an adult pagan was genuine in his desire to learn of Christianity as opposed to infiltrating the church with the intention of destroying it. The sponsor also assumed the responsibility of watching over the candidate's preparation and instruction.¹⁴ (In the case of infants, parents often served as sponsors and spoke for their children since the baptismal liturgies, formulated for adults, were used without change.)¹⁵

This next paragraph touches on a number of interesting items. Someone more learned than myself in early church history may be able to explain to what extent the discussion of these topics (valid baptism, rebaptism, late baptism and infant baptism) took on a credal quality as a reaction to real or perceived practices in the church at the time. What I do know is that they did indeed become issues as church history unfolded. We think, for example, of Emperor Constantine's late baptism and, more than a millennium later, the Anabaptist movement...

Book VI, Section 111, §XV: *That We Ought not to Rebaptize, nor to Receive That Baptism Which Is Given by the Ungodly, Which Is not Baptism, but a Pollution.*

Be ye likewise contented with one baptism alone, that which is into the death of the Lord; not that which is conferred by wicked heretics, but that which is conferred by unblamable priests, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Mt 28:19): and let not that which comes from the ungodly be received by you, nor let that which is done by the ungodly be received by you, nor let that which is done by the godly be disannulled by a second. For as there is one God, one Christ, and one Comforter, and one death of the Lord in the body, so let that baptism which is unto Him be but one. But those who receive polluted baptism from the ungodly will become partners in their opinions. For they are not priests. For God says to them: "Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee from the office of a priest to me" (Ho 4:6). Nor indeed are those that are baptized by them initiated, but are polluted, not receiving the remission of sins, but the bond of impiety. And, besides, they that attempt to baptize those already initiated crucify the Lord afresh, slay Him a second time, laugh at divine and

¹² *Ibid.*, page 431.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pages 431-432.

¹⁴ Jackson, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. I*, page 446.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 446.

ridicule holy things, affront the Spirit, dishonor the sacred blood of Christ as common blood, are impious against Him that sent, Him that suffered, and Him that witnessed. Nay, he that, out of contempt, will not be baptized, shall be condemned as an unbeliever, and shall be reproached as ungrateful and foolish. For the Lord says: “Except a man be baptized of water and of the Spirit, he shall by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Jn. 3:5). And again, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mk 16:16). But he that says, When I am dying I will be baptized, lest I should sin and defile my baptism, is ignorant of God, and forgetful of his own nature. For “do not thou delay to turn unto the Lord, for thou knowest not what the next day will bring forth” (Ecclesiasticus 5:7, Pr 27:1, 3:28). Do you also baptize your infants, and bring them up in the nurture and admonition of God. For says He: “Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not” (Mt 19:14).¹⁶

It is a presupposition that instruction preceded adult baptism. At this point (Book VI, Section III, §XVIII) the Constitutions state the principle: “Instruct the catechumens in the elements of religion, and then baptize them.”¹⁷ Later on much detail is given as to what constitutes proper instruction.

The use of oil in the ceremony (“chrismation”) and the injunction to fast before baptism has already been mentioned. The reasons behind this are now spelled out more clearly. It is interesting to note that although highly symbolic and therefore considered to be an important component of the ceremony, chrismation was not viewed as essential to a valid baptism.

Book VII, Section II, §XXII: *A Constitution of Our Lord, How We Ought to Baptize, and into Whose Death.*

[Directions once again on the use of the Trinitarian formula.] ... But thou shalt beforehand anoint the person with the holy oil, and afterward baptize him with the water, and in the conclusion shalt seal him with the ointment; that the anointing with oil may be the participation of the Holy Spirit, and the water the symbol of the death of Christ, and the ointment the seal of the covenants. But if there be neither oil nor ointment, water is sufficient both for the anointing, and for the seal, and for the confession of Him that is dead, or indeed is dying together with Christ. But before baptism, let him who is to be baptized fast; for even the Lord, when He was first baptized by John, and abode in the wilderness, did afterward fast forty days and forty nights. But He was baptized, and then fasted, not having Himself any need of cleansing, or of fasting, or of purgation, who was by nature pure and holy; but that He might testify the truth to John, and afford an example to us. Wherefore our Lord was not baptized into His own passion, or death, or resurrection—for none of those things had then happened—but for another purpose. Wherefore He by His own authority fasted after baptism, as being the Lord of John. But he who is to be initiated into His death ought first to fast, and then to be baptized. For it is not reasonable that he who has been buried with Christ, and is risen again with Him, should appear dejected at His very resurrection. For man is not lord of our Savior’s constitution, since one is the Master and the other the servant.¹⁸

What about the catechumen who presented himself to be baptized? What course of instruction and what degree of spiritual knowledge was necessary? The following prerequisites are outlined...

Book VII, Section III, §XXXIX: *How the Catechumens Are to Be Instructed in the Elements.*

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, *op cit.*, pages 456-457.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 457.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 469.

Let him, therefore, who is to be taught the truth in regard to piety be instructed before his baptism in the knowledge of the unbegotten God, in the understanding of His only begotten Son, in the assured acknowledgement of the Holy Ghost. Let him learn the order of the several parts of the creation, the series of providence, the different dispensations of Thy laws. Let him be instructed why the world was made, and why man was appointed to be a citizen therein; let him also know his own nature, of what sort it is; let him be taught how God punished the wicked with water and fire, and did glorify the saints in every generation—I mean Seth, and Enos, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham and his posterity, and Melchizedek, and Job, and Moses, and Joshua, and Caleb, and Phineas the priest, and those that were holy in every generation; and how God still took care of and did not reject mankind, but called them from their error and vanity to the acknowledgment of the truth at the various seasons, reducing them from bondage and impiety unto liberty and piety, from injustice to righteousness, from death eternal to everlasting life... [The one who “lays his hands upon” the catechumen, i.e. the baptizer, is then instructed to continue instructing the catechumen even after his baptism, especially “in the doctrines concerning our Lord’s incarnation, and in those concerning His passion, and resurrection from the dead, and assumption.”]¹⁹

How long did all this take? At this point let us introduce another ancient document, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*. Discovered early this century, it is attributed to a Roman presbyter, Hippolytus (AD 170?-253), and dated at the end of the second century. Scholars recognize it as “Western Christianity’s oldest extant liturgical document. As such, it is invaluable for light shed on the religious life of the early Roman Christian community.”²⁰ Concerning the period of instruction, Hippolytus advises: “Catechumens will be under instruction from a period of three years. If someone is zealous and applies himself well to the work of the catechumenate [lit., to the thing], not the period of time but [evidence of] conversion alone shall be judged.”²¹ (Note: By the end of the fourth century the time has greatly decreased to a period of instruction during Lent). Most of the other things Hippolytus has to say on baptism in his *Apostolic Tradition* is echoed in the *Constitutions*.

In addition to understanding the basics of the Christian faith, the catechumen must also be prepared to renounce the devil and take seriously his new life in Christ. Hippolytus speaks of daily exorcisms performed by instructors on the baptism candidates under their charge up until the day of baptism. He also speaks of exorcism being a part of the baptismal ceremony. However, the baptism candidate was not to be strictly passive in this area. The *Constitutions* provide the following formula of renunciation and dedication:

Book VII, Section IV, §XLI: *The Renunciation of the Adversary, and the Dedication to the Christ of God.*

[End of previous paragraph: Let, therefore, the candidate for baptism declare thus in his renunciation:] I renounce Satan, and his works, and his pomps, and his worships, and his angels. and his inventions, and all things that are under him. And after his renunciation let him in his consociation say: And I associate myself to Christ, and believe, and am baptized into one unbegotten Being, the only true God Almighty, the Father of Christ, the Creator and Maker of all things, from whom are all things; and into the Lord Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, the Firstborn of the whole creation, who before the ages was begotten by the good pleasure of the Father, by whom all things were made... [what follows is essentially a restatement of the Apostles’ Creed. The final statement of the paragraph then reads: And after this vow, he comes in order to the anointing with oil.]²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pages 475-476.

²⁰ Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate*, page 43.

²¹ *Ibid.* page 47.

²² Roberts and Donaldson, *op. cit.*, page 476.

Having completed the above, the catechumen was ready for these next steps:

- 1) After a prayer of thanksgiving, the baptizer anoints the catechumen with “the mystical oil” blessed by the “high priest” (bishop);
- 2) The catechumen proceeds to the water, where, after a second prayer of thanksgiving, he is baptized in the name of the Triune God;
- 3) A third prayer; the catechumen then is anointed with “the mystical ointment,” representative of the “sweet odor of the knowledge of Gospel”;
- 4) The catechumen rises (indicative of rising with Christ) and prays the Lord’s prayer facing east (patterned after those who celebrated the dedication of Solomon’s temple in 2 Chronicles 5); and
- 5) A final prayer by the catechumen asking God to provide him “a body undefiled, a heart pure, a mind watchful, an unerring knowledge, the influence of the Holy Ghost for the obtaining and assured enjoying of the truth...”

The Constitutions then complete this subject matter with the statement: “We have thought it reasonable to make these constitutions concerning the catechumens.”²³

As a summary of the typical adult baptism discussed thus far and with a view to filling in the blanks on items not mentioned, let us turn to a composite. We’ll then conclude this study with some general observations...

Tertullian²⁴ states that Easter was the preeminent time for baptism, and it seems certain that the rite described in the Apostolic Tradition was celebrated during Easter night. Baptism was preceded by a long period of preparation. On being brought forward by sponsors, those who sought entry into the church were examined concerning their reasons for coming and their readiness to abandon evil ways and forbidden occupations. If found worthy, they were admitted to a catechumenate which, at least in Hippolytus’ day, usually lasted three years. During this time they received instruction in classes which concluded with prayer and with a laying on of hands by the teacher. When they were “chosen” to receive baptism, their sponsors had to testify that they had lived piously while catechumens. Then throughout their proximate preparation for baptism they were exorcised daily. On the Thursday before baptism the candidates washed themselves; on the next two days they fasted. On the Saturday they received the final exorcism from the bishop, who also “breathed on their faces and sealed their foreheads and their noses”. In the paschal vigil the candidates heard the Scriptures read and received instruction.

Baptism took place away from the full assembly, and in the following manner. At cock-crow prayer was said over the water. Having stripped, each candidate professed his renunciation of Satan and was anointed with the oil of exorcism (exorcised by the bishop), the administering presbyter saying, “Let all evil spirits depart from thee.” Then the candidate went down into the water. He replied, “I believe”, to each of the three credal questions concerning the Trinity and was “baptized” by the minister (whether bishop or presbyter or deacon) upon each answer. On leaving the water the candidate was anointed by a presbyter with the oil of thanksgiving (previously consecrated by the bishop), the accompanying words being, “I anoint thee with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ.” The newly baptized dressed themselves and entered the full assembly. There the bishop laid hand upon them and prayed. Next he anointed the head of each one by hand, saying, “I anoint thee with holy oil in the God the Father Almighty and Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.” Then the bishop “sealed” him on the forehead and gave him the kiss of peace.

Thereupon the neophytes enjoyed their new privileges as members of the Church: they joined in the prayers of the faithful, they shared the congregational kiss of peace, and they participated in the eucharistic liturgy proper. At their first communion the neophytes not only received the bread and wine

²³ *Ibid.*, page 476-477 for all quotes following 22.

²⁴ A.D.160?-230?

but also partook of a cup of water and cup of milk and honey. The water is said to be an inward washing corresponding to the outward baptism, and the milk and honey is referred to the promise made to the Patriarchs concerning the promised land.²⁵

Allow me to bring this presentation to a close with a few observations. Maybe you made the same ones—or others—along the way. It is interesting to note points of comparison between the way things were done then and the way we do them now...

- 1) Early church baptisms were rich in symbolism both before and after the ceremony. Comparatively, our baptism service (CW) is trimmed to the bare essentials.²⁶
- 2) Early church baptisms presupposed an extensive study of Scripture and theology. Comparatively, our adult information courses of 16 to 24 lessons (which is far more rigorous than any other church body I'm aware of) is light, but probably somewhat in keeping with the Church's expectations shortly after this time period.
- 3) Early church baptism demanded evidence of faith and sanctified living to the point of calling in witnesses before it would be administered to a candidate. Comparatively, I suspect we may consider such a stringent examination legalistic.
- 4) Early church baptism was administered in a special service apart from the general church assembly. Full participation with the rest of the congregation came only after baptism. Comparatively, we encourage baptism to be a part of the regular service and encourage the adult catechumen to fully participate in worship (with the exception of Lord's Supper) during the period of instruction.
- 5) Early church baptism customs and liturgies were devised for adults since adult conversion was the predominant method of growth in the early centuries. Comparatively, in our circles (at least in the United States) today we perform far more infant baptisms than adult baptisms.

Perhaps you can think of other points of comparison.

Nevertheless, far more important than any change in custom we may have with the early church is the similarity we share with her in regard to baptism. And that is a profound reverence and respect and gratitude to God for giving us this precious and blessed sacrament.

²⁵ Wainwright, *Christian Initiation*, pages 20-21.

²⁶ However, in an article entitled "Communicating Baptism's Power" (*Parish Leadership* Vol. 1 No. 2), Bryan Gerlach opines: "The lack of symbolism and ceremony surrounding our baptismal rite may be one hindrance to a greater appreciation of baptism. If this is true, we might consider recalling that appreciation with more symbolic reminders of baptism's rich blessing." He then makes a number of suggestions.

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