

In Support of Apostolic Origin: Tertullian's Argument Against Infant Baptism

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Who are the proper recipients of the sacrament of baptism? For the Baptist, Scripture and the testimony of the Church demonstrate that only individuals who profess faith are to be baptized. Conversely, paedobaptists (those who baptize infants) argue that it is biblical and well attested through church history that the sacrament be applied to the children of believing, communicant members of the Church. While the question of the biblical basis for infant baptism is an interesting one, the scope of this paper will deal with the Patristic development of baptism and focus on the teaching of the Patristic fathers from 100-300 AD.

This time period contains a number of fascinating pieces of evidence about the early Church's understanding of who the proper recipients of baptism were. Justin Martyr, the *Didache*, Cyprian, and Origen, among others, comment on the topic of baptism and shed light on the Patristic view of baptism. Their views and writings will be explored, but the primary work that will be examined will be Tertullian's *Homily on Baptism* or *De Baptismo*. His analysis of baptism and his critique of infant baptism in particular will be utilized as a guide into understanding the testimony of the early fathers.

It may be objected that using Tertullian as a paradigm to interpret the earlier father's is anachronistic or improper because he writes after a number of them. But the reason Tertullian is used he is the first theologian to write an extensive treatment of the subject (around 200 AD)¹, and because he is the first to clearly condemn infant baptism. Additionally, even Baptists Hendrick Stander and Johannes Louw state, "[Tertullian's] description of the practice of baptism

¹ Steven A. McKinion *Baptism in the Patristic Writings in Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* Ed. Thomas Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright. (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2006), 173 n. 34.

is remarkably similar to the descriptions found in the writings of other Church Fathers.”² As a result, seeing his development of the doctrine of baptism, and his arguments against infant baptism will give a glimpse into how baptism was understood and practiced in the first two to three centuries. *It will therefore be argued that in Tertullian’s statements against infant baptism, he provides a paradigm that gives insight into the common early understanding of the baptismal rite and the preparation to receive the sacrament, culminating in a strong (though not certain) case that the early church baptized the infants of believing parents.*

As mentioned above, there were a number of earlier testimonies concerning baptism other than Tertullian’s account, but a better understanding of Patristic baptism is available after engaging Tertullian. Therefore, after Tertullian’s doctrine is defined, early testimonies about baptism will be discussed.

One of the limitations of historical study is that one’s hypothesis is always contingent upon available information. The thesis may be undermined by new discoveries, but sources could be discovered that are earlier than Tertullian’s treatment of infant baptism and give scholars new information and understanding. However, Bryan Holstrom confirms the general consensus of scholars when he says, “The lone voice to utter a word against infant baptism from the early church period was Tertullian...who wrote a treatise entitled *On Baptism* around the year 200.”³ Thus, Tertullian is a good Father to examine for evidence of baptism. As a result, it is now appropriate to unpack Tertullian’s theology of baptism and his argument against infant baptism.

² Hendrick J Stander and Johannes P. Louw. *Baptism in the Early Church*. (Leeds: Carey Publications, 2004) 63.

³ Bryan Holstrom *Infant Baptism and the Silence of the New Testament*. (Ambassador-Emerald Intl, 2008), 91.

Tertullian was born of pagan parents around A.D. 160 in Carthage and converted to Christianity shortly after 190.⁴ He wrote a number of influential defenses of the Christian faith and is the first recorded Father to use the word “trinity.” He was considered one of the ablest men in the generation to deal with questions of Christian doctrine and has shaped the language of Latin speaking churches. His *De Baptismo Liber* however, was not part of his main series of writings.⁵ Instead, Ernest Evans suggests, “This work is intended to be useful not only to those who are shortly to receive baptism and to any simple person who, though baptized, are open to hostile attack through defective understanding of what they have experienced.”⁶ Joachim Jeremias therefore suggests that this treatise is intended for those who have converted to the Christian faith and have either been newly baptized or are going through their catechetical training.⁷ Kurt Aland replies however that this does not make sense of the treatise, “This category [Jeremias’ argument] is not suitable to Tertullian’s writing. For one thing he does not speak to catechumens only: he expressly declares that *De Baptismo* was written also in order to strengthen full members of the Church.”⁸

Tertullian himself gives this lengthy introduction

This discussion of the sacred significance of that water of ours in which the sins of our original blindness are washed away and we are set at liberty unto life eternal, will not be without purpose if it provides equipment for those who are at present under instruction, as well as those others who, content to have believed in simplicity, have not examined the

⁴ Tertullian *De baptismo liber. Homily on baptism*, trans. and ed. Ernest Evans (London: S.P.C.K., 1964) viv.

⁵ Ibid xii.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. The Library of history and doctrine. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 82. For detailed argument of this conclusion pages 70-86 should be consulted.

⁸ Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 62.

reasons for what has been conferred upon them, and because of inexperience are burdened with a faith which is open to temptation.⁹

In light of Tertullian's statement, it appears that Jeremias' explanation is stronger than Aland's. Jeremias is not saying that Tertullian did not intend his treatise to instruct everyone in the Church, but his primary emphasis was for those young believers tempted to forget the value of baptism. He does not, as Aland argues above, suggest that his treatise was only for catechumens. Jeremias rather appeals to the audience that Tertullian himself explains that he is writing to; those who are at present under instruction as well as those who are inexperienced and burdened. Jeremias' position does not directly determine Tertullian's attitude towards infant baptism but, knowing that new (baptized and unbaptized) converts were the primary recipients of Tertullian's treatise lays a framework for understanding the argument of *De Baptismo*.

In the beginning of the treatise Tertullian works hard to emphasize the importance of baptism against those who would lead the flock of God astray. Tertullian says that to take baptism out of Christianity would be like taking the little fishes (Christians) and the big fish (Jesus) out of water.¹⁰ Tertullian then admits that it may seem odd that God use an element such as water for the mode of making his people new, but he offers three basic defenses for the use of water in the sacrament. First, water was the element that the Holy Spirit hovered over in the beginning of the world.¹¹ Second, he argues, "by dividing the waters he brought about the suspension of the firmament of heaven in the midst, and by gathering the waters aside he accomplished the spreading out of the dry land."¹² Next, he appeals to the fact that the waters

⁹ Tertullian 1.1.

¹⁰ Ibid. This is a clear reference to the ichthus symbol that Christians came to accept in early Christianity. See Evans notes on this issue.

¹¹ Ibid 1.3.

¹² Ibid.

brought forth life to prove the important function of water throughout history. Because God had functioned so closely with water in the past, Tertullian can conclude that, “The Spirit of God, who since the beginning was borne upon the waters, would as baptizer abide upon waters.”¹³

Therefore, for Tertullian, baptism is an essential aspect to having a right relationship with God the Father. The element of water itself when joined with the power of the Spirit truly communicates salvation to humanity. He says, “For at once the Spirit comes down from heaven and stays upon the waters, sanctifying them from within himself, and when thus sanctified they absorb the power of sanctifying.”¹⁴ For those who doubt that the Holy Spirit works through the waters, Tertullian appeals to a number of Old Testament passages that refer to God, through the mediation of angels, working miracles through water. He primarily references the angel at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5) as an example of how God uses his angels to bless his people through water. After more detailed discussion about the validity of water baptism Tertullian moves on to discuss what is done in baptism.

He says that after “washing,” or baptism, the baptized was to receive an anointing of oil, just like Aaron and his sons did. Immediately following this act the hands of the ministers are to be placed upon the newly baptized convert and he receives the Holy Spirit, just as Christ received the dove at his baptism.¹⁵ Tertullian then goes on to relate baptism to the Genesis story of the Flood with Noah and how this event prefigured baptism. It is at this point which Tertullian makes a statement concerning the efficacy of baptism. He says, “The world sinned, and so is appointed for the fire, as also a man is when he renews his sins after baptism: so that

¹³ Ibid 1.4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid 1.9.

this also needs to be accepted as a sign and a warning to us (the Flood).”¹⁶ Continuing this thought, Tertullian determines that baptism can bring judgment, as it did to the Egyptians who pursued Israel, or it can bring life, as it did to the Israelites as they crossed the Red Sea. This demonstrates that if baptism is not taken seriously, those who receive it will reap judgment and destruction.

Tertullian goes on to discuss a number of other issues involved with baptism including the baptism of John, which he determines is not Christian baptism, and how Christians can reconcile the fact that Jesus did not baptize yet baptism is necessary for salvation. In connection with these issues he brings up the necessity of baptism for justification. He openly criticizes those who suggest that only faith is needed for justification for God and argues that while Abraham did not receive baptism, he lived in the Old Covenant. This meant he did not live in the fulfillment, where in the New Covenant baptism now accompanies faith as the instruments of justification.¹⁷ Clearly then, baptism is essentially important in order to be a Christian. Once the theological reasoning for baptism had been established, Tertullian described how, when, and where the rite was to be administered.

Tertullian points out that there is only one baptism, as opposed to the Jewish practice of multiple cleansing and washing. Tertullian says, “We enter into the bath once only, once only are our sins washed away, because these ought not to be committed a second time.”¹⁸ It is clear then that baptism is a very serious thing and once it is administered the one initiated takes on very clear and important responsibilities. Because of the importance of baptism and the importance of the grace that it infuses, the only person qualified to baptize is the bishop, though

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid 1.13.

¹⁸ Ibid 1.15.

in very extreme circumstances laity could baptize an individual.¹⁹ It is within this section that Tertullian moves to the area of most interest regarding infant baptism in the early church.

As his argument is developed, because baptism is such a large responsibility to be heaped upon an individual, it should therefore not be given rashly. He quotes Matthew 7:6, “Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast ye your pearl before swine,” and I Timothy 5:22 which reads, “do not lay on hands easily, not become sharers in others sins,” as proof that baptism should only be accepted after much thought and preparation for receiving it. He therefore asserts, “It follows that deferment of baptism is more profitable, in accordance with each persons’ character and attitude, and even age; and especially so as regards children.”²⁰

So for Tertullian, baptism should be set off because it is unwise to heap onto someone a responsibility that they do not fully comprehend, particularly one with such large eternal significance. But his argument continues,

What need is there, if there really is no need, for even their sponsors to be brought into peril, seeing they may possibly themselves fail of their promises by death, or be deceived by the subsequent development of an evil disposition... Why should innocent infancy come with haste to the remission of sins? Shall we take less cautious action in this than we take in worldly matters? Shall one who is not trusted with earthly property be entrusted with heavenly? Let them first learn how to ask for salvation, so that you may be seen to have given to one that asketh. With no less reason ought the unmarried also to be declared until they either marry or are firmly established in continence: until then, temptation lies in wait for them, for virgins because they are ripe for it, and for widows because of their wandering about. All who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement.²¹

So Tertullian’s basic argument follows a basic structure. Baptism is a one time washing of sin that cannot be repeated, thus creating enormous responsibility for the one baptized. This means that deferment of baptism is preferable until one is certain that they want to commit to the rigors

¹⁹ Ibid 1.17.

²⁰ Ibid 1.18.

²¹ Ibid.

of Christian life. Therefore, infants and the unmarried should not receive baptism because they either do not understand or may be in a position that they cannot keep the intense expectations that are placed on them after baptism.

After his critique of speedy baptism (notice not a critique of infant baptism), Tertullian moves on to discuss what the baptized individual ought to do. He lists things that a number of earlier sources that will be explored shortly also confirm the baptized candidate must do. He says, “Those who are at the point of entering upon baptism ought to pray with frequent prayers, fastings, bendings of the knees, and all night vigils, along with their confession of their former sins, so as to make a copy of the baptism of John.”²² He concludes the last few paragraphs of his treatise by discussing how fasting after baptism is not necessary though permissible, and with this he concludes.

But before proceeding to make an argument about Tertullian’s view of baptism, it will also be beneficial here to briefly discuss one of Tertullian’s other reference’s to baptism in his work *De Corona*, which is a book on military service and the traditions of the church. This work was written after *De Baptismo* but Kurt Aland suggests that they were written around the same time period.²³ In this section Tertullian states,

When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then when we are taken up (as new-born children), we taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey, and from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week. We take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike.²⁴

²² Ibid 1.20.

²³ Aland 63.

²⁴ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Tertulian, *De Corona* Ch. IV, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 81.

What key does Tertullian unlock for understanding the early Church's practice of infant baptism? Some would suggest that it is proof that the baptism of infants was an innovation. Kurt Aland suggests that everything quoted above could include infants, but the fact that they did not take a bath for a week eliminates infants from being able to have been among those who were baptized.²⁵ This conclusion is somewhat odd, but it is understandable that it would be strange for a child not to be washed for a week.

Stander and Louw agree with Aland's conclusion and make a similar comment about the statements in *De Corona* (and Tertullian's view of baptism in general), "This description of the practice of baptism in the writings of other Church Fathers...The baptismal candidates were requested to denounce publicly the devil and his angels immediately before the baptismal ceremony. This procedure, found in many of the Fathers of the Church, made it unlikely that babies too were involved in the act of baptism."²⁶ This appears to be a stronger case than the one advocated by Aland, and they take the whole of the process as likely precluding infants. In it they also allude to Tertullian's treatise *The Shows*, where he says, "When entering the water, we make a profession of the Christian faith in the words of its rule; we bear public testimony that we have renounced the devil, his pomp and his angels."²⁷ Therefore, Tertullian in multiple places gives indirect evidence that infants cannot be baptized, according to Stander and Louw.

Perhaps the most poignant statement on Tertullian's description of baptism, however, is made by Steven McKinion. He says, "None of these acts of preparation were appropriate for infants. Only older children and adults could respond to these instructions."²⁸ McKinion goes on

²⁵ Aland 64.

²⁶ Stander 63.

²⁷ Tertullian, *The Shows* as quoted in Stander 66.

²⁸ McKinion 176.

to say that where Tertullian talks about repenting and holding all night prayer vigils that obviously infants could not stay up all night confessing sin.²⁹ McKinion's basic position is that Tertullian's argument expressly excludes any thought of infants.

So McKinion's stronger view, and Stander and Aland's more reserved approach implies that infants could not be (or probably were not) included among those who confessed therefore removing them as candidates for baptism. While it is understandable why this position may be held, an analysis of Tertullian shows that this approach is unwarranted and is a later understanding of baptism placed on the early explanation of the rite.

First, the arguments made by Aland, McKinion, Stander, and Louw make questionable assumptions that are not warranted. While McKinion claims, "The treatise was written in response to the innovative practice of infant baptism," this is not demonstrated from Tertullian's writing.³⁰ In fact, his argument is not against infant baptism in a strict sense. As demonstrated, it is against quickly baptizing individuals because of the great responsibility that accompanies the rite. While authors like McKinion take statements about making professions of faith, fasting, praying, and the like to mean infants were necessarily excluded, it in fact brings incredulity to a position that infant baptism was not the normative practice of the early church.

The problem is, if it is as straightforward as McKinion argues, why does Tertullian not argue as McKinion and those who agree with him? Tertullian does not reject the idea that infants truly receive valid baptism nor does he insist that it is invalid because they are not able to do the things listed as requirements. If the case was as McKinion proposes, it would be very odd that Tertullian not make the obvious charge against infant baptism. His point however, is not that infant baptism is a dangerous practice because it is not biblical, or apostolic, but that because it

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid 173.

gives too much responsibility to one not able to properly deal with the all the responsibilities. Tertullian rather seeks to protect the infants, virgins, and widows, including the one who sponsors a child, for they will receive judgment if the one baptized falls away. Given Tertullian's concern over the importance of tradition in *De Corona*, one should question why he never accuses infant baptism of being an innovative practice.³¹ David F. Wright agrees saying, "Novelty is one argument that Tertullian does not level against infant baptism—presumably because he knew he could not convincingly do so."³² The fact that he remains silent on this matter is a good indication that Tertullian is arguing against a practice that has been going on for sometime. It is precisely at this point that we gain added insight into how to read the material of the early church.

Simply because we are told about practices that men and women did that we would assume could only be done by children does not therefore mean infants were excluded. To make this assumption makes one struggle to explain Tertullian's argument. The modern Baptist argument is something completely foreign to Tertullian because he is not suggesting that the baptism of the infants is invalid or improper, simply unwise. This does not mean however, that faith was not an important aspect of baptism.

Faith was essential for the baptism of converts, but this does not necessarily speak to the question of children of believing parents. After discussing how faith was critically important to receive the sacrament of baptism in the early Church Thomas Finn says, "A note of caution. Early Christian baptism had clearly in view adults; yet infants and children (and the incapacitated) were not thereby excluded."³³ This principle can then be learned from Tertullian's

³¹ In this work, Tertullian argues for the importance of tradition in determining whether or not Christians should be in military service and wear a "crown." A large portion of his argument is historical.

³² David F. Wright. *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective*. (London: Paternoster, 2007), 8.

³³ Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria*. Message of the fathers of the church, v. 5. (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 14-15.

writing, while it may appear that only adults would be able to fulfill what is described of the recipient of baptism, it is not valid to assume that infants are excluded. This principle will aid in interpreting other church fathers and early documents, and these early documents and church fathers will also solidify the interpreting Tertullian in this way.

Before addressing the earliest documents, an examination of additional third century writing concerning baptism will be expounded. This first place to begin discussion is with Origen of Alexandria. Origen was born to Christian parents around 185 AD.³⁴ It is recorded that his father, Leonidas, was martyred under persecution of the government.³⁵ This is important to consider because as Jeremias argues,

Origen maintains...that infant baptism was a custom reaching back to apostolic times. He could hardly have expressed himself thus if he had not himself been baptized... When we note that his family, as Eusebius credibly informs us, had been Christian for several generations, we must add that he could hardly have spoken of a ‘tradition handed down from the Apostles’ had he not known that at least his father and probably also his grandfather had been baptized as paidia (children).³⁶

This argument would then date the practice of infant baptism as early as the late first century.

While this case seems convincing, it is not without dissenting opinion. Kurt Aland suggests that Jeremias’ conclusions are anachronistic and that his father may have been a convert later in his life.³⁷ Additionally for Aland, ultimately, the fact that Origen has to even ask the question demonstrates that, “Origen’s statements can be explained only on the assumption that this ‘custom of the Church’ in Palestine (and elsewhere) *is not yet very old*. For only on this

³⁴ Stander 81.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jeremias 66. To find the three quotes of Origen concerning baptism, consult Origen’s following works: *Homilies on Leviticus 7. Commentary on Romans 5.9. Homilies on Joshua 8:32*. Because all sources consulted affirm that Origen defended infant baptism, it seemed appropriate to leave space for other quotes and topics.

³⁷ Aland 48.

presupposition is it explicable that the voices against infant baptism are still so strong that Origen has to enter into discussion with them time and again.”³⁸

The problem with Aland’s arguments is that while he challenges the assumption of Jeremias that Origen’s grandfather was baptized, he doesn’t address the source that Jeremias relies on. Though not everything Eusebius records can be taken at face value, unless there is reason presented to conclude otherwise, it cannot be strongly asserted that his father may have been a convert latter in life. There is no support for this position, and the evidence points in the other direction.

Aland’s other argument is likewise flawed. For the fact that there is dispute about a particular doctrine does not mean that it is not apostolic. As Aland himself recognizes, Origen primarily writes to those who question why baptism should be administered to *innocent* infants.³⁹ The question was not about the historic apostolic nature of infant baptism, but the reason for it. But this is precisely part of Origen’s argument. For Origen, part of the reason the Church baptized infants was because it was an apostolic practice. Therefore, Origen gives added insight into the principle demonstrated from Tertullian, and it can safely be said that Origen’s defense of infant baptism places the practice at least in the late second century but possibly into the early second to late first century.

This evidence then further solidifies the principle learned from Tertullian’s writing. Just because infant baptism is not expressly mentioned does not mean that it is excluded. In fact, at the very least that the practice was widespread enough for Origen to argue for its apostolicity when his own baptism would have been around 200AD. This, and the shape of Tertullian’s

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid 47.

argument against infant baptism, strengthens the paedobaptists argument. Reading in Cyprian of Carthage further confirms this thought.

Cyprian (c.200-257) was strongly influenced by Tertullian, but flatly rejected Tertullian's argument against infant baptism (as well as his split from the mainline Church into Montanism).⁴⁰ What we know about Cyprian's situation is that he wrote about the question of Bishop Fidus, of an unknown See. A council that was assembled in Carthage debated whether or not children should be baptized on the eighth day, to parallel Old Testament circumcision, or if it should be administered earlier.⁴¹ Describing the decision of the council assembled to deal with these issues, Cyprian gives the following perspective,

But in respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eight day, we all thought very differently in our council.⁴²

Cyprian says that the council gave unanimous consent to the fact that infants should be baptized as soon as possible. The council ruled that waiting to the eight day was not a necessity and that quicker baptisms were actually to be preferred.⁴³ It should be noted that this synod was from Africa, so it does not mean that the entire church necessarily accepted the practice, but these evidence further substantiates the fact that infant baptism was an established practice by the early third century. For while the council was not held until c.251-253, it would be odd that the council would unanimously decide that infants should be baptized as soon as possible if the practice had not been around for at least a generation. Cyprian's argument proves further that

⁴⁰ Jeremias 85.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Cyprian as cited in Stander and Louw.

⁴³ Wright 29.

infant baptism was a very early practice and strengthens the case that early church documents and writings not mentioning children should not signal their exclusion.

One further early Christian writer will be referenced, Hippolytus (170-235). He wrote a work entitled *The Apostolic Tradition*, in which he discusses various doctrines of the Church of Rome during the early third century (which presumably originates from the Apostles). In this document we read the following from Hippolytus, "...first baptize the little ones. Those who can speak for themselves shall do so; if not, their parents or some other relative shall speak for them. Then baptize the men, and last of all the women."⁴⁴ Reading in light of the practices that we know occurring in the Church, and given Hippolytus' words, it is clear that infants are included in those who are to be baptized. Some may reject this conclusion however, as Stander and Louw do.

Concerning the children mentioned they say, "Such children were surely not babies. Those who could not speak for themselves could be very young children who needed assistance in responding by pronouncing the required formulas."⁴⁵ Their reasoning is plausible, but highly unlikely given what Hippolytus says. The indication from Hippolytus is that the infant is not able to answer the questions. Perhaps there were times that the child was helped through repeating the proper confession, but this in no way establishes that this is what Hippolytus is referring to. It makes much more sense of the passage to see that those who were not able to speak had someone speak in their behalf. Therefore, with Tertullian as an interpretative paradigm, and building off of the testimony of other Christian's in the third century, it is now appropriate to analyze more ambiguous statements in earlier documents. To demonstrate a

⁴⁴ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* in Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961).

⁴⁵ Stander 77.

situation where the principle learned from Tertullian can be utilized to help in ruling out improper conclusions, *The Didache* will be examined.

The Didache's date is debated, but there is a scholarly consensus that the document was written around the late first century or early second century.⁴⁶ The work is composed of short sections describing various religious practices of the Church. Section 7 is the place in the work where baptism is detailed. It reads as follows,

Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: after you have reviewed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you have no running water then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And before the baptism, let the one baptizing and the one who is to be baptized fast, as well as any others who are able. Also, you must instruct the one who is to be baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand.⁴⁷

Consistent with their basic argument McKinion and Stander suggest that the fact that fasting and prayer are present indicates that infants are therefore disqualified from being part of the discussion. McKinion states, "If the *Didache* envisioned an instance in which infant baptism would be practiced, instructions for such a ceremony would surely have been included in the manual."⁴⁸ This is certainly a plausible position, but then again the absence of infants in the baptismal rite is not totally surprising and does not signal that infant baptism was not practiced. But recalling Tertullian's account of baptism (which Stander and Louw affirm is similar to other documents in antiquity), also notice that he includes many of the same requirements. Yet in his argument against infant baptism, he does not cite them as reason for their exclusion.

⁴⁶ Stander 32.

⁴⁷ Michael W. Holmes *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2007), 355.

⁴⁸ McKinion 170.

Furthermore determining the recipients and the occasion for the writing of the *Didache* would perhaps show that there are other reasons the infants were not included.

Examining the *Didache* from a sociological perspective, Jonathan Draper develops the idea that the *Didache* was written to distinguish members of the community from those outside. He says, “There is a coherent ritual process lying behind the whole of 1-10 as an initiation ritual for Gentile converts. Life [new life in baptism] is the dominant symbol, indicating the successful adoption of the Way of Life by those baptized by the community.”⁴⁹ So if Draper is right in his analysis, then it would have to be proved that infants of believing parents were considered outside of the community and considered Gentiles. Such a conclusion seems unlikely and is difficult to ascertain from the available information. But it cannot be argued from the text that infants were definitively baptized either, and other second century sources do not decisively clarify this issue for scholars either. So where does this leave the student of the early church and his pursuit of the Patristic doctrine of infant baptism? Should the historical project of recovering the early churches understanding of baptism be forgotten?

The answer to this question is twofold. First, there is a humility that should accompany this discussion. Either a baptist or paedobaptist interpretation of the history of baptism is plausible. There is no way for determining with certainty precisely what the Church practiced. Therefore, new interpretations and multiple perspectives on the data are healthy for further dialogue. At the same time, as this paper has argued, when Tertullian’s treatment of baptism (and refutation of infant baptism) is considered alongside documents like the *Didache*, it undermines assumptions that McKinion and others hold concerning who can be part of the baptismal rite.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Jonathan Draper "Ritual Process and Ritual Symbol in Didache 7-10". *Vigiliae Christianae* 54, 1999, 33.

⁵⁰ Other second century documents include Justin Martyr’s section in his *First Apology*, the *Apology of Aristides*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, & *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Because these works could not be dealt with

One final point should be made concerning infant baptism and the interpretation of the early Church writers. Often times, the practice of the Church determined the theologizing that followed. This can be seen in the christological debates, particularly with Arianism, and in other debates such as the debate between Augustine and Pelagius on original sin. This does not guarantee that an early practice that is developed is Apostolic, but it does lay a framework for understanding how Christians articulated what their worship meant. Modern Christians should not simply accept the theologizing of the church fathers, but should compare it with Scripture.

For example, Paul Bradshaw suggests that in Rome, the parents were assumed to have the legal rights to make decisions for their children.⁵¹ This can be used to explain why and how the early Church was able to continue this practice without thinking much of its significance. As a result, it could be argued that this is not Biblical and shows that the practice is an innovation, or it could be a way early Christians explained their practice. Even when there is ambiguity in these discussions, Tertullian is an able guide. As has been expressed throughout the paper, even in opposing baptism, Tertullian does not object to its historical roots. With this in mind, it seems more likely that Bradshaw's suggestion was a way that first, second, and third century individuals explained an apostolic tradition that they were not pressed on Biblically (at least in the same way as paedobaptists are pressed now).

After examining Tertullian's argument against infant baptism, it is safe to say that one can only have direct evidence from the text that activities rule out infants. Simply assuming that they cannot fast, pray, or confess does not rule them out, as evidenced by Tertullian's arguments.

adequately in the space given they are referenced here for further study.

⁵¹ Bradshaw, Paul F. Ap 2006. The profession of faith in early Christian baptism. *Evangelical Quarterly*. 78 (2):101-115.

The fact that Tertullian was arguing against a practice already well established is seen both in his argument (not rejecting the Apostolicity of infant baptism), and in the very early testimony from Origen, Cyprian, and Hippolytus. Because of this testimony, it is justifiable to assume that even though infants are not expressly mentioned in documents like the *Didache*, they cannot be assumed to be excluded. Rather, given the flow of history and the absence of a serious debate against the apostolic origin of infant baptism, it is more natural to assume that infants of believing parents were included in baptism.