

WORSHIPING

WITH THE

CHURCH

FATHERS

CHRISTOPHER

A. HALL

 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	9
<i>Introduction</i>	11
PART 1: SACRAMENTS	
1 Baptism: Entering the Worshiping Community	21
2 Eucharist: Feasting with the Worshiping Community	51
PART 2: PRAYER	
3 The Basics of Prayer	83
4 The Challenge of Unceasing Prayer	113
5 Further Coaching on Prayer	143
6 The Lord's Prayer	173
PART 3: DISCIPLINE	
7 The Transforming Call to the Desert	203
8 A Space to Draw Close to God	223
<i>Conclusion</i>	247
<i>Notes</i>	251
<i>Permission Credit Lines</i>	273
<i>Subject Index</i>	275
<i>Scripture Index</i>	279

Great is the baptism that lies before you: the ransom of captives, the forgiveness of sins, the death of sin, the regeneration of the soul, the garment of light, the holy perpetual seal, a chariot to heaven, the delight of paradise, a welcome into the kingdom, the gift of adoption.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM PROCATACHESIS 16

It is the Holy Spirit who effects with water the second birth, as a certain seed of divine generation. It is a consecration of a heavenly birth and the pledge of a promised inheritance.

NOVATIAN TREATISE CONCERNING THE TRINITY¹

Faith and baptism are two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation: faith is perfected by baptism; baptism is established by faith, and both are completed by the use of the same names. As we believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so we are baptized into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Confession leads the way and brings us to salvation; baptism follows, setting the seal on our assent.

BASIL OF CAESAREA ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

O N E

BAPTISM

Entering the
Worshiping Community

The Sacramental Mysteries

Some readers, particularly those from an evangelical background and perspective, may find themselves surprised, bewildered and perhaps troubled to discover that the church fathers thought, lived and worshiped sacramentally. That is to say, the fathers believed that God delights to use tangible, concrete, earthy means—matter itself—to communicate his grace, redemption and presence to us, elements as simple and specific as bread, wine, water and oil. Sometimes this perspective is known today as sacramental realism.

The word *sacrament* (Lat. *sacramentum*) was borrowed by Latin Christian writers such as Augustine from its common use in the Western Latin world; in a Roman context *sacramentum* was the term employed for the oath sworn by a candidate entering the military service. Because entrance into Roman military service included religious rituals and sacrifices, *sacramentum* possessed religious connotations, non-Christian though they were.²

With the passage of time Latin fathers began to use *sacramentum* in a specifically Christian sense and related its meaning to the Greek word *mysterion*.³ *Sacramentum* never lost its pagan Roman overtones, however, in

terms of obligations taken under oath. To enter the church in baptism was to accept certain clear and distinct obligations and to profess a commonly held faith.⁴ As we will see, baptism was serious business—both joyful and solemn.

Why would the church fathers embrace a sacramental worldview, a way of viewing the world that seems strange and counterintuitive, at least from an Old Testament perspective? Are we not a step away—if not closer—to the heinous sin of idolatry? Isn't the attempt to merge the divine with the material idolatry's foundation stone? One can imagine an Israelite carpenter fashioning an image out of wood or stone and quickly encountering the wrath and sarcasm of Isaiah. "To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple" (Is 40:18-20). To unite or combine the realm of the Spirit with the realm of the material, then, appears deeply troubling—both foolish and dangerous—from a biblical perspective.

So again we have to ask the question, why would the church fathers clearly and openly affirm that God has chosen to draw near to us through the medium of his own creation? There is only one safe, solid, coherent answer: Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of the eternal Word we discern the rhyme and reason of the sacraments. In the wondrous, mysterious, divine-human person nestled in the Virgin Mary's womb, we encounter the sacramental principle. The eternal Word, the Son of God, has humbly joined his nature to the human nature trustfully and lovingly offered to him by Mary. In Christ the divine and human, the immaterial and the material, the Spirit and the flesh, are married. Who would have thought that such a wonder was possible?

The incarnation, then, is the bedrock upon which all sacraments are built. The sacramental principle—God wills, indeed, delights in using tangible, earthly means to draw near to his image bearers—is grounded on the Word made flesh. John of Damascus captures this principle well:

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked. . . . I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace. Is not the thrice-precious and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter? Is not the holy and august mountain, the place of the skull, matter? Is not the life-giving and life-bearing rock, the holy tomb, the source of the resurrection, matter? Is not the ink and the all-holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and tablets and bowls are fashioned? *And, before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter?*⁵

Those grounded in the tradition of the fathers believe that to reject a sacramental worldview is to cut oneself off from the very means God has ordained for human growth and flourishing. Theophan the Recluse, a nineteenth-century Russian Christian and spiritual father of the Orthodox Church, puts it this way: to “reject” the “natural means” of the sacraments is similar to “someone who wants to cross a river by means of some spiritual power, while boats and bridges are at his disposal. Such a person will wait in vain for the power of the Spirit. And while others cross to the other side, he will be left on the riverbank, alone.” A sacrament, Theophan comments, “is like a framework that supports one’s inner attitude and ensures its stability.”⁶

Both Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa emphasize that the sacraments are indissolubly linked to “the historical economy of salvation in the events of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁷ For instance, when the fathers contemplate the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper), they interpret them through the lens of the biblical narrative from beginning to end. If God has chosen to use water in baptism to signify redemption and re-creation in Christ, it should not surprise us to find the fathers mining the Old Testament references to water for deeper redemptive, christological meaning.

The apostle Paul himself provides the pattern for this Christ-centered reading of Scripture. Paul teaches that key events in the exodus experience of Israel were themselves a kind of baptism. The food (manna) and water providentially provided for Israel in the wilderness came from Christ's presence with them. "They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:2-4).

Key figures, events and practices in the covenantal history of Israel prefigured the fulfillment of God's purposes in Christ. The type (Gk. *typos*) of the Red Sea, for instance, finds its eschatological and sacramental fulfillment in the waters of baptism as the age to come invades this present evil age. Peter links the protection of Noah and his family within the ark to the protection baptism offers. "In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pet 3:20-21).

Augustine provides a well-known definition of a sacrament: a sacrament is "a visible form of an invisible grace."⁸ Irenaeus speaks of the sacraments as "the mysterious operations of God." Chrysostom refers to them as "spiritual realities under sensory signs," grace-filled wonders that "bring to pass what they signify . . . and make visible." They are "the invisible in the visible."⁹

The sacraments of the church are not magical rites, divorced from the faith of the person receiving them. "They are like fire: if the wood is damp—that is, if the soul is passion ridden, the inner warmth does not make itself felt immediately after receptions of the sacrament."¹⁰ The sacraments' pattern and efficacy are based on faith—faith in God's actions in history on our behalf, that God in Jesus Christ is presently reigning in the midst of this present evil age. The fathers ponder God's actions in history as related in the narrative of the Bible and build their sacramental worldview on this biblical basis. Thus the sacraments are both biblical and eschatological in nature. God has invaded this present evil age in Christ, and the sacraments communicate that reality to believers. Hence, a sacrament is a lively, living

remembering of the holy Trinity's loving actions for human beings, "the bringing of the past into the present before God's (and not primarily men's) eyes, so that He may remember, act, and make his people walk forward from the covenant towards the end of the ages."¹¹ Indeed, the fathers' linking of *sacramentum* with Paul's use of *mysterion* indicates their clear awareness that "the plan of salvation eternally hidden in God," the Lord's divine secret, has now been "revealed in and by Christ."¹² This is the mystery now revealed in the "economy."

Latin writers such as Ambrose connect *sacramentum* and *mysterion* in phrases such as *sacramenta mysteriorum* and *mysteria sacramentum*. In these phrases the *sacramentum* designates what we can see, for instance bread and wine, while the *mysterion* is the interior aspect of the sacrament, the spiritual reality the sacrament is conveying and communicating. "The *sacramenta* introduce us to the *mysteria* and, in turn, the *mysteria* make us understand the outer sign, the *sacramenta*." One reality functions as "a sign of another," an "efficacious sign" which wondrously, mysteriously, sacramentally communicates what it signifies.¹³ There is "a force in the sacrament," a power communicated by the Holy Spirit, so that the sacrament actually "produces the signified effect."¹⁴

TWO KEY SACRAMENTS: BAPTISM AND THE EUCHARIST

In the first two chapters of this book, I want to focus on the fathers' fruitful reflection and teaching on two key sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. The fathers view baptism as the door through which one enters the church and receives the life of salvation. It is the great initiatory rite of the church. In turn, it is the Eucharist that early Christians viewed as "a key component in the continued development of the believer and a central element in Christian worship."¹⁵ Boris Bobrinsky comments on the "bipolarity of baptism and the Eucharist. . . . This bipolarity . . . signifies in particular that every baptism tends toward the Eucharist as to its fullness, and that every Eucharist finds its source in baptism, as in the entrance door of the world to the Church."¹⁶

Both baptism and the Eucharist are concrete, grace-filled, earthly means God employs to communicate central themes of the gospel narrative and

the overarching biblical story to the mind and body of a Christian. Henry Chadwick speaks of Christians gathering together on the pattern of the Jewish synagogue, but to celebrate a new covenant in continuity with the old. In “water, bread, and wine” the church possessed “covenant signs . . . means of divine grace and . . . ordered rites which provide both form and vitality to the disorder of human life.”¹⁷ In early Christian worship, believers communed with God through “a pattern of symbolic words and actions through which the presence of the Lord” was “expressed.”¹⁸

We should not overlook the ethical dimension of church’s sacramental life. To be baptized and to share in the Eucharist entailed a definite “yes” to Christ and “no” to sin. In a word, the renunciations involved in baptism, “dramatically reinforced by exorcism, affected people’s jobs.”¹⁹ For the baptized, certain activities and vocations were off limits.

A married man who also had a concubine or mistress or slept with his slave-girls had to change his ways. A priest serving idols could not so continue. (It is instructive that there were applications from people employed in this way.) Actors and actresses, who in antiquity were mostly slaves, or professional gladiators had to find different work, raising inevitable questions about trying to finance emancipation, perhaps with help from the church chest. In general the public entertainments industry was looked on with aversion. Considerable qualms attached to those whose duty, as soldiers or as prison gaolers, involved them in taking human life, and the same held good for provincial governors, whose duties constantly required attendance at idolatrous ceremonies, not to mention ordering torture and execution of criminals. Sufficient evidence of the bribery of judges survives to make it certain that this was a widespread problem, and especially offensive when used to bring about a death sentence. (Capital punishment was not approved by Christians.) The list of those before whom the Church erected barriers is not only a sign of the Christians’ determination to be a society of purged saints rather than a school for sinners continuing in unacceptable positions but also a testimony to the wide cross-section of society attracted by the gospel.²⁰

A closer look at an ancient Christian worship service may well prove helpful as we explore the fathers' thoughts on baptism and the Eucharist.

EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP SERVICES

Baptism always occurred in the context of the church's worship. Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian apologist, describes in some detail the worship service that followed the initiatory rite of baptism. Justin writes:

We all assemble on the day of the sun [Sunday] because that is the first day, the day on which God drew matter out of darkness and created the world. It is also the day on which Christ our Savior rose from the dead. . . . We pray in common, for ourselves and for everyone . . . to attain to the knowledge of truth and grace . . . to keep the commandments . . . When the prayers are over we give one another the kiss of peace. Next, bread and a cup of wine mixed with water are brought to the president of the assembly of the brothers. He takes them, praises and glorifies the Father of the universe in the name of the Son and Holy Spirit, then he utters a long eucharistic prayer as a thanksgiving for having been judged worthy of these blessings. When he has finished the intercessions and the eucharistic prayer all the people exclaim *Amen*. *Amen* is the Hebrew word meaning "so be it." When the president has finished the thanksgiving and all the people have responded, the ministers whom we call deacons distribute the consecrated bread and wine to all who are present and they take some to those who are absent.²¹

Justin points out a number of interesting aspects of early Christian worship, information we can supplement from other early Christian writers such as Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria.

Worship occurred on the first day of the week, the "Sun's Day" from a Roman perspective. The early Christian community felt free to utilize the Roman calendar, substituting Christian meanings for pagan ones. Yes, the Romans may consider the first day of the week to be the Sun's Day, but for Christians this was the day of Christ's resurrection, when the light

of the world broke forth from the tomb.

Either the writings of the apostles or the prophets were read to the gathered community. Here we have an indication that by the middle of the second century A.D. early Christians acknowledged and understood that texts from the hands of the apostles were authoritative for the church and should be read in the context of worship. Justin also mentions “the prophets,” evidence of the high regard in which the early Christians held the Hebrew Scriptures.

The “president” of the assembly would comment in an exhortatory style on the passages read, delivering a sermon that was practical in nature, biblically based and designed to elicit concrete change in the lives of those listening. Tertullian supplements the information Justin provides, referring to “elders” who presided over the church and who received their position because of their proven character. He also mentions the reading of “sacred texts” in worship and sermons that contained instruction, exhortation and “divine censures.”²²

Clement of Alexandria characterizes the early Christian teacher as “not enslaved with fear but . . . true in word, patient in labor, unwilling to lie in spoken word; thus he always accomplishes what is without sin, since a lie—inasmuch as it is spoken with a certain deceit—is not an empty word but works evil.”²³ Truth in word and life were the fundamental prerequisite for those who would teach the gathered community.

Desert monastic teaching reinforces Clement’s point. Amma Syncletica warns, “It is dangerous for one to teach who has not been trained in the practical life. It is like someone who has an unsound house and receives guests; he will cause harm by the collapse of the dwelling. In the same way, those who have not first built themselves up destroy those who come to them. For they may summon them to salvation by their words, but by their evil conduct they injure even more those who follow them.”²⁴

Group prayer followed the president’s exhortation. It is difficult to know with certainty the exact nature of this group prayer. Was it spontaneous, similar to the relatively unstructured prayer often offered, for instance, in evangelical circles? Or was communal prayer more liturgical in nature? Tertullian lists a number of specific emphases in the church’s prayers:

prayer for government officials such as the emperor; prayer for the divine preservation and maintenance of civil order; and prayer for the delay of God's judgment on the world.²⁵

In all likelihood, the singing of hymns accompanied the prayers of the church. In his *First Apology* Justin comments that "We praise [the Maker of the universe] as much as we are able by the word of prayer and thanksgiving for all the things with which we are supplied . . . being thankful in word, [we] send up to him honors and hymns for our creation, all the means of health, the various qualities of the different classes of things, the changes of the seasons, while making petitions for our coming into existence again in incorruption by reason of faith in him."²⁶

Ancient Christian worship displays a charismatic side. Tertullian specifically mentions a "sister in the congregation" who possessed "gifts of revelation." She would experience these revelations "by ecstasy in the Spirit during the regular services of the Lord's day in the church." Visions could also occur at almost any other time in the service.²⁷

The Eucharist was celebrated on a weekly basis, with the serving of both bread and a mixture of wine and water. The church's understanding of the Eucharist was "realistic" in the sense that Christians believed the wine and bread—once consecrated—were Christ's body and blood, though the "how" of this mystery for the most part was left alone. In other places in his writings Justin describes the Eucharist as both a sacrifice and as a memorial of Christ's body and blood.²⁸

The consecrated Eucharist was taken to believers unable to attend the weekly assembly, demonstrating the importance of the Eucharist to early Christians. This practice continues today in the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The early church was extremely concerned that money be handled wisely and honestly. An offering was collected weekly, with "those who have means" freely choosing the amount they would give, though all members were expected to give to the best of their ability. Justin Martyr comments: "For no one is compelled, but he contributes voluntarily."²⁹ This money was then distributed to orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, foreigners and anyone else in need of assistance.

Nicholas Wolterstorff comments on the “nicely balanced bifocal service” of the early church between the preached word and the sacraments, a balance he feels Protestants have had a hard time maintaining. In Reformed and evangelical circles it is the weekly preaching of the Word that is prominent, with the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper more often celebrated on a monthly or quarterly basis. “The Reformed service became a preaching service—except for those four times a year when it was a Lord’s Supper service. *Whereas the medievals tilted Justin’s [Martyr’s] nicely balanced bifocal service way over toward the Eucharist, the Reformed now tilt it almost all the way toward the sermon.*”³⁰

THE WATER OF BAPTISM

Apart from early Gnostics, ancient Christians affirmed and celebrated the marvelous ability of matter to bear and communicate spiritual life. Clement of Alexandria observes how easily milk can be blended with water. Similarly, the milk of the Word blends naturally with the water used in baptism. They have a natural affinity for one another that God has ordained and delights in.³¹

Early Christian teachers acknowledge that a sacramental understanding of baptism may initially be strange and improbable for some. The act of baptism appears too simple and obvious to convey such mysterious import. Its very simplicity, Tertullian believed, was a stumbling block for the human mind. Divine works should be grand, complex and mysterious. Or so it would seem. “How foolish and impossible it is to be formed anew by water!” Tertullian exclaims. How could this “material substance” merit “a position of such high dignity?”³² Yet in the simplicity of baptism a grand effect is promised and produced by the Spirit of God, though to the naked eye all that *appears* to occur in baptism is a simple dipping in water “amid the utterance of some few words.”

Tertullian sees in baptism a perfect example of what Paul means when he speaks of God confounding the wisdom of the world with divine foolishness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). “For if God is wise and powerful”—self-evident truths for Tertullian—“it is with good reason that He lays the material causes of His own operation in the contraries of wisdom and of power, that is, in

foolishness and impossibility.”³³ Though it seems impossible for God to use something as humble and common as water in his saving acts, this is exactly what God has done and continues to do. God loves to use matter in remarkable, unexpected ways. As we have seen, the incarnation provides the fundamental paradigm for the sacramental principle.

Ambrose, writing in the fourth century A.D., helpfully explains and develops the sacramental principle illustrated in baptism. “What did you see?” Ambrose asks those who have experienced baptism. “Water, to be sure, but not only that.” In baptism, the invisible Spirit communicates and empowers by means of the visible, divinity manifesting its presence and action through matter and in turn through matter leading the believer to adore invisible realities. Ambrose turns to Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4 and Romans 1 to illustrate the sacramental principle at work in baptism. “The first thing that the Apostle taught you was that we must not contemplate ‘what is visible but what is invisible, since what is visible is temporal, whereas what is invisible is eternal’ (2 Cor. 4:18). And elsewhere you read that, ‘since the creation of the world, the invisible things of God are understood by way of the things that have been made. His eternal power and also his divinity’ (Rom 1:20) are known through his works.” Jesus himself taught that “If you do not believe me, at least believe my works” (see Jn 10:38).³⁴

Thus, on the basis of the sacramental principle, Ambrose beckons the newly baptized to believe in the efficacy of what they cannot see. Though they have seen what *appeared* to be water, Ambrose calls believers to trust “that the Deity is present there. Do you believe in his working but not in his presence? Where would his working come from were it not preceded beforehand by his presence?”³⁵

As we explore the church fathers’ thoughts and practices concerning baptism, it should not surprise us if they find multiple meanings in baptism and numerous references to baptism in both the Old and New Testaments. It bears repeating that the fathers read the entire biblical narrative in light of its fulfillment in Christ and found predictions and types of Christ’s person, work and sacraments throughout Scripture.

Think, for instance, of the water used in baptism.³⁶ We have our first references to water in the book of Genesis within the context of creation,

judgment and redemption. Tertullian delights in mining these texts for information and illumination regarding baptism. In Genesis 1 water is present on the earth's "unshaped" surface, before God furnished the earth with its unique characteristics. Water is "ancient," older than almost every other aspect of the earth as created by God.³⁷

Water is not only ancient but honorable. It possesses a unique "dignity," for it was on water that the Spirit rested (Gen 1:2), a biblical clue that water was "more pleasing" to the Spirit "than all the other then existing elements." It "alone . . . supplied a worthy vehicle to God."³⁸

Water supplies life. It is to the "waters" that God gives the command "to bring forth . . . living creatures" (see Gen 1:20 NRSV). Should it surprise us that writers such as Tertullian view the waters of baptism, then, as life-giving? The pattern fits. Creation through water—re-creation in baptism through water. The links in Tertullian's hermeneutical chain are unmistakably coupled to the sacramental principle. Material substance, in this case water, the very substance that "governs terrestrial life," also acts as a creative agent "in the celestial."³⁹

Tertullian is amazed at how often water is mentioned in the scriptural narratives as a sign of the judgment of sin, cleansing from sin and deliverance from its power. At Christ's baptism the Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. This dove draws Tertullian's mind to the time of Noah and the judgment of the flood (Gen 8:8-12; cf. 1 Pet 3:20-21). The flood's waters in the days of Noah "purged" the earth of sin—a baptism of sorts in Tertullian's thinking. So the return of a dove to the ark "announced to the world the assuagement of divine wrath, when she had been sent out of the ark and returned with the olive branch." In like manner, according to what Tertullian calls the "law of heavenly effect," the dove of the Holy Spirit descends to the earth of human flesh as the believer rises from the baptismal font, "bringing us the peace of God, sent out from the heavens," the celestial home of the church, typified by Noah's ark itself.⁴⁰

Other fathers saw Israel's crossing of the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua as a type of baptism; just as Israel spent many years in the wilderness traveling toward the land promised to Abraham, so it was not uncommon for catechumens (those being instructed for baptism) to receive up to three

years of instruction before their baptism. The crossing of the Jordan pointed to the true “completion of the catechumenate by the mystery of baptism.”⁴¹

Other redemptive deliverances through water come to Tertullian’s mind as he ruminates on Scripture. At the waters of the Red Sea, Israel is delivered from Pharaoh. Similarly, the waters of baptism defeat the world and the devil.⁴² By the power of God, Moses’ wooden staff, a “tree” of sorts, removed the bitterness from the waters of Marah and restored them to their “native grace of ‘sweetness’” (see Ex 15:24-25). Likewise, Christ’s tree—the cross—has healed “the veins of envenomed and bitter nature into the all-saving waters of baptism. This is the water that flowed continuously down for the people from the ‘accompanying rock,’” identified by Paul as Christ (1 Cor 10:4).⁴³

Tertullian is especially struck by how often water is connected with key events from Christ’s own life. Christ is baptized in water by John (Mt 3:13-17), changes water into wine at a wedding at Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-11), invites all who are thirsty to drink of the living water he offers (Jn 7:37-38), commends anyone who is willing to offer a cup of cold water to a disciple in need (Mt 10:42), recovers his strength at a Samaritan well (Jn 4:6), walks on water (Mt 14:25) and washes the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:1-12).

In addition, at least two key events of Christ’s passion concern water: Pilate washes his hands with water after surrendering Christ to the cross (Mt 27:24), and blood and water pour from Christ’s pierced side (Jn 19:34). “How many,” Tertullian exclaims, “are the pleas of nature, how many the privileges of grace, how many the solemnities of discipline, the figures, the preparations, the prayers, which have ordained the sanctity of water?”⁴⁴

The blood and water that flowed from Christ’s wounded side drew the attention of many church fathers and were occasionally connected in patristic thinking to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve’s creation by God and subsequent fall into sin. Many church fathers view the church, composed of all who are baptized into Christ, as the new Eve. The first Eve, created from Adam’s rib, sinned. The second Eve—the church—is created from Christ’s pierced side, from the water (baptism) and blood (the Eucharist) that flowed from Christ’s body.⁴⁵ Origen comments: “For the thirsty he sends a spring of living water from the wound which the spear opened in his side. . . . From

the wound in Christ's side has come forth the Church, and he has made her his Bride."⁴⁶

A cluster of significant themes express the fathers' views on baptism and baptism's implications for Christian faith and living, some reflected in Tertullian's treatise.

In baptism we die with Christ and are resurrected with Christ. An ancient prayer of the church captures well the mystery of our death and resurrection with Christ. As the rite of baptism begins, the presiding priest prays that the water to be used in the baptism be sanctified, or set apart, by the Holy Spirit to bring *both death and life*: "Sanctify this water, that those who are baptized in it may be crucified with Christ, die with him, be buried with him, and rise again through adoption."⁴⁷ Basil writes: "How then do we enter into the likeness of his death? By being buried with him in baptism. There is only one death and only one resurrection, of which baptism is the figure . . . the water being the likeness of death and the Spirit imparting life."⁴⁸

Baptism's waters are pictured by the fathers as a means of capital punishment, a tomb, and a womb; the transformation from tomb to womb is solely based on Christ's resurrection.⁴⁹ First, we must die and be buried. Yet death is not the last word. Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the primeval waters in the Genesis account of creation, birthing life and order out of chaos, so the Holy Spirit hovers over the waters of baptism, impregnating them with divine, "maternal" life. This time the Spirit's work is "re-creation."⁵⁰ As Basil expresses it, the sanctified, sacramental water is infused with life by the Spirit, renewing the lives of the baptized to "the state of original life." In baptism, the great story of God's purposes for creation is renewed for each new Christian. It is in baptism, and the union with Christ that baptism offers, that the ancient story of sin and death ends and God's new story of re-creation is birthed sacramentally as the believer is joined to Christ in his death and resurrection.⁵¹

Tertullian is less concerned about the type of water used in baptism—cold, running, calm, warm—than the key role the Holy Spirit plays in the sacrament of baptism.⁵² It was the Holy Spirit, rather than the water itself, who created the water's "sacramental power of sanctification." "It makes no

difference whether a man is washed in a sea or a pool, a stream or a fountain, a lake or a trough. . . . All waters . . . attain the sacramental power of sanctification. For the Spirit immediately supervenes from the heavens and rests over the waters, sanctifying them through Himself. And being thus sanctified, they acquire at the same time the power of sanctifying."⁵³

The Spirit touches the created matter of water and divine life is communicated to it. In turn, as a person enters into the waters of baptism, life is communicated to her. Why? How? Because Father, Son and Holy Spirit have promised to be present sacramentally in this particular place at this particular time. "For if 'in the mouth of three witnesses every word shall stand' [cf. Dt. 19:15, Matt. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:1]—while, through the benediction, we have the same (three) as witnesses of our faith whom we have as sureties of our salvation too—how much more does the number of the divine names suffice for the assurance similarly of our hope!"⁵⁴

The person choosing to be baptized is openly, publicly trusting in God's promise. Though it is incredible—indeed, seemingly impossible—that something as simple and unpretentious as words of invocation over water could produce such a remarkable effect as salvation, Tertullian delights in the mystery and wonder of the connection between the spiritual and the material. Tertullian is not thinking magically, as though it is simply the incantation of words that produces the sacramental nature of the water. No, he is referring to God's promise and commitment to save and deliver those who have faith that God's Spirit has sanctified baptism's water for a special purpose and promised to meet them there, in this particular substance and place.

The same sacramental principle applies to other "matter" used in the rite of baptism. Consider, for example, the ointment or oil used to anoint the newly baptized. Once the presence and action of the Holy Spirit have been invoked over this ointment, its nature changes. Cyril of Jerusalem sees the sacramental principle at work in this change.

Beware of supposing that this is merely ointment. For as the bread of the Eucharist, after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is no longer simply bread, but the Body of Christ; so also this holy ointment is no

longer merely ointment, not what one might call ordinary ointment, after the invocation; it is the gift of Christ, and by the presence of the Holy Spirit it conveys the power of his divinity. It is applied symbolically to the forehead and the other organs of sense; and while the body is anointed with the visible ointment, the soul is sanctified by the holy and life-giving Spirit.⁵⁵

In his discussion of the chrism, or anointing that follows baptism, Tertullian emphasizes the connection between actions under the old covenant and the sacramental realities of the new covenant. He points to the similarity between the chrism and the anointing of priests with oil under the old covenant. In both cases matter is set apart for a special spiritual purpose, communicating rather than simply symbolizing a spiritual reality. “When we come from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction [i.e., oil]. This practice comes from the old discipline, where on entering the priesthood, men used to be anointed with oil from a horn. . . . In our case, the oil runs physically, but it profits us spiritually. It is similar to the act of baptism itself, which is also physical—in that we are plunged in water. Yet, its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.”⁵⁶

Not only does anointing remind Tertullian of previous old covenant practices, but the subsequent laying on of hands and prayers of the baptismal service remind Tertullian of key old covenant types and “sacramental” rites that pointed to Christ and find their fulfillment in him. Jacob, for example, laid his hands on the heads of both Ephraim and Manasseh as he blessed them. When Jacob did so, though, he crossed his arms (Gen 48:12-14). Tertullian believes the Old Testament narrative draws the discerning reader to think of Christ, “with his hands laid on them and interchanged, and indeed so transversely slanted one over the other, that, by delineating Christ, they even portended the future benediction of Christ.”⁵⁷

Tertullian realizes that a perceptive reader will wonder about the situation of believers who lived before the time of Christ. People such as Abraham surely believed in the promises of God under the old covenant and yet were never baptized. What of folk such as Abraham? Does Abraham’s great

faith—though Abraham was never baptized—undercut the importance of baptism in the church? Tertullian responds with a strong no, and lays out a fundamental principle for understanding the relationship between events, people and principles of the old covenant and those present and operative under the new. He writes, “in all cases it is the later things that have a conclusive force, and the subsequent that prevail over the antecedent.”⁵⁸

Before the “passion and resurrection” of Christ believers such as Abraham were saved through the exercise of “bare faith.” In light of Christ’s coming, however, “faith has been enlarged.” Christian faith, a faith in continuity with Abraham’s faith in the promises of God to him, “believes in [Christ’s] nativity, passion, and resurrection.” The birth, ministry, cross and resurrection of Christ have amplified, as it were, the sacrament. “The sealing act of baptism,” has become, in Tertullian’s understanding, “the clothing, in some sense, of the faith that before was bare.”⁵⁹ The connection between baptism, the cross and the resurrection of Christ in patristic thought surely deserves a closer look on our part.

BAPTISM, THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION

Very early Christian writings link trust in the cross of Christ to the act of baptism. The *Epistle of Barnabas* specifically investigates “whether the Lord took care to foreshadow the water and the cross.” Among other Scriptures, this ancient epistle points to Psalm 1.⁶⁰

The psalmist speaks of “a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither” (Ps 1:3). Here, Barnabas believes, we encounter a metaphor of baptism and the cross. “Notice how he pointed out the water and the cross together. For this is what he means: blessed are those who, having set their hope on the cross, descended into the water, because he speaks of the reward ‘in its season’; at that time, he means, I will repay. But for now what does he say? ‘The leaves will not wither.’ By this he means that every word that comes forth from your mouth in faith and love will bring conversion and hope to many.”⁶¹ In what may be a veiled reference to Ezekiel 47:1-12, Barnabas mentions “a river flowing on the right hand, and beautiful trees were rising from it, and whoever eats from them will live forever.’ By this he means that while we descend into the

water laden with sins and dirt, we rise up bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus in our spirits."⁶²

Perhaps some readers are rolling their eyes over Barnabas's imaginative, christological interpretation. A tree is a tree. Period. A river is a river. We can gain spiritual insight from Psalm 1 without engaging in these hermeneutical flights of fancy. Fine. A fair enough response, though perhaps a bit heated. These readers should understand, though, that their point of view, one that would limit the meaning of Psalm 1 or other Old Testament literature to its own age—with applications then made to a twenty-first century context—is not the majority view in the history of biblical interpretation.

Patrick Henry Reardon, an Orthodox pastor of All Saints Antiochian Orthodox Church in Chicago, well represents the ancient perspective in a modern context. For instance, Psalm 1 begins with "Blessed is the man . . . [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD" (Ps 1:1-2). Is this reference to a "man" in the time of David limited only to those living in David's time—perhaps with an application we can make to our own—or might the text be referring to a greater man, one even greater than David?

Reardon observes that the words translated "man" in Psalm 1—the Hebrew *ʾîš*, Greek *anēr*, and Latin *vir*—are all "emphatically masculine," singular nouns. They have a deeper significance than simply "human being." "The 'man' of reference here is a particular man. According to the Fathers of the Church, he is the one mediator between God and man, the Man Jesus Christ. The Law of the Lord, which is to be our delight and meditation day and night, finds its meaning only in Him. Christ is the one who fulfills it, and He is the key to its understanding."⁶³ Here we have an interpretation that respects the Old Testament itself while also interpreting the Hebrew Scripture through the culmination and consummation of the biblical narrative in Jesus Christ. Reardon, like the church fathers, is right to see Psalms, and the Old Testament as a whole, as chock full of references to Christ's person and work, texts often highlighting old covenant textual clues to the cross and resurrection.

Ignatius of Antioch speaks movingly of the cross in his letter to the Ephesians and portrays the waters of baptism as communicating to the believer the cleansing effect of Christ's death. The Ephesians, Ignatius writes,

have received “new life through the blood of God.”⁶⁴ They are “stones of a temple, prepared beforehand for the building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit; your faith is what lifts you up, and love is the way that leads up to God.”⁶⁵

In a manner similar to what we have already seen in Tertullian, Ignatius acknowledges the seeming foolishness of the cross and the faith that believes the cross’s benefits are communicated to the believer in baptism. “My spirit is a humble sacrifice for the cross, which is a stumbling block to unbelievers, but salvation and eternal life to us. ‘Where is the wise? Where is the debater?’ (cf. 1 Cor 1:20) Where is the boasting of those who are thought to be intelligent? For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit. *He was born and baptized in order that by his suffering he might cleanse the water.*”⁶⁶

If we fast-forward to the fourth century, we find fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa speaking of the “descent into the water and the threefold immersion” as imitating Christ’s resurrection. Gregory teaches that “the method of our salvation became effectual not so much as a result of instruction . . . as by means of the flesh which [Christ] assumed . . . therefore it was necessary that *a means should be devised by which there should be in what is done by the follower some kinship and likeness to the leader.*” Since Christ died and was buried for three days, something “resembling this must be devised for us.”⁶⁷ Gregory then draws a number of parallels between Christ’s death and resurrection and the experience of Christ’s followers in baptism:

Christ died and was buried. Likewise, “the imitation of death on our part is represented in water, the neighboring element.”⁶⁸

Christ was resurrected on the third day. “So every one who is linked to him in virtue of his bodily nature and fixes his eyes on the same victory (and by this I mean the consummation, which is life) has water poured upon him, instead of earth, and thus, by submitting to this element three times, represents the grace of resurrection attained after three days.”⁶⁹

In Christ’s death and resurrection human nature has been restored and recreated. Although Christ’s disciples do not experience “exact and complete imi-

tation” of Christ in their human nature, they do receive “as much as” their human nature “is able, while the remainder is reserved for the time to come.” How does baptism represent this “annihilation of wickedness”? “By the image of dying presented by the water. It is not, however, a complete annihilation; but a kind of breach in the continuity of evil, two things concurring to effect the removal of wickedness—the repentance of the offender and the imitation of the death of Christ.”⁷⁰

Gregory’s mention of the importance of repentance in connection with baptism emphasizes a link made by patristic writers from the apostolic fathers down to Gregory’s life in the fourth century.

FAITH, REPENTANCE AND BAPTISM

The following patristic voices are one in their insistence that baptism means nothing if not accompanied by heartfelt faith and repentance.

Justin Martyr refers to baptism as a “laver of repentance and knowledge of God,” a rite “ordained on account of the transgression of God’s people.” Personal repentance and faith naturally lead to baptism, a baptism that Justin contrasts with Jewish baptisms or cleansings. Christian baptism is “alone able to purify those who have repented.” It is “the water of life.” Jewish cleansings, by contrast, can only clean the body. “For what is the use of that baptism that cleanses the flesh and body alone? Baptize the soul from wrath and from covetousness, from envy, and from hatred; and, lo! The body is pure.”⁷¹ Repentance, faith, baptism and internal change are inextricably connected for Justin.

Clement of Alexandria weaves together faith, repentance, cleansing in baptism’s waters, illumination from the Holy Spirit and eschatological hope in an insightful and lively passage from *The Instructor*. He writes of sleepers who have “shaken off sleep and suddenly become all awake within.” It was as though a “film” covered the eyes of these sleepy souls. In baptism, “having wiped off the sins that obscure the light of the Divine Spirit,” “the eye of the spirit” has been freed and is now “unimpeded and full of light, by which alone we contemplate the Divine, the Holy Spirit flowing down to us from above.”⁷²

In baptism, through the Spirit, “an eternal adjustment of the vision” has

occurred, with a corresponding refocusing of loves. The believer now loves what is lovable and is drawn to the holy: “like loves like; and that which is holy, loves that from which holiness proceeds.”⁷³ Faith exercised or “generated” in time receives the “promise.” “If, then, *those who have believed* have life, what remains beyond the possession of eternal life? *Nothing is wanting to faith*, as it is perfect and complete in itself. . . . *Faith is not lame in any respect.*”⁷⁴ Through faith—again, expressed and exercised in baptism—we have “in anticipation grasped . . . that which is future.” “And where faith is, there is the promise; and the consummation of the promise is rest.”⁷⁵

Knowledge of God, Clement writes, replaces ignorance. The “bonds” of ignorance “are with all speed loosened by *human faith and divine grace*, our transgressions being taken away by the one . . . medicine, the baptism of the Word. *We are washed from all our sins, and are no longer entangled in evil.*”⁷⁶ Clement pictures the “washing” of baptism as “the one grace of illumination. . . . Our characters are not the same as before our washing.”⁷⁷

Clement then explains the relationship between faith, knowledge, baptism and illumination: “Knowledge springs up with illumination, shedding its beams around the mind; the moment we hear, we who were untaught become disciples. Does this, I ask, take place on the advent of this instruction? You cannot tell the time. *For instruction leads to faith, and faith with baptism is trained by the Holy Spirit.*”⁷⁸

While questions of timing may be hard to pinpoint, Clement is absolutely sure of one thing: those who have been baptized into Christ are all equal members of Christ’s body, all illuminated, all changed. “There are not, then, in the same Word some ‘illuminated (Gnostics); and some animal (or natural) people.’ Rather, all who have abandoned the desires of the flesh are equal and spiritual before the Lord.”⁷⁹ Clement is especially irritated by his Gnostic opponents, people who claim that only they have a knowledge of God, and only they have been illuminated. No, Clement insists. Everyone who has been baptized into Christ has been illuminated by Christ. And the route to illumination, knowledge, purity and change is through repentance and baptism. “We also, *repenting of our sins, renouncing our iniquities, purified by baptism, speed back to the eternal light, children to the Father.*”⁸⁰

We should realize that the early church fully expected that those who

had been baptized would leave a life of sin behind. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth century document (A.D. 390), teaches that “those who are baptized into the death of our Lord Jesus are obliged to go on no longer in sin; for as those who are dead cannot work wickedness any longer, so those who are dead with Christ cannot practice wickedness. We do not therefore believe, brothers, that any one who has received the washing of life continues in the licentious acts of transgressors.” The *Apostolic Constitutions*, though, do acknowledge that postbaptismal sin is possible and can be forgiven. Those who sin after baptism must repent and leave their sins behind, or they “shall be condemned to hell-fire.”⁸¹

Baptism is not a magical rite that confers divine forgiveness apart from the intention of the person being baptized. This point needs to be emphasized: *If one comes to baptism unrepentant, one will leave unforgiven.* Origen, for instance, insists that if the person being baptized is not repentant, his baptism will lead only to “greater condemnation.” The “intention” of the person coming to be baptized, then, is of great significance.⁸²

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, written over a hundred years after Origen’s comments, clearly distinguish between those who desire to repent and “complete Christians.” Repentance normally comes through hearing the “Word” preached in church, while baptism is the door to full communion with Christ and other Christians. “When they wish to repent, we receive the pagans into the church to hear the Word. However, we do not admit them to communion until they have received the seal of baptism and are made complete Christians.”⁸³

Cyril of Jerusalem, writing in the fourth century, carefully instructs catechumens in the ethical standards that accompany new life in Christ. Those to be baptized are given forty days to cultivate the repentance that leads to baptism: “Put off fornication and uncleanness, and put on the shining garment of self-control. . . . You have ample notice; you have forty days for penitence.”⁸⁴ Cyril warns those to be baptized that Simon Magus “was baptized, but not enlightened. He dipped his body in water, but did not admit the Spirit to illuminate his heart. His body went down and came up; but his soul was not buried together with Christ, nor with him raised” (cf. Acts 8:31-40).⁸⁵

Cyril mentions the situation of Simon Magus to prevent new Christians from divorcing a life of holiness from baptism or from viewing the sacrament as a magical rite. "Let no one of you be found tempting grace . . . through . . . an insincere heart."⁸⁶ God is looking for "honest resolve" and "honesty of purpose" in those coming to be baptized.⁸⁷ If people are baptized while disguising their intentions to remain impenitent over their sin, "though the water shall receive" them, "the Spirit will not accept" them.⁸⁸

Basil of Caesarea, also writing in the fourth century, accentuates the indissoluble link between faith, baptism and salvation. "Faith and baptism are two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation: faith is perfected by baptism; baptism is established by faith, and both are completed by the use of the same names. As we believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so we are baptized into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Confession leads the way and brings us to salvation; baptism follows, setting the seal on our assent."⁸⁹

Basil's mention of the Holy Spirit draws our attention to the crucial role of the Spirit in the sacrament of baptism as understood by the church fathers.

BAPTISM AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The fathers draw attention to the role the Holy Spirit plays in baptism, one they often associate with regeneration and the remission of sins, though they sometimes disagree on details concerning the Spirit's baptismal role. The principal patristic emphases include the following:

- ✦ Baptism must take place in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Justin Martyr, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa).⁹⁰
- ✦ Some patristic writers see the water of baptism as preparing the believer for the reception and sealing of the Holy Spirit. Consider the comments of four significant ante-Nicene patristic figures (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Methodius):

Tertullian: "It is not that in the waters we obtain the Holy Spirit. Rather,

in the water . . . we are cleansed and prepared for the Holy Spirit."⁹¹

Hippolytus: "The ropes that stretch around her [the ship of the church] are the love of Christ, which binds the church. The net that she bears with her is the bath of the regeneration that renews the believing, from which too are these glories. Just like the wind, the Spirit from heaven is present, by whom those who believe are sealed."⁹²

Cyprian: "He who has been sanctified, his sins being put away in baptism, and has been spiritually reformed into a new man, has become fitted for receiving the Holy Spirit."⁹³ Cyprian is not entirely consistent. At other times he speaks of the Holy Spirit as being received in baptism itself.⁹⁴

Methodius: "Those who are born again by the bath receive . . . of his holiness and of his glory. . . . The illuminated receive the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, and they are appropriately born again to incorruption."⁹⁵

The link between the Holy Spirit and regeneration in baptism is one that we will need to revisit.

- ♦ It is through the laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit is invoked and invited (Tertullian).⁹⁶
- ♦ It is by the agency of the Holy Spirit that a new birth occurs in the waters of baptism (Irenaeus, Origen, Novatian).⁹⁷

BAPTISM AND REGENERATION

A closer look at the thought of Gregory of Nyssa on baptism will shed light on how the fathers in general understood the relationship between baptism and regeneration.

Gregory refers to a "regeneration" that occurs in baptism, a new birth grounded in the sacramental nature of baptism itself. How so? Gregory speaks of "a regeneration perceived by thought, not observed by the eyes." Through God's "kingly grace," God's "kingly bounty," "one scarred with sins and grown old in evil habits" can be restored "to the innocence of a babe."⁹⁸

On the one hand, Gregory teaches that “It is not the water that bestows this bounty . . . but the commandment of God and the intervention of the Spirit, which comes sacramentally to give us liberty.” In a word, God has “commanded” the church to baptize and promised that his Spirit will purify those who come to the waters of baptism. Purification from sin is the Spirit’s work, yet is intimately associated with water itself through the sacramental action of the Spirit. “But water has a part to play, by giving an outward sign of the purification. For when our body has been soiled by dirt and mud it is our practice to make it clean by washing in water. We therefore use water in the sacramental action also, signifying, by something perceived by the senses, a shining cleanliness which is not a bodily cleanliness.”⁹⁹

Gregory then moves into “a more searching inquiry,” beginning his investigation with a comment on a key verse for many of the fathers, John 3:5: “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” Why does John mention both water and the Spirit? “Why is not the Spirit alone considered necessary for the fulfillment of baptism?” Gregory asks. Both the Spirit and water are necessary for regeneration because a human being “is composite, not simple.” We are a composite of a “visible body” and “invisible soul,” with each aspect affected by sin and in need of healing. Thus, Gregory believes, “medicines are assigned which suit and resemble [a human being’s] double nature.”¹⁰⁰ The “visible body” needs water, just as the “invisible soul” needs the Spirit.

What occurs in the wonder of the sacrament is a movement of “the unseen Spirit, invoked by faith,” who “comes in a fashion we cannot describe.” The Spirit both “blesses the body which is being baptized, and the water that baptizes.”

Matter itself, in this case the water of baptism, is set apart or consecrated for a special use by the Holy Spirit. Gregory sees the same as being true of the “holy altar,” the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the oil used to anoint the newly baptized, and the priesthood. The altar, for instance, “is in itself an ordinary stone slab, in no way different from other slabs with which our walls are built and our pavements are adorned.” Once it has been “consecrated for the service of God,” however, “and has received the blessing, it is a holy table, an undefiled altar, no longer touched by the hands of all, but only

by the priests, and by them with reverence." Likewise, the bread used in the Eucharist is in itself "common bread, but when the sacramental act has consecrated it, it is called, and becomes, the body of Christ." So too "with the sacramental oil, and the wine." The central sacramental principle is this: "though things of small value before the blessing, after the sanctification by the Spirit each of them has its special effectiveness."¹⁰¹

THE QUESTION OF INFANT BAPTISM

Did the early church baptize babies? Testimony as to infant baptism, at least through the second century, is mixed. Irenaeus refers to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and comments that Jesus was "thirty years old when he came to be baptized, then possessing the full age of a Master." Rather than "despising or evading any condition of humanity," Jesus' thirty years encompassed and sanctified every age.¹⁰²

Jesus had once been an infant, grown up as a child, moved through his teen years and finally attained adulthood. "For," Irenaeus writes, "He came to save all through means of Himself—all, I say, who through him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age," and so on.¹⁰³ Christ sanctifies every stage of human life through his embrace of each period of life's journey in his own humanity. Irenaeus does not mention baptism, but his comment concerning infants is significant.

Tertullian is one of the strongest early Christian voices against infant baptism. His objections to the practice indicate at least two things: Christians were baptizing infants and not all Christians were convinced this was a good idea. Tertullian writes that "baptism is not to be bestowed rashly" and that "it is more salutary to delay baptism according to the state and character of each person," with delay especially appropriate "in the case of infants."¹⁰⁴

Tertullian worries that the sponsors of infants for baptism place themselves in danger because they have no way of determining what the character will be of the baby being baptized or if they will live long enough to bring up the child in the ways of the Lord. Jesus does invite the little ones to come to him (Mt 19:14), but Tertullian views Christ's invitation as a call to chil-

dren to be educated in the faith, rather than baptized. “‘Let them come,’ then, when they are growing up: let them come if they are learning, if they are being taught to what they are coming; let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ.” Like modern day Baptists, Tertullian speaks of an “age of innocence,” when baptism is not necessary. “Why does the age of innocence hasten to the remission of sins?”¹⁰⁵

Cyprian represents well what comes to be the majority view among the church fathers concerning infant baptism. Even the worst offenders against God are invited to the waters of baptism. If no one is turned away, if even great sinners bring a life filled with rampant sin to Christ and ask for forgiveness, how can the church turn away infants? Though babies have not willfully sinned, they have still been born “of Adam’s line according to the flesh” and have “contracted the contagion of the ancient death. Indeed the infant’s approach to the reception of remission of sins is the easier from the very fact that the sins remitted are another’s, not his own.”¹⁰⁶ As far as Cyprian is concerned, there is no age of innocence for babies, precisely because Adam’s sin has infected all human beings, regardless of their age. Simply put, all who have been stained with sin, both through Adam and through their own intentional acts of sin, need to be cleansed in baptism’s waters.¹⁰⁷ Augustine will make much the same point in the late fourth century.

Before we examine Augustine on infant baptism, a glance at a few of Augustine’s contemporaries in the East may prove helpful. Gregory of Nazianzus acknowledges that one cannot know whether a baby will grow up to be a person of faith and proven Christian character—a concern, as we have seen, for Tertullian. Rather than viewing this uncertainty about an infant’s future development as a roadblock to Christian initiation, though, Gregory calls his audience to trust in God. What about Hannah, the mother of Samuel? “Why, Hannah vowed Samuel to God before he was born, and no sooner was he born than she made him a priest and reared him in a priestly robe; for she had no human fears but put her trust in God.” Better to trust and sanctify than to fear and leave someone outside the community of faith. “Have you an infant?” Gregory asks. “Do not let wickedness seize its chance. Let him be sanctified from babyhood, and consecrated by the Spirit in his tender years.”¹⁰⁸

Gregory supports the baptism of infants because of the “pressing danger”

that infant mortality posed in the ancient world. For “it is better to be sanctified without being conscious of it than to depart without being sealed and initiated.” In addition, the circumcision of infants under the old covenant provided a rationale and precedent for the baptism of infants into the community of the church. “And we find our justification for this practice in the fact that circumcision, which in some degree prefigures the baptismal seal, was administered on the eighth day to babies who were still irrational.”¹⁰⁹

In similar fashion, the anointing of the Israelites’ doorposts at the time of the Passover protected the firstborn of Israel, including babies, from God’s judgment. If so, should not the babies of Christian families be similarly protected? Gregory suggests waiting for three years before baptizing infants and toddlers, “by which time they are capable of some spiritual understanding and are able to reply; even if they cannot fully understand, their characters and minds are in process of formation.”¹¹⁰

Gregory, like other fathers in the East, believes a human being’s age is a key factor in determining the level of accountability before God concerning sin and baptism. “For the case stands thus. Children begin to be answerable for their actions as soon as their reason is fully developed and they have been instructed in the divine revelation; they are not answerable for the sins of ignorance which are due to their tender years.”¹¹¹

Chrysostom also links accountability and punishment for sin to moral agency. Though humans are “mortal” as a result of Adam’s sin, they are reckoned as sinners before God because of their own sin rather than Adam’s. “But how should it follow that from his [Adam’s] disobedience anyone else should become a sinner? For unless a man becomes a sinner on his own responsibility he will not be found to deserve punishment.”¹¹² Still, as Gregory argues, in light of the dangers that surround the young, “it is on every consideration more profitable for children to be fortified by the baptismal washing.”¹¹³ Chrysostom also comments that “we do baptize infants, although they are not guilty of any sins.”¹¹⁴

In the West, it is Augustine who argues most fervently for infant baptism. Original sin has been passed on to all of Adam’s descendants, including infants. When babies are baptized they receive “the sacrament of regeneration,” Augustine writes. Whether these babies are actually saved,

though, is decided by wider considerations than baptism itself. "The sacrament of baptism is one thing, the conversion of the heart is another; but the salvation of human beings is effected by these two. If one is missing, we are not to suppose that the other is absent: in an infant, baptism can exist without conversion; in the penitent thief, conversion without baptism. . . . There can be conversion of the heart when baptism has not been received, but not when baptism has been rejected."¹¹⁵

Augustine believed that God condemns and punishes unbaptized infants. Augustine's strong belief in original sin drove him to this troubling conclusion, one related to his prolonged conflict with the Pelagians.

Might it not be better for a baby never to be created than to be created by God, die in infancy unbaptized, and then experience condemnation because of Adam's sin? No, Augustine answers, arguing that the punishment unbaptized infants experience is small. "I do not say that those who die without Christ's baptism are to be involved in so heavy a punishment that it would be better for them not to have been born. . . . Who could doubt that unbaptized infants, who have only original sin and are not burdened by sins of their own committing, will suffer the lightest possible condemnation. I cannot define the nature and extent of this, but I cannot bring myself to say that it would be better for them not to exist than to exist in that condition."¹¹⁶

The church was later to reject Augustine's position concerning the condemnation of unbaptized infants. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for example, entrusts unbaptized children to the "the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. The great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,' [Mark 10:14] allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism."¹¹⁷

By water, the fathers teach, human beings enter the church. In the Eucharist, through the common, earthy elements of bread and wine, Christians are fed with the body and blood of Christ. In our next chapter we will take a close look at the fathers' teaching on this second great sacrament.

I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life—which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. . . . And I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH *EPISTLE OF IGNATIUS TO THE ROMANS*¹

Our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and, in turn, the Eucharist establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit. For the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist—consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly. So also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having hope of the resurrection to eternity.

IRENAEUS *AGAINST HERESIES* 4.18.5²

Since Christ himself in his own words asserted of the bread, “This is my body,” who will dare any longer to have doubts? And since in his own words he insisted, “This is my blood,” who will have any doubts or say that it is not his blood? Once, in Cana of Galilee, he changed water into wine (and wine is akin to blood); is it incredible that he should change wine into blood?

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM *ON THE MYSTERIES*³

He is the bread of life. Whoever eats life cannot die. . . . Go to him and take your fill, for he is the bread of life. Go to him and drink, for he is the spring. Go to him and be enlightened, for he is the light. Go to him and become free, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. . . . I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (John 6:35).

AMBROSE *COMMENTARY ON PSALM 118*⁴