

**BAPTISM IN THE  
EARLY CHURCH**

*by*

*PROF. H.F. STANDER*

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*PROF. J.P. LOUW*

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# CHAPTER 1

## *Baptism and the use of church history by modern scholars*

In the history of the Christian churches the rite of baptism has been a contentious issue for many centuries. In our time, and especially during the past decades, baptism has become a hotly debated issue. The central questions in this debate are concerned with the recipients of the act of baptism (infants or believers) and the mode of baptism (sprinkling or immersion). These two main themes lead to other questions concerning the covenant (especially the Abrahamic covenant and circumcision), and also eventual rebaptism.

Debaters, irrespective of whatever point of view they support, are naturally convinced that their interpretation of baptism is indeed scriptural. Moreover, it has also become very common in this debate to appeal to the history of the early church.<sup>1</sup> Scholars are often led by their theological presuppositions when they claim that history supports their particular point of view. All the different perspectives concerning baptism have been 'proved' by quotations from the writers of the early church. Consequently, people today have a very perplexed picture of the practice of baptism in the early church. This might

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'early church' has become conventionalized and is used as such in this book. However, the reader is advised to bear in mind that in reality there was no unified church during the first centuries but numerous Christian congregations, and often regional groupings. The term 'early church' should be understood as a cover term for all the Christian communities.

lead people to conclude that the early Christians were very much confused. The truth is that modern day authors misinterpret and sometimes misrepresent the statements of the Church Fathers.

It is not the aim of this book to defend any theological point of view. Certainly not. The purpose of this study is to present the information about the actual rite of baptism in the writings of the early church as literally as possible, and in historical order, so as to provide a source book which may be of help to debaters in their quest for the practice of baptism in the first four centuries A.D. We also include such sources as tombstone inscriptions and early Christian art. The contention of this book will rather be to let the Church Fathers speak for themselves on this issue. Naturally, a specific quotation cannot be fully appreciated unless it is understood within the total context in which it appears, and with due attention to the requirements of the linguistic and literary features of significance in reading a text. Such comments will accompany the quotations in order to furnish the reader with the necessary background information required to appreciate the referential meaning(s) of the quotations. In several instances comments by modern authors on specific passages will also be discussed to illustrate how particular passages were interpreted by various debaters. However, before one can seriously expound the Patristic sources, the methodology of this study has to be related to many other studies of the history of the rite of baptism prevalent in the writings of various debaters. In order to underscore the need for an objective and scientific presentation of baptism in the early church, a survey will now be given of some of the statements occurring frequently in modern literature. It will clearly illustrate how scholars (mis)represent church history.

One of the most striking aspects of the arguments proposed by supporters of infant baptism, is that they are not content to accept that the inception of the baptism of infants occurred at some time and place in the history of the early church, but that they are usually very keen to find proof – even if it is only

indirect - of a *common* practice right from the time of the New Testament onwards. Apart from a few, such as Kurt Aland (1963), the general procedure is to argue for their theological position on the basis of possibilities, without weighing the complete data, in order to evaluate the actual state of affairs in the early church. A typical example is the extensively documented work by Joachim Jeremias (1960). The concern is primarily whether infant baptism did occur, not what facts are available on baptism. Jeremias quotes forty ancient documents as sources, of which twenty five are designated as explicit references to infant baptism – the earliest dating from 200 A.D., namely, Tertullian's treatise called *On Baptism (De Baptismo)*. Tertullian lived at a time when quite contrary views on baptism were prevalent, viz. that it should be administered as close as possible to death, since baptism was regarded as cleansing a person from all sin (and thus affording less opportunity to sin again). Others advocated an early baptism to remove inherited sin. Tertullian disapproved of both practices. In the *On Baptism* he criticized the baptism of *parvuli*, that is, small children. He, as a lawyer, was very much concerned about a person's responsibility in making decisions, and therefore advocated that children should be baptized when they could be taught and could understand what it required to be a Christian.

Many scholars refer to the above-mentioned passage in Tertullian as clear evidence of infant baptism in the early church (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 1978:701; *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* 1971:83; Pitchers in König 1984:32). The passage in Tertullian runs as follows:

And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary – if (baptism itself) is not so necessary – that the sponsors likewise should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfil their promises, and may be disappointed

by the development of an evil disposition, in those for whom they stood? The Lord does indeed say, "Forbid them not to come unto me". Let them "come," then, while they are growing up; let them "come" while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the "remission of sins?" More caution will be exercised in worldly matters: so that one who is not trusted with earthly substance is trusted with divine! (Tertullian *On Baptism* 18)

This passage from Tertullian is indeed the earliest reference in early Christian writings to children being baptized. However, to equate the baptism of children with the baptism of babies, as adherents of infant baptism prefer to do, is to neglect the fact that these children were not baptized within a theological framework of the Abrahamic covenant and circumcision. The passage from Tertullian does not speak of infant baptism as it is understood today; it merely refers to a practice among some Christians (of which Tertullian disapproves) to baptize people at a very early stage as small children. It is also remarkable that Tertullian refers to sponsors who probably had to go through the ceremony on behalf of these little ones. This was done at a time (which will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this book) when baptism was regarded as one's guarantee to enter the Kingdom of heaven. As a safeguard, in order to avoid the possibility of little ones dying before they are grown and able to partake of the ritual themselves, sponsors substituted on their behalf. That is why Tertullian advises that such baptisms are undesirable and should be postponed until the recipients can understand what is actually at stake.

It is important to account for the meaning as well as procedures of baptism in the early stages of the Christian church before one can compare ancient and modern practices. This is exactly what Jeremias (1960:98) suggested at the very end of

his book without elaborating on this extremely important issue. Perhaps we should herein see the reason why Jeremias has become an important reference book for supporters of infant baptism though he actually only talked about the baptism of children. However, even Aland (1963) understood him as defending infant baptism, and as such he criticises a number of the assumptions made by Jeremias. Many others have since used the data as applying to infant baptism though in the vast majority of the 'clear' cases quoted by Jeremias the issue was children, not specifically babies. This distinction is hardly ever made in the debate.

It is remarkable that though there are a number of references in ancient sources to the baptism of children, these are perhaps of too late a date to have gained much attention. The general tendency seems to seek proof of infant baptism in documents much closer to the time of the New Testament even though these may be 'indirect'.

A.C. Barnard gives the following as an 'indirect proof' of infant baptism in the early church:

Justin Martyr writes in his first Apology ± 165: "There are among us many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, and who remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years."

Barnard then concludes:

This refers to the time when they received their status of discipleship, i.e. at their baptism. Thus they must have been baptized ± 80-90 A.D.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The original Afrikaans version reads as follows:

Justinus die Martelaar skryf in sy eerste Apologie ± 165: 'Daar is by ons baie sestig- en sewentigjarige manne en vroue wat van kindsbeen af Christene was en steeds onbedorwe gebly het.' Dit wys op die tyd toe hulle die status van dissipelskap ontvang het, d.w.s. by die doop. Hulle moes dan hulle doop ± 80-90 n.C. ontvang het. (Barnard 1984:78)

But when Justin says that someone has been a Christian from childhood, that surely would not imply that such a person was indeed baptized, specifically as an infant. The phrase ‘from childhood’ – in the Greek *ἐκ παιδῶν* (*Apology* I,15,6) – refers to the early years of a person’s life. It may extend up to the age of puberty and somewhat beyond. Regularly in the ancient world persons were referred to as children up to about 16–18 years of age. This allows for a much wider extent of time than the few weeks since birth, presently associated with the age of a youngster being baptized as an infant. As we will see later on in this study, children who confessed that they believed in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, were occasionally baptized. It was not the age that qualified a person for baptism, but confession of belief. Therefore, one can only say from Justin’s remark that the people referred to had probably been baptized during the early years of their life. One still has to show what this rite of baptism entailed, and also how old they were at the time.

For this reason the reference quoted by Barnard as a possibility of infant baptism in the early church is not only unconvincing, but Barnard also fails to tell his readers that there are a number of explicit descriptions of the nature of baptism, namely believer’s baptism, in this same work of Justin, from which he has taken the above-mentioned quotation. The following excerpt will suffice:

As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy



Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. (Justin *Apology* I,61)

One may speculate why Barnard resorts to an 'indirect proof' of infant baptism in Justin's *Apology* but ignores a 'direct proof' of believer's baptism in the same work!

W. Oetting argues on even less convincing grounds as follows:

It should be noted, however, that neither Justin Martyr nor the *Didache* mentions infant baptism. The literature seems to assume it, just as the New Testament apparently does. (Oetting 1970:31)

Oetting is employing here a rather haphazard form of argumentation based on the fact that if a matter was not recorded in a writing, one can assume that it is taken for granted. But one is on very shaky ground when one argues that an author is actually giving his tacit approval of infant baptism, or any other issue for that matter, when he does not mention it in his work. If this form of argumentation were allowed, one might as well argue that because rebaptism, or even the baptism of non-human beings for that matter, is not mentioned, 'the literature seems to assume it'. Oetting, too, prefers not to mention the explicit references to believer's baptism in Justin's writings.

As is evident in the quotation above, Oetting also refers to the *Didache* as a work which 'seems to assume' infant baptism though it does not mention it. When we look at the *Didache*, however, we read the following:

But before baptism let the baptizer fast, and the one baptized, and whatever others can; but you should order the baptized to fast one or two days before. (*The Didache* 7,4)

It is unclear how one can conclude from this work that the author 'seems to assume' infant baptism. The pre-baptismal fasting would rather *not* suggest that infants are involved. This is also the conclusion of Engelbrecht, though he stands in the tradition of infant baptism, when he remarks:

Justin and the Didache contain no reference whatsoever to infant baptism ...<sup>3</sup>

W. Marais, however, a proponent of infant baptism, does not want to concede this and really presses the text when he says:

I find nothing in this passage which teaches that the baptismal candidate should be an adult, since an infant, too, can fast.<sup>4</sup>

In order to 'prove' that infants can fast, he refers to Jonah 3:5-8<sup>5</sup> and Joel 2:15-16.<sup>6</sup> However, these two passages are not

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<sup>3</sup> The original Afrikaans version reads as follows:

*Justinus en die Didache* verwys hoegenaamd nie na die kinderdoop nie .... (Engelbrecht 1984:57)

<sup>4</sup> The original Afrikaans version reads as follows:

Ek vind in hierdie gedeelte niks wat leer dat die dopeling 'n volwassene moet wees nie, want ook 'n suigeling kan vas. (Marais 1974:143)

<sup>5</sup> Jonah 3:5-8 reads as follows: 'The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence...."'

<sup>6</sup> Joel 2:15-16 reads as follows: 'Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.'