

SECTION 1

COVENANTS & ORDINANCES

“FOR I RECEIVED FROM THE LORD WHAT I ALSO PASSED ON TO YOU: THE LORD JESUS, ON THE NIGHT HE WAS BETRAYED, TOOK BREAD, AND WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS, HE BROKE IT AND SAID, ‘THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS FOR YOU; DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME...’”

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-24

SACRAMENTUM: BAPTISMAL PRACTICE & THEOLOGY OF TERTULLIAN & CYPRIAN

DR. REX BUTLER¹

Our introduction to the extant history of North African Christianity is the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, the court record of twelve Christians from an obscure village that was probably near Carthage.² In their trial before the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus,³ the seven men and five women demonstrated obedience to authority, dedication to their faith, and readiness to die; in short, characteristics of *milites Christi*, soldiers of Christ.

From the beginning, militant Christianity was a hallmark of the early church in North Africa, and, in the literature of that time and setting, Christians were often described as soldiers.⁴ The military motif also was utilized through the reference to baptism as *sacramentum*. Although this term had been used to describe a military oath of allegiance, Tertullian, the prolific and rigorous Carthaginian teacher of the late second and early third centuries, appropriated it for ecclesiastical usage, making it part of the Latin theological lexicon.⁵ The other significant North African churchman and rigorist, Cyprian, also made use of the term in his writings concerning the baptismal issues of the mid-third century.

In another sense, *sacramentum* meant “something set apart as sacred,” and Tertullian used it to translate the Greek word μυστήριον for “mystery,” in such passages of the New

¹Dr. Rex Butler is Associate Professor of Church History and Patristics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

²*The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. with an introduction by Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1972), xii, 168-75.

³Saturninus is mentioned by Tertullian, *Scap.* 3.4, as one who suffered after persecuting Christians: “Vigellius Saturninus, who first directed the sword against us in this place, lost his eyesight.” See also Musurillo, 87 n. 2. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of ancient, Latin texts are mine and are based upon Latin texts in Corpus Christianorum Series Latina.

⁴For examples, see Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.1; *Cor.* 1.1; *Or.* 19.5; *Mart.* 3.1; *Exh. Cast.* 12.1; *Fug.* 10.1. See also Cyprian, *Ep.* 10.5.2; 15.1.1; 31.5.2; 37.1.1; 39.3.1. Cyprian’s epistles are numbered according to the order in *Sancti Cypriani Episcopi Epistalarium*, ed. G. F. Diercks, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996).

⁵Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, vol. 6, *Message of the Fathers of the Church*, ed. Thomas Halton (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 115.

Testament as Eph. 1:9-10, 3:8-9, and 5:32.⁶ When Paul spoke of the “mystery of His will,” the “administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God,” and the fact that the “mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church,”⁷ he referred to God’s hidden plan of salvation through Christ for the church. For Tertullian, however, the saving work of Christ is revealed to the church through rites such as baptism, laying on of hands and anointing with oil, and the Eucharist. Therefore, he combined the ideas of the sacred act and the oath of allegiance to introduce to the church the concept of the sacrament.⁸

Other words and phrases were used to describe baptism, and *sacramentum* signified other Christian rites, especially the Eucharist. This term, however, provides an appropriate starting point for a study of baptismal practice and theology in third-century North Africa because it originated with Tertullian⁹ and because it relates etymologically to the sacramentalism that dominated the Latin fathers’ understanding of baptism. The key sources for research into this area are the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian and others within their circle and range of influence.

TERTULLIAN

The earliest surviving monograph on Christian baptism is Tertullian’s treatise *De Baptismo*,¹⁰ written around the turn of the third century.¹¹ As will be seen, he also wrote about baptism elsewhere, but this treatise provides an outline for his overall thought on the subject.

⁶Tertullian, *Marx.* 5.17.1; 5.18.2, 5.18.9; *An.* 21.2; *Ieiun.* 3.2. See also Joseph Crehan, *Early Christian Baptism and the Creed: A Study in Ante-Nicene Theology*, vol. 13, The Bellarmine Series, ed. Edmund F. Sutcliffe (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1950), 103.

⁷Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the Bible are from the New American Standard Bible (The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

⁸Crehan, 103.

⁹J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 193.

¹⁰Melito of Sardis (d. c. 190) wrote a treatise *On the Laver*, which may have influenced Tertullian, but too little of it has survived to know to what extent. Tertullian, *Bapt.* 15.2, wrote a baptismal treatise in Greek prior to the one in Latin, but it is lost. Ernest Evans, ed., *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism* (London: Society for the Preservation of Christian Knowledge, 1964), xi.

¹¹Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 55, dated the treatise between 197 and 203.

Ostensibly this work was occasioned by the teaching of a woman missionary from the Cainite sect,¹² who argued that the rite of baptism was materialistic and, therefore, unspiritual and trivial. Tertullian, evidently, presented this material originally in a series of lectures delivered to both catechumens and those recently baptized.¹³ Ernest Evans summarized the treatise in three parts:

Chapters 1-9 are controversial and doctrinal, beginning with a defence of the sacrament against heretical denials of its utility, and proceeding to an explanation of the significance of the several parts of the baptismal rite. Chapters 10-16 treat of a number of questions . . . which were under debate at the time. Chapters 17-20 are again didactic, laying down practical rules for the administration of the sacrament.¹⁴

In the opening chapters, Tertullian responded to the heretical attack on baptism with a defense “concerning our sacrament of water” (*De sacramento aquae nostrae*) (*Bapt.* 1.1), supporting his argumentation with a variety of types (*figurae*) of water drawn from the biblical record. Water is prominent in the account of creation, and the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the water, sanctified it (*Bapt.* 3.2, 4.1). The Israelites were set free from Pharaoh at the Red Sea, as Christians are set free from the devil at the baptismal waters. The water which the Israelites drank during the Exodus came from the rock, which represents Christ the Rock, or was sweetened by Moses’ tree, also representing Christ (*Bapt.* 9.1-3). The baptism by John (*Bapt.* 6.1) and the baptism of Jesus were types of Christian baptism as were the many experiences with water in Jesus’ life (*Bapt.* 9, 19).¹⁵

¹²The Cainites, who were a Gnostic sect, disdained physical matter and regarded God, who created the world, as responsible for its evil. As a result, they elevated those biblical characters that resisted God, such as Cain, Esau, and Korah. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed., s.v. “Cainites.”

¹³Jerome, *Vir. Ill.* 53, attested to Tertullian’s status as a priest, but Barnes, 11, disproved that misconception based on Tertullian’s own testimony that he was a layperson in *Exh. Cast.* 7.3; *Mon.* 12.2. Nonetheless, Barnes, 117, speculated that Tertullian indeed delivered these lectures on baptism. Due to his rare and valuable literary ability, Tertullian would have been a leader of his Christian community in Carthage and would have had ample opportunity to teach. For a discussion of literacy in this period and the system of house churches in Carthage, see William Tabbernee, “To Pardon or not to Pardon?: North African Montanism and the Forgiveness of Sins,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 36, ed. M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2001), 375-86.

¹⁴Evans, xii.

¹⁵Jesus’ experiences with water include changing water to wine (John 2:1-11); inviting those who are thirsty to drink of him and to receive living water (John 7:37-38); promising a reward to those who give a cup of cold water in his name (Matt. 10:42); offering living water to the woman at the well (John 4:1-38); walking on the water (Matt. 14:22-33); crossing the sea (Matt. 8:23-27); pointing out the place for the celebration of the Passover by the sign of water being carried by a man (Mark 14:13); and washing his disciples’ feet (John 13:5-11).

Tertullian defended baptism not only with the biblical typology of water but also by his emphasis on the simplicity of the rite and the material nature of water. Citing 1 Cor. 1:27, he insisted that God has chosen foolish things to shame the wise, referring to the Cainite woman and others who had disparaged baptism because it involved a material substance like water.¹⁶ The Gnostics disdained matter, but Tertullian claimed that the physical substances and actions used in baptism – water, oil, gestures, words – effected salvation.¹⁷

In his treatise *De Baptismo*, Tertullian provided a description of the baptismal rites in the Carthaginian church, which is further supplemented by incidental allusions in other writings. He indicated that the candidates received pre-baptismal instruction (*Bapt.* 18.4) but gave no clue to its duration. Prior to the ceremony, the candidate engaged in prayer, fasting, humility, a nightlong vigil, and confession of sin (*Bapt.* 20). The final step before baptism was the renunciation of Satan (*Cor.* 3.2).

According to Tertullian, there was no difference between water that was running or still, outside or indoors (*Bapt.* 4.3). After the invocation of God, the baptismal water was consecrated by the descent of the Spirit, who imparted to the water the sacramental power to sanctify the one who was immersed therein (*Bapt.* 4). Indeed, baptism was conducted by triple immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit while those being baptized responded with “a slightly broader answer than the Lord has commanded in the Gospel” (*Cor.* 3.3; *Bapt.* 6.2).¹⁸ According to Tertullian, the primary authority for baptism belonged to the bishop, but that authority could be delegated to priests and deacons or even laymen – but certainly not laywomen! (*Bapt.* 17.1-2, 4-5) Tertullian was the first author to record the presence of sponsors, who attended at least as witnesses but possibly also as sureties (*Bapt.* 18.4; cf. 6.2).

After emerging from the baptismal water, the one newly baptized was anointed with consecrated oil (*Bapt.* 7), was signed with the cross (*Res.* 8.3), and had the administrator’s hands imposed in welcome of the Holy Spirit (*Bapt.* 8.1). After the descent of the Spirit and the ascent of the baptizand from the font, the time had come to ask for the *charismata* (*Bapt.* 20).¹⁹ The new members of the church then joined the congregation for prayers (*Bapt.* 20.5)

Even during Christ’s passion, water is evident when Pilate washes his hands and when the soldier’s lance brings forth water from Christ’s side. Finn, 117.

¹⁶Ernest Evans, xii; Finn, 116.

¹⁷Finn, 8.

¹⁸See Hippolytus, *Apos. Trad.* 21, for a complete presentation of the ceremonial use of the baptismal creed.

¹⁹In *Passio de Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, Perpetua reported her experience with the Spirit following baptism: “The Spirit directed me to request nothing else after the water except endurance of the flesh” (*Pass. Pert.* 3.5). Her experience reflected Tertullian’s exhortation to catechumens in his treatise *De Baptismo*: “Therefore, blessed ones, . . . when you ascend from that most holy bath of new birth and spread out your hands for the first time, . . . ask from

and for their first celebration of the Eucharist, at which time they were given a drink of milk and honey, which symbolized the Promised Land (*Cor.* 3.3).

Later, in his treatise *De Resurrectione Carnis*, Tertullian expressed the theological basis for this baptismal practice: “flesh is the hinge upon which salvation turns” (*Res.* 8.2).²⁰ He expanded this thought with the following summary of the ceremony: “the flesh is washed so that the soul also might be purified; the flesh is anointed with oil so that the soul also might be consecrated; the flesh is inscribed so that the soul also might be fortified; the flesh is shaded by the laying on of hands so that the soul also might be illuminated by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ so that the soul also might be fattened upon God” (*Res.* 8.3). He said something similar in the treatise *De Baptismo*: “the oil runs on our flesh but benefits us in the spirit; in the same way also, although the act of baptism itself is carnal in that we are immersed in water, the effect is spiritual in that we are liberated from sins” (*Bapt.* 7.2).²¹

The elaborate ceremony which Tertullian described is far removed from the simple observances recorded in the New Testament. Tertullian admitted that Scripture did not prescribe all of the rituals that were performed but that tradition and custom provided their precedents (*Cor.* 3.1-2). In his study of *A History of Christian Thought*, Justo González came to this conclusion concerning baptism in the early church: “Not only in their understanding of baptism, but also in their total theological outlook, one senses a distance between the Christianity of the New Testament – especially that of Paul – and that of the Apostolic Fathers.”²² This distance widened in the following years, and Gonzalez’ observation is even truer of Tertullian and later church fathers.

The baptismal theology that informed the baptismal practice was sacramental. Tertullian believed and taught that the water of baptism provided four benefits: the remission of sins, deliverance from death, regeneration, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (*Marc.* 1.28.2).²³ Thomas Finn takes particular note of “Tertullian’s sacramental conviction, namely, that water is capable of regenerating the candidate because of God’s spirit, which it bears. The very fact that water can penetrate to the hiddenmost inner recesses of the physical world discloses that it penetrates to the very spirit of the baptismal candidate. Thus,

the Father, ask from the Lord, to receive personal resources of grace and distributions of gifts” (*Bapt.* 20.5).

²⁰*caro salutis est cardo*. See also Evans, xx.

²¹Translation by Ernest Evans, 17.

²²Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 96.

²³Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 163; Kelly, 209.

the candidate's spirit is physically washed, while the body is spiritually cleansed in the very same waters."²⁴

By the third century and earlier, the symbolism of baptism as the believer's identification with the death and resurrection of Christ, as taught by Paul, was seemingly forgotten and replaced by sacramentalism which assigned salvific power to the baptismal act itself.²⁵ Tertullian still recognized the role of faith in salvation but taught that faith was incomplete, or "bare (*nuda*)," without the clothing of baptism (*Bapt.* 13.2). The reasons for this trend toward sacramentalism are not readily apparent, but an examination of Tertullian's use of sacred writings and of the milieu of the early church may yield possible hints.

Tertullian seems to assume baptismal regeneration rather than to argue for it from sacred writings of his day. Only rarely did Tertullian quote or allude to passages that are cited most frequently today in support of baptismal regeneration – Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Tit. 3:5; and 1 Pet. 3:21²⁶ – and only one of those citations was given in argumentation for his sacramental view.²⁷ In the treatise *De Baptismo*, he argued for the necessity of baptism with an abbreviated quotation from John 3:5: "Unless someone is born of water, that person has not life" (*Bapt.* 12.1). Overall, he used Jewish and Christian sources extensively but largely to support his view with types of baptism.

A possible influence toward sacramentalism from outside the church came from the many mystery religions that were attracting adherents during the early centuries of Christianity. Tertullian listed several of these religions that included washings that effected regeneration and remission of sins:²⁸ the cult of Isis,²⁹ Mithraism,³⁰ the worship of Aphrodite,

²⁴Finn, 117. See also Tertullian, *Bapt.* 4.5.

²⁵González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 96. See also Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. and ed. James Moffatt, with an Introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 230.

²⁶Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), 1097-9. See the scriptural indices in *Tertulliani Opera*, vol. 2, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 1457-93.

²⁷Possibly, Tertullian made two allusions to Tit. 3:5 – "the font of your new birth (*lauacrum noui natalis*)" (*Bapt.* 20.5) and "the font of regeneration (*lauacrum regenerationis*)" (*Pud.* 1.5) – but both references were assumptive rather than argumentative.

²⁸Arthur Darby Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 60-62, doubts the accuracy of some of Tertullian's information.

²⁹In Egypt, the worship of Isis involved the waters of the Nile River. André Hamman, ed., *Baptism: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, trans. Thomas Halton, ALBA Patristic Library, vol. 2 (Staten Island, N.Y.: ALBA House, 1967), 34 n. 6.

and the Cybelene cult.³¹ He also cited other pagan rituals whereby expiation of sins, even murder, was achieved by water (*Bapt.* 5.1). According to Tertullian, the reason for the similarities was that the devil, in the false religions that he inspired, imitated the things of God (*Bapt.* 5.3).³²

Historians have debated the influence that early Christianity and the mystery religions exerted upon each other. Everett Ferguson questioned the impact of the mysteries upon the origins of Christianity and considered it possible that the mysteries borrowed from Christianity. He was convinced, however, that later Christianity did derive from the mysteries and pagan religions certain gestures, terminology, artistic motifs, ceremonies, and other ideas and practices. Although he insisted that there are “no true parallels to baptism in the mysteries,” he pointed to several similarities: baptism was conducted as an initiation into certain cults; water was applied for purification; the benefit of baptism was effective through its operation (*ex opere operato*); and, in the case of the Dionysiac mysteries, the initiation of children was practiced.³³

Although the influence of mystery religions on the origin of baptism can be refuted,³⁴ their influence on the development of sacramentalism during the postbiblical centuries must be taken into consideration. Adolf Harnack freely described baptismal practice and theology in the early church in terms of a mystery and even claimed that “magical ideas were bound up from the very first with baptism.”³⁵ The sacrament played an important role in the expansion of the church because of its visibility and tangibility; it appealed to many who were seeking comfort in mysteries but would not be “satisfied with a purely spiritual

³⁰One step of initiation into Mithraism was purification by water. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 277.

³¹The statues of Aphrodite and Cybele were bathed during ceremonies associated with each cult. Hamman, 34 n. 7.

³²According to Ferguson, 279, “The Christian writers of the early centuries may have exaggerated the similarities, either from defensiveness or . . . because they could make apologetical capital for the truth of Christianity by claiming demonic imitations in paganism.”

³³*Ibid.*, 279-80; cf. 248.

³⁴G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1963), 1-44, lists four antecedents of Christian Baptism: lustrations in the Old Testament, Jewish baptizers and the Qumran Community, Jewish proselyte baptism, and the baptism of John the Baptist.

³⁵Harnack, 388 n. 1.

religion.”³⁶ Harnack saw in Tertullian’s writing a description of baptism in an advanced stage of sacramentalism, amplified with new ceremonies added to the original, simple bath.³⁷

Harnack referred to the visibility and tangibility of the sacrament. The physical actions involved in the baptismal ceremony described by Tertullian became pictures to the catechumens and the Christians in the congregation, most of whom were illiterate.³⁸ The actions, then, as described above, became more than just signs to the participants and the spectators; they came to effect what they signified,³⁹ namely the washing away of sin and the anointing with the Holy Spirit.

This trend was exacerbated by the lack of leadership during the century between the apostles and Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, and Hippolytus. Without exceptional spiritual and intellectual leadership, Christian congregations, whose members came from the lower middle class, “were set in the confused religious milieu of the Gentile world, side by side with . . . the devotees of the numerous mysteries.”⁴⁰ From this pagan environment, in which they lived and worked, they brought many ideas which affected their baptismal theology. “It was in this age of confusion, while the Church was still evolving the means by which this confusion was soon to be reduced to order . . . that the liturgical tradition took shape.”⁴¹ By the end of the second century, the church fathers seemed blind to this process, and Tertullian, as has been seen, actually contributed to the trend.⁴²

One likely way in which baptismal practice and theology developed through a popular movement in the church can be seen in Tertullian’s discussion of infant baptism. He advocated postponement of baptism of children and asked, “Why does the innocent age of life hurry toward the remission of sins?” (*Bapt.* 18.5) His argumentation, however, indicated that infant baptism was being practiced or, at least, requested by parents and others in his congregation. Appeal was made to Jesus’ words, “Do not forbid them to come to me” (Matt. 19:14, cited in *Bapt.* 18.5). In reply, Tertullian discouraged the baptism of children, insisting instead, “Let them come, then, when they grow up, when they are learning, when they are taught where they should come; let them become Christians when they are able to know

³⁶ Ibid., 388-9.

³⁷ Ibid., 390.

³⁸ William Tabbernee, “To Pardon or not to Pardon? North African Montanism and the Forgiveness of Sins,” *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001): 380-81.

³⁹ Finn, 13.

⁴⁰ G. W. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers*, 2nd ed. (London: Society for the Preservation of Christian Knowledge, 1967), 97-8

⁴¹ Ibid., 102. See also Beasley-Murray, 354-5.

⁴² Beasley-Murray, 357.

Christ” (*Bapt.* 18.5). At this time in North Africa, this baptismal expression of sacramental theology had not yet received the support of ecclesiastical leadership. Fifty years later, quite the opposite was the case.

An issue that did arise from the doctrine of baptismal regeneration was the question of post-baptismal sin: If baptism cleanses one from past sins, how is one cleansed from sins committed after baptism? In his treatise *De Paenitentia*, written about the same time as *De Baptismo*,⁴³ Tertullian allowed a second but final opportunity for repentance and forgiveness of sin committed after baptism. The penitent must undergo a process known as *exomologesis*, which included prostration before the elders of the church in sackcloth and ashes, fasting, praying, and confessing before the congregation. Though strict, this penitence afforded absolution for both spiritual and carnal sins (*Paen.* 7.10; 9.1-6; 3.8).

About a decade later, Tertullian wrote *De Pudicitia*, a treatise that expounded a decidedly more severe restriction on post-baptismal forgiveness. In its introduction, he repudiated his earlier views and insisted instead that indulgence must not be granted to believers who commit the most extreme sins, such as adultery and fornication (*Pud.* 1.6). In his offensive against such practices, he condemned the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which he named “Shepherd of adulterers (*Pastore moechorum*)” (*Pud.* 20.2), because it permitted one opportunity for repentance after baptism.⁴⁴ Later, he included apostasy, murder, and idolatry in the list of sins that were unpardonable by the church (*Pud.* 22.11).

The severity of such baptismal doctrine led many seekers in the third century to postpone baptism, sometimes even until immediately before death.⁴⁵ Tertullian encouraged such practice to some extent, at least, in the case of those who are not married (*Bapt.* 18.6) and encouraged all baptismal candidates to learn sinless living before baptism so that they would not require repentance afterward (*Paen.* 7.1). At the same time, he deplored those catechumens who, like soldiers on furlough, used the time before baptism as an opportunity for sinning rather than for learning the discipline of sinlessness (*Paen.* 6.3). The problem of delaying baptism continued to spread and became a source of serious concern in the church.

⁴³ Tertullian also insisted in *On Baptism* that only once are one’s sins washed away: “Happy water, which *once* washes away” (*Bapt.* 15.3).

⁴⁴ *Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate 4.3.1-7; cf. .4.1.1-10. See also Cahal B. Daly, *Tertullian the Puritan and His Influence: An Essay in Historical Theology* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 128-9.

⁴⁵ Harnack, 391.

Tertullian did acknowledge a second baptism, the baptism of blood, or martyrdom.⁴⁶ From 195 on, Christians in North Africa suffered sporadic persecutions,⁴⁷ as evidenced by Tertullian's treatises *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*, written from 197-8.⁴⁸ Seeking encouragement from Christian writings, Tertullian found motifs that united baptism and suffering. Jesus himself had come "by water and blood" (1 John 5:6, cited in *Bapt.* 16.1) and had predicted, "I have to be baptized with a baptism" (Luke 12:50, cited in *Bapt.* 16.1). Tertullian saw in the water and blood that poured from Jesus' pierced side a figure of the two baptisms, one of water, the other of blood. The latter "brings about at once the bath of the laver even when it has not been received and restores it when it is lost" (*Bapt.* 16.2). Thus, the baptism of blood remitted sins for the convert who had not yet been baptized and provided cleansing even for post-baptismal sins.

CYPRIAN

In 248, about fifty years after Tertullian wrote *De Baptismo*, Cyprian was elected bishop of Carthage, thereafter becoming the leading North African churchman of the mid-third century. According to Jerome, Cyprian daily read from the works of Tertullian, whom he called "my master,"⁴⁹ but Cyprian was less theological and more practical in his writings, which consisted of several short treatises and a broad correspondence.

As did Tertullian, Cyprian glorified the ideal of the Christian militia⁵⁰ and often used the term *sacramentum* as a synonym for baptism.⁵¹ His sacramental theology can be seen readily in his description of his own salvation as being "reborn and endowed with new life

⁴⁶In 203, only a few years after Tertullian wrote *De Baptismo*, four young catechumens and their teacher received the baptism of blood in the Carthaginian amphitheater. Their story was recorded by an eyewitness and preserved in *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. E. C. E. Owen, introduction to *Passion of SS. Perpetua and Felicitas in Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrs*, trans. by E. C. E. Owen (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1927), 75-7, alleged that Tertullian was the eyewitness and editor of the *Passio* and cited as one of his reasons the use of the term "second baptism" by both Tertullian and the editor. All that can be known certainly is that Tertullian was familiar with the story of Perpetua (*An.* 55.4). For a discussion of the identity of the editor of the *Passion*, see Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy and "New Visions": Evidence of Montanism in "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas"* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

⁴⁷W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 293.

⁴⁸Barnes, 55.

⁴⁹Jerome, *Vir. Ill.* 53.

⁵⁰See footnote 3 above.

⁵¹See, for examples, Cyprian, *Ep.* 30.7.1, 45.1.2, 55.21.2, 54.2.4, 64.4.3, 72 passim, 74 passim.

by the laver of saving water.”⁵² Furthermore, “afterwards, when the stain of my earlier life had been washed away with the aid of the water of regeneration, a light from above poured itself upon my heart that is made righteous and pure; afterwards, when I had drunk up the heavenly Spirit, the second birth remade me as a new person.”⁵³ For Cyprian, remission of past sins and regeneration came to him in the baptismal waters; the Spirit, in the confirmation that followed.⁵⁴

Cyprian also followed Tertullian in his teaching that faith was insufficient for salvation unless completed by baptism. In his own testimony, he implied his eventual faith when he expressed his original doubt: “It was very difficult and hard to believe . . . that divine mercy was promised for my salvation.”⁵⁵ He described the ultimate goal of his belief, however, in the sacramental terms cited above. Elsewhere, he recognized saving faith in Cornelius and the Gentiles, who were “heated with the fire of faith, believing in the Lord with their whole heart; . . . nevertheless, the blessed Apostle Peter, mindful of the divine precept and the gospel, instructed that those same men, who already had been filled with the Holy Spirit, should be baptized, in order that nothing should seem to be neglected so that they might observe the apostolic directions through every divine precept and the law of the Gospel” (*Ep.* 72.1.2). Again, from another story from the Acts of the Apostles, he related that “those who had believed in Samaria had believed in the true faith and had been baptized by Philip the deacon, whom the same apostles [Peter and John] had sent, within the church, which is one and to which alone it is permitted to grant the grace of baptism and to forgive sins” (*Ep.* 73.9.1). Other than these examples and few others, Cyprian focused on sacrament rather than faith.

By the mid-third century, the trend toward infant baptism, spurred on by such sacramentalism, had advanced to the place where it was no longer only a popular demand but had become an episcopal requirement. Fidus, one of Cyprian’s fellow bishops, had written his opinion that an infant should be baptized on the eighth day, according to the ancient law of circumcision. Cyprian, with the support of a council, responded that an infant should be baptized within the first two or three days because God’s grace should be denied to no one born (*Ep.* 64.2.1-2). The rationale for the decision was that even the greatest sinners were granted remission of sins through baptism and grace, so infants, who have not sinned at all but have been infected with Adam’s sin through birth, should receive the remission of sins that are not his or her own but belong to another (*Ep.* 64.5.2). Cyprian saw further justification for infant baptism in his observation that “immediately at the first moment of their birth, weeping and wailing, they [infants] are able to do nothing except beg” for the sacrament (*Ep.* 64.6.2).

⁵²Cyprian, *Epistula ad Donatum* 3.

⁵³Cyprian, *Epistula ad Donatum* 4.

⁵⁴Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 118.

⁵⁵Cyprian, *Epistula ad Donatum* 3.

Clearly the practice of infant baptism advanced rapidly in North Africa during the first half of the third century but could not have been widespread previously since Tertullian discouraged it as a novelty. Questions about the origin of infant baptism as well as its rise and universal adoption, as reflected in Cyprian and others, cannot be answered definitively, but investigation may yield clues.

G. R. Beasley-Murray, in his thorough and systematic survey of *Baptism in the New Testament*, developed the thesis that “infant baptism originated in a capitulation to pressures exerted upon the Church both from without and from within.”⁵⁶ According to Beasley-Murray, those pressures included: “[t]he participation of children at an early age in the Greek cults (to secure for them the benefits of the sacrifices, etc.), the analogy of circumcision and the baptizing of children of proselytes in Judaism,”⁵⁷ and the increasing emphasis of the sacramental-magical element in the popular understanding of baptism. Developed through such sub-Christian or non-Christian influences, infant baptism signified “a falling away from apostolic Christianity.”⁵⁸

Even paedobaptists partially agreed to such an assessment of infant baptism. Albrecht Oepke, an advocate of infant baptism and baptismal regeneration, admitted, “From the beginning, the sacrament in Christianity is a hybrid creation: half spiritual symbolism and half primitive magic.”⁵⁹ The implication of such a statement is that this “half-primitive magic” made possible the rise of infant baptism.⁶⁰ H. J. Evander, another proponent of infant baptism, saw “no font for small children” in “Paul’s baptistery” but added that the way for paedobaptism was prepared by the influences listed above – the development of the sacramental-magical character of baptism, the influence of mystery cults, the comparison to circumcision – as well as by “the conception of the Church as the exclusive institution of salvation, into which one came through baptism and from which it was desired not to exclude the infants.”⁶¹ This final suggestion by Evander points back to Cyprian, the great champion of the exclusivity of the Church.⁶²

⁵⁶Beasley-Murray, 352.

⁵⁷Ibid., 353. See also Hans Windisch, “Zum Problem der Kindertaufe im Urchristentum,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 28 (1929): 124

⁵⁸Windisch, 142. See also Beasley-Murray, 352-3.

⁵⁹Albrecht Oepke, “Urchristentum und Kindertaufe,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 29: (1930), 100.

⁶⁰Beasley-Murray, 353.

⁶¹H. J. Evander, *Det kristna dopet, dess uppkomst och betydelse: Några synpunkter till ledning för diskussionen vid prästmötet i Lund den 20, 21 och 22 September 1938* (Lund, 1938), 92, cited by Beasley-Murray, 354.

Much of Cyprian's baptismal doctrine was hammered out on the anvil of the controversies that followed the Decian persecution.⁶³ During the persecution, many Christians had lapsed and had submitted to the worship of the Roman deities, while others merely pretended to do so by purchasing certificates of compliance. As for Cyprian, he went into exile, but, when the persecution ended with Decius' death, he returned to Carthage, where he confronted a variety of difficult issues and schisms.

The request of the lapsed to rejoin the church was met with two extreme reactions. One party, led by some confessors who had resisted the persecution and survived, desired to forgive the lapsed and readmit them to the church with no penance other than renewed declarations of allegiance to Christ. A group of presbyters who had opposed Cyprian's election as bishop joined this community. Another party, which was more rigorous and resisted allowing the lapsed to return to the church, was led by Novatian, a Roman presbyter and rival of Cornelius, bishop of Rome.⁶⁴ Although Novatianism began in Rome, it spread to North Africa through missionaries, who established a competing church (*Ep.* 59.9.2).⁶⁵

Cyprian, as bishop of Carthage and leader of the Catholic Church in North Africa, opposed both the laxist and rigorist churches. In his treatise *De Lapsis*, he counseled penance and readmission for those who had purchased certificates but had not actually worshiped the Roman deities and for those who had apostatized only after severe tortures. Those who had fallen voluntarily had violated their "oath of allegiance to Christ (*Christi sacramentum*)" (*Laps.* 7), and, therefore, he required them to do penance throughout their lifetimes and allowed restoration only on their deathbeds. Furthermore, lapsed clergy were to be deposed.⁶⁶

⁶²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 263-4.

⁶³When Decius instigated the persecution of the church in 250, Cyprian had been bishop of Carthage scarcely a year or two. The imperial policy required every person to worship the ancient Roman gods through a libation, burning incense, and eating sacrificial meats. Those who complied received a certificate. Among those who refused, some were imprisoned; some were deprived of the necessities of life; some were tortured. Under such suffering, some died, and others recanted and offered the required evidences of worship. Because Christian bishops were targeted especially, Cyprian decided that his duty was to flee into exile, from which he could direct his church through secret correspondence during the crisis. J. Patout Burns, Jr., *Cyprian the Bishop* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-2; González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 245. See also Cyprian, *Ep.* 20.

⁶⁴Justo González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984), 88-90.

⁶⁵Burns, 100.

⁶⁶Roy Joseph Deferrari, introduction to *On the Lapsed*, in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, 56; González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 246.

Although this treatise and the Council of Carthage of 251, which followed its recommendations, settled the controversy for the Catholic Church, the schismatic churches continued to coexist.⁶⁷ In response to such divisions, Cyprian issued his treatise *De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate*. One aspect of ecclesiastical unity is baptism, which Cyprian calls the sacrament of unity (*sacramentum unitatis*), citing “the blessed Apostle Paul”: “One body and one Spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God” (Eph. 4:4-6, cited in *Unit.* 4). In contrast, the false baptism of the schismatics divides:

Although there cannot be another baptism except the one, they suppose that they are able to baptize; although they have forsaken the font of life, they promise the grace of life-giving and saving water. There people are not cleansed but instead are soiled, nor are their sins purged but, on the contrary, are heaped higher. That birth begets offspring not for God but for the devil. Being born through a falsehood they do not receive the promises of truth; begotten from faithlessness they lose the grace of faith. They cannot come to the gift of peace who have violated the peace of the Lord by the insanity of discord (*Unit.* 11). In a summary, Cyprian asserted that the unity of the church comes from the divine sacraments, which cannot be broken or separated (*Unit.* 6).

Along with Cyprian’s insistence on the unity of baptism, a new controversy developed among Catholics concerning the validity of baptism in schismatic churches. Tertullian, also citing Eph. 4:4-6, had already condemned heretical baptism (*Bapt.* 15.1-2), as had a council held in Carthage about 230 and led by Agrippinus, who was the bishop at that time (*Ep.* 71.4.1).⁶⁸ Neither Tertullian nor Agrippinus’ Council would accept a candidate baptized in a heretical community into the Catholic Church without rebaptism,⁶⁹ although that term was not used because heretical baptism was no baptism at all.⁷⁰ To some, however, schismatic baptism did not seem to be the same error, since it was conducted by those who shared the same faith and who themselves had been baptized by the same ritual (*Ep.* 70.1).⁷¹ The questions, then, involved the method and purpose of instatement and the status of the baptismal candidate: imposition of hands upon penitents to restore them to

⁶⁷González, *The Story of Christianity*, 89.

⁶⁸Graeme W. Clarke, ed., *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, vol. 4, *Letters 37-82*, vol. 47, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas Comerford Lawler (New York: Newman Press, 1989), 196-8; Burns, 102-3.

⁶⁹ Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Work* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1897), 335-6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁷¹Burns, 103.

membership in the true church; imposition of hands upon previously baptized candidates to confer the Holy Spirit; or the full ritual of baptism upon newly converted catechumens.⁷²

In response to the controversy, Cyprian argued that only the bishops who had succeeded the apostles had the power, handed down from Christ, to sanctify the baptismal waters (*Ep.* 70.1.3), to consecrate the post-baptismal chrism, and to make holy those who come to them to be baptized (*Ep.* 70.2.2-3).⁷³ Furthermore, he was appalled that his fellow bishops had failed to defend the exclusivity of their authority, since only apostolic bishops with the power to forgive could baptize (*Ep.* 69.10.2; 70.3). Recognition of rival bishops' baptism would acknowledge another source of the authority to forgive, such as the patronage of confessors, and would contradict Cyprian's claim that "there is no salvation outside the Church" (*Ep.* 73.21.2).⁷⁴

In his exposition of the rebaptism controversy, J. Patout Burns outlined two stages: "the first involved a clarification of the practice and the reasons for applying it; the second brought sharp conflict over requiring or even allowing it. The first remained largely within Africa and must have focused primarily on the reception of laxists. The second introduced a debate over Novatian and entailed a bitter dispute with the bishop of Rome over the power of schismatics to perform sacred functions."⁷⁵ The Roman Bishop Stephen insisted that his policy followed the apostolic tradition of the church to receive into communion any heretics, including schismatics, with the imposition of hands only, without the necessity of baptism (*Ep.* 74.1.2). The conflict between Stephen and Cyprian threatened the communion between the Roman and African churches (*Ep.* 74.8.2; 75.25.1-4) and lasted until Stephen's death, which was followed by Cyprian's martyrdom the next year.⁷⁶

Opposition to Cyprian's policy of rebaptism, however, did not come only from across the sea but also from within his own country. An anonymous treatise *De Rebaptismate* was written, most likely by a Numidian or Mauretanian bishop,⁷⁷ and circulated early in the dispute, probably during its first phase before Stephen entered the fray.⁷⁸ Evidently aiming at

⁷²Ibid., 102.

⁷³Clarke, 192.

⁷⁴Burns, 103-4.

⁷⁵Ibid., 104.

⁷⁶Ibid., 10.

⁷⁷Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian*, Patristic Monograph Series, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), 305-6 n. 5; Benson, 393-4. Translations of quotations from *On Rebaptism* are based on the text in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 3.

⁷⁸Benson, 392, 398-9, suggested that this treatise was sent to Cyprian along with a letter from Jubaian (*Ep.* 73.4.1). Clarke, 219, 223, posited May/June 256 as a date for Cyprian's response to Jubaian but doubted that the treatise mentioned was *De Rebaptismate*.

Cyprian, the author described his target as “one man” who was “proclaimed vaingloriously among certain unstable men to be of great wisdom and steadfastness” but who was instead “endowed with the stupidity of heretics” (*Rebapt.* 1). Then the author began the treatise with the argument that rebaptism violated tradition and “ought not . . . to be inflicted shamelessly like a blot on the Mother Church” (*Rebapt.* 1).

According to the author, baptism of water could be effective simply when administered in the name of Jesus (*Rebapt.* 6) and would not depend upon the moral character of the baptizer, who could be a heretic or a schismatic (*Rebapt.* 6-7, 10), if the person baptized later came to the true faith and received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the bishop’s hands (*Rebapt.* 6). In such a case, repetition of baptism would bring dishonor to Jesus and his name (*Rebapt.* 10). Thus, the author placed the locus of salvation in the imposition of the bishop’s hands, which conferred the Holy Spirit (*Rebapt.* 4-6). However, baptism alone, when administered in the unity of the church, could be sufficient in cases where the baptizand died before confirmation because, in such a case, Christ himself would stand in the bishop’s stead to confer the Spirit (*Rebapt.* 3-5). Therefore, the author of this treatise disagreed with Cyprian on the necessity of rebaptizing a heretic or schismatic, but they both agreed on the necessity of the sacraments of baptism and laying on of hands.⁷⁹

The controversies over rebaptism developed as a result of the sacramentalism of third-century North Africa. The insistence that salvific grace was conferred by a sacrament moved the soteriological focus from the faith of the convert to the accompanying rituals and ultimately, in the case of Cyprian, to the ecclesiastical organization. He insisted that “the church is one” (*Ep.* 69.2.1) and that only those who are baptized within the one Catholic Church can receive life and sanctification from the water (*Ep.* 69.2.3). Outside the Catholic Church, neither the baptizand can receive forgiveness based upon his or her faith alone (*Ep.* 73.4.1-2), nor does the baptizer have the power to baptize and to grant forgiveness (*Ep.* 73.7.2). The central concern in Cyprian’s sacramental theology, therefore, was not the sacrament or even the administrator but the administrator’s relationship to the Catholic Church.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

The description of the elaborate baptismal ceremony of third-century North Africa reveals rich imagery of salvation: the candidate renounces Satan and pledges allegiance to Christ; the water cleanses from sin; the triple immersion emphasizes the operation of the Trinity; the imposition of hands calls down the indwelling Spirit; the oil seals the believer; spiritual gifts are granted; the new member of the body of Christ partakes of the bread and wine of the Eucharist; and the drink of milk and honey is served to the new citizen of the Promised Land. Each ritual seems to paint a picture of the believer’s journey of faith.

⁷⁹For discussions of the anonymous treatise *On Rebaptism*, see Burns, 124-6, 128, 130; Sage, 305-8; and Benson, 390-401.

⁸⁰Sage, 304-5.

The faith represented by these signs, however, received little attention in discussions of baptism by Tertullian and Cyprian as the signs came to be regarded as sacraments that caused what they signified.⁸¹ Possible reasons for the development of sacramentalism were influences from mystery religions; beliefs about magic; misunderstanding of the physical actions of baptism by largely illiterate participants; lack of leadership in the second-century church; and, specifically in the case of infant baptism, the comparison of baptism to circumcision as an initiatory rite. The results of sacramentalism include elaboration of the baptismal ceremonies; controversies over post-baptismal sin and forgiveness; postponement of baptism; conflict in the church over rebaptism of those baptized by heretics and schismatics; and the movement away from believer's baptism to infant baptism.

Although the role of faith may have been minimized in the writings about baptism considered in this paper, the expression of faith through what became known as the second baptism, or the baptism of blood, was extolled. Tertullian made the observation that "the blood of Christians is the seed" of the church (Ap. 50.13).⁸² Cyprian himself endured the second baptism when he became the first bishop in North Africa to shed "the blood of martyrdom" (Vit. Cyp.). Each of these milites Christi, soldiers of Christ, followed in the footsteps of the early North African Christians, the Scillitan martyrs, and fulfilled his or her sacramentum, the oath of allegiance to Christ.

⁸¹Finn, 12.

⁸²This axiom proved true when the suffering of Perpetua and her companions led to the attraction of their jailer Pudens to their faith (*Pass. Pert.* 9.1, 16.4, 21.1).