

Infant baptism debate in early Christianity

ABSTRACT

Research on infant baptism in early Christianity usually focuses on the question where its presence can be proved. This article deals with the question: where is it contested? It turns out that only Tertullian and Gregory of Nazianza have texts wherein they plea for a delay of baptism. Both, however, also have strong positive texts about infant baptism. The passages about delay are in the framework baptizing catechumens, not about children of Christians. Thus, there is no text in early Christianity against baptism of the children of believers. Pelagius should draw this conclusion from his theology, according to Augustine, but he does not dear so because of the protests it would evoke. As new customs were usually contested in early Christianity, we can safely draw the conclusion that infant baptism was normal use in that time.

1. ASKING THE QUESTION

Many publications have appeared about infant baptism in early Christianity. They usually have two common characteristics. First, they often argue by indirect evidence, i.e., by referring to the so called ‘house texts’ or to the baptism of proselytes. Second, the perspective is directed to the *presence* of infant baptism: when was it recorded for the first time?¹ How solid is the argument? How plausible is the occurrence of baptism of children in a specific context?

In this article, I will change the perspective. I will ask the question: where was infant baptism *refuted* for the first time? And why was it so? What are the arguments in early Christianity *against* infant baptism? And in which context should they be placed? Further, I will restrict myself to explicit texts. It is evident from the research history of baptism that indirect evidence easily reflects the author’s opinion, since the results depend on the aspects that we take from the external context.

So we will explore the explicit texts in early Christianity that reject infant baptism. We will place them in their literal and ecclesiastical context and try to discover what was at stake for their authors.

2. TERTULLIAN

2. 1. De Baptismo

As far as I am aware, the first writer who opposes infant baptism is Tertullian in his *De Baptismo*. In chapter 18 he writes about ‘the Persons to Whom, and the Time When, Baptism is to Be Administered’. In a more extensive discourse against hasty baptism, he writes:

And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary—if it is not necessary—that the sponsors likewise

1 See e.g. Oepke 1928; Windisch 1929; Jeremias 1949; 1958; Aland 1963 (‘When and why was infant baptism introduced?’ p. 100-111); Aland 1971; Van de Bank 1983; Wright 2007.

should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfil their promises, and may be disappointed by the development of an evil disposition, in those for whom they stood? The Lord does indeed say, "Forbid them not to come unto me." Let them "come," then, while they are growing up; let them "come" while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the "remission of sins?" More caution will be exercised in worldly matters: so that one who is not trusted with earthly substance is trusted with divine! Let them know how to "ask" for salvation, that you may seem (at least) to have given "to him that asks."

Tertullian introduces arguments that are also used against infant baptism today. First, those who want to be baptized must consciously know what they ask for. Further, they must take their own accountability for baptism; no one else should be burdened with responsibility for the future actions or lifestyle of those baptized. Finally, since baptism is about remission of sins, why should we baptize little children who are still in 'the innocent period of life'? A full fledged theology of adult baptism seems to be present here.

Tertullian is not an orthodox church father. He is considered to have embraced Montanism, a second century movement that stressed the ongoing presence of the charismata of the Spirit. Therefore, we could easily depict Tertullian as a Pentecostal of early Christianity: stressing the power of the Spirit and arguing for adult baptism. That would give the present day propagators of adult baptism deep roots in history. On the other hand, the defenders of infant baptism can argue that it is clear that Tertullian is a heretic and therefore his arguments are valueless to orthodox Christianity.

However, if we look more precisely at historical evidence, things turn out to be more complicated. First, Tertullian wrote his *De Baptismo* before he sympathized with Montanism, thus in the time that he was fully accepted by orthodox Christians. It was not the Montanist Tertullian who wrote this, but the orthodox Tertullian. Therefore, we cannot push Tertullian into a modern framework of Pentecostalism or baptism. In addition, it is a more recent matter of debate whether Tertullian really became a Montanist and even whether Montanism was a heresy or a schism at all (Ayers 1976; Bray 1979; Barnes 1985). They never appointed counter-bishops and did not build up an alternative church organisation. Therefore, they could be considered a movement rather than a separate church. Moreover, their ideas are more radical and often conservative than innovative and deviating from traditional Christian thought. Next to that, the fact that Tertullian had sympathies for the new prophecy does not imply that he really joined the Montanists. As independent a theologian as he was, he certainly had his sympathies, and even more his opponents, but in the end he followed his own path. 'It is ... likely that Tertullian was a Tertullianist whether he was a member of the Catholic, Montanist or Tertullianist churches' (Vokes 1966: 311). By consequence, it will not be easy to boil down his ideas as heretical and therefore irrelevant. Tertullian offers a radical theology that criticizes an easy Christianity, and that makes him unpleasant, on the one hand, but the more relevant for a critical theology, on the other hand.

The conclusion of these considerations is that we must deal with Tertullian's critique regarding infant baptism within the framework of orthodox Christianity and take into account that the borders between orthodoxy and Montanism were not so very clear; as for instance, the border with Marcionitism with its own canon, its deviating doctrine, and its own church organization.

2.2. De Anima

Tertullian's opinion regarding infant baptism is, however, much more complicated. The same person who so eloquently pleaded for a delay of baptism for children also provides church history with a discourse pro infant baptism. In his *De Anima* 39 he writes:

Hence in no case (I mean of the heathen of course) is there any nativity which is pure of idolatrous superstition. It was from this circumstance that the apostle said, that when either of the parents was sanctified, the children were holy (1 Corinthians 7:14) and this as much by the prerogative of the seed as by the discipline of the institution "Else," says he, "were the children unclean" by birth: as if he meant us to understand that the children of believers were designed for holiness, and thereby for salvation; in order that he might by the pledge of such a hope give his support to matrimony, which he had determined to maintain in its integrity. Besides, he had certainly not forgotten what the Lord had so definitively stated: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5); in other words, he cannot be holy.

Tertullian states in *De anima* that all human beings are born in a context by which they are influenced from their very beginnings. Children are not born as a *tabula rasa* but have knowledge, intellect, and sensitivity (*De anima* 19). The circumstances wherein they are conceived and born make them what they are. By consequence, children of heathens are unclean due to idolatrous and superstitious activities by which procreation among pagans is accompanied (ch. 39). Only by dying to this life and a new birth in Christ can they be saved. Children from Christian parents are born into the community of faith. Therefore, they are clean, as the apostle Paul says. They are not born in the middle of superstitious activities and idolatry, but within the discipline of the church, expressed by baptism and education in faith. They are born by water and Spirit, and that is the only way to enter the kingdom of God (ch. 39). When children come into contact with Jesus, they offer testimony to Him by their confession—as the children who sang Hosanna when Jesus entered Jerusalem, or by their blood that is shed when they are slaughtered for his sake as the children of Bethlehem who were killed by Herod (ch. 19).

As much as the passage in *De baptismo* seems to display classic arguments against infant baptism, Tertullian seems to provide us with classic arguments to support it in *De anima*. These opposing statements, of course, have continuously challenged scholars.² That is even more so because *De anima* is written in his Montanist period. If it were the other way around, then we could explain the difference by claiming that Montanism as a movement of spiritual renewal propagated adult baptism as a conscious act of mature Christians. However, the orthodox Tertullian pleads for a delay of baptism and the Tertullian with Montanist sympathies argues for baptism in the earliest infancy of Christian children. And he does the latter without any reference to his former position; he also does not give any impression of *retractationes*. That requires clarification.

2.3. Other writings of that time

In order to understand which position Tertullian takes in both statements, it will be helpful to look at other writings from the end of the second and the first half of the third century. By doing so, we can discover what he is actually doing in the context of church life during his time. No theologian operates without his or her contexts, and that is certainly the case for Tertullian, who is always in conflict with opponents. Therefore, we will see what other authors from his time

² See e.g. Windisch 1929: 135f; Van den Bank 1983: 150.

period say about the subject.

The closest is the *Traditio Apostolica* (ca 215), a document written by Hippolyt that reflects the liturgy of the church in Rome during his time. The liturgy of baptism is described, in chapter 21, as follows:

At the hour in which the cock crows, they shall first pray over the water. When they come to the water, the water shall be pure and flowing, that is, the water of a spring or a flowing body of water. Then they shall take off all their clothes. The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family. After this, the men will be baptized. Finally, the women, after they have unbound their hair, and removed their jewelry. No one shall take any foreign object with themselves down into the water.

It is clear from this liturgy that young children were baptized. Since it is a liturgy, there is no discussion over it and thus no arguments. Hippolyt just gives the instruction on how to perform the baptismal ceremonies. Precisely this liturgical setting indicates that infant baptism was normal in Rome in that time.³

Decades earlier Irenaeus also speaks about children (*Adv. Haer.* 2,22):

For 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.

Though Irenaeus does not mention baptism explicitly, the expression ‘who through Him are born again to God’ includes it. For Irenaeus baptism is the moment of being born again. There is no salvation without being baptized into the body of Christ; that is the new birth.⁴

An important witness for the context of Tertullian is a letter by Cyprian. Although it was written about half a century after Tertullian’s writings, it is located in the same community where he lived: the church of Carthago in North Africa. Around 250 a Bishop Fidus from this church proposed to baptize children on their eighth day, obviously an analogy to circumcision in the Old Testament. Cyprian discussed this with sixty-six other bishops, and they unanimously rejected the proposal.⁵ Children should be baptized as soon as possible. ‘Since it is to be observed and maintained in respect of all, we think it is to be even more observed in respect of infants and newly-born persons, who on this very account deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, that immediately, on the very beginning of their birth, lamenting and weeping, they do nothing else but entreat’ (ch. 5). ‘For God, as He does not accept the person, so does not accept the age; since He shows Himself Father to all with well-weighed equality for the attainment of heavenly grace’ (ch. 3).

Although this is a debate about infant baptism, it is not about the practice as such. It

3 The argument that the baptism of children is not deeply integrated in the whole of the baptismal instruction of the *Traditio apostolica* (Wright 2007: 7), and thus seems an addition to an earlier praxis of adult baptism, is not valid. It is normal that baptismal instructions, even in the case of infant baptism only, have an extensive discourse on baptism in general, stressing the transition from death to life, the remission of sins and the call to a new life, whereto the text about infant baptism is added. Even the classic Reformed instruction on baptism, where the idea of the covenant and the similarity to circumcision is dominant, has this shape.

4 Cf. *Adv. Haer.* 1,21,1: ‘baptism which is regeneration to God’; *Epideixis* 3: ‘baptism is the seal of eternal life, and is the new birth unto God’.

5 Cyprian, Epistola 59, *De Infantibus Baptizandis, ad Fidum*, Migne, Patrologia Latina 3: 1047-1056.

is only about the precise day and whether judaïsing practices will be accepted or not. Infant baptism seems self evident to both parties. Cyprian also does not refer to earlier debates in the church of Carthago on the topic, although he often deals with Tertullian's thought. It seems to have not been an issue in Carthago.

This all fits the statement by Origen that 'the church since the apostles keeps to the tradition to give baptism also to the little ones' (*Comm. Epist. Romans* V,9; Migne, PG 14: 1047).⁶ In all regions of the church in the Roman Empire, infant baptism seems to be practiced in Tertullian's time: Rome (Hippolyt), Asia Minor and Lyons (Irenaeus), Carthago (Cyprian), and Egypt (Origen). These texts support Tertullian's position as given in his *De anima*.

This makes the challenge to understand his passage in *De baptismo* the greater. Tertullian himself does not use the argument that infant baptism would be something new in the church. If something can be labelled as new—not belonging to the traditional heritage of the church—the label is usually a strong argument against it in early Christianity. A rhetorically skilled person like Tertullian certainly would not have allowed the opportunity if he would have known that infant baptism was something new and he wanted to reject it (cf. Oepke 1930: 89; Wright 2007: 24).

So actually, we have to conclude that Tertullian is doing something very remarkable in his plea for the delay of baptism in his *De baptismo*, and that makes this plea even more interesting. It is the only plea of this kind before the time of Constantine and Nicea, and the only one confronting a common church practice that was supported by Tertullian himself, even when he became more or less awkward to catholic Christianity.

2.4. The setting of *De baptismo*

When we take the wider context of the church of that time into account, the confusion about Tertullian is only made greater. However, there is another context: his own context in the years when he wrote his *De baptismo*. We can trace this context both from this document itself and from other writings of Tertullian from the same period.

A key text in this respect is found in *De poenitentia*, chapter 6. There Tertullian also opposes those who hastily run to baptism. Baptism is not an isolated ritual and not even a fully new beginning. It is far more the sealing of the work that God has begun in a human being, wherein the person who will be baptized is fully involved. 'Baptismal washing is a sealing of faith, which faith is begun and is commended by the faith of repentance. We are not washed *in order that we may* cease sinning, but *because we have* ceased, since in *heart* we have *been* bathed already. For the *first* baptism of a learner is *this*, a perfect fear; thenceforward, in so far as you have understanding of the Lord faith *is* sound, the conscience having once for all embraced repentance.'

De poenitentia does not refer to children. That makes the text less complicated and clearer. It is obvious that it is about catechumens and the discussion focuses on the question of sin and penitence. The people who Tertullian opposes are of the opinion that baptism is the

6 He does so with a reference to Psalm 50 (51):7, interpreting this as a reference to original sin because it is not about a concrete sin of David's mother. Oepke 1928: 85 rightly argues that we should not easily interpret Origen's statement as a dogmatic postulate (so again, Aland 1971: 28). He could not have said so, if, at least, infant baptism was a long praxis in the Egyptian church, unless he wanted to give a good opportunity to refute him. Infant baptism was not such an old tradition in Origen's time that often people ask why it was necessary because babies did not yet sin; they practiced it, but no longer understood its meaning. Then Origen must argue that infants are unclean due to original sin. And thus he can state: 'Because by the sacrament of baptism the uncleanness of birth is removed, therefore the little ones are baptized too' (*Hom. in Lucam* 14; Migne, PG 13,3: 1855). See, for further texts of Origen on infant baptism, Jeremias 1958:75.

marker between sinning and not sinning. Until baptism you are free to sin, but after baptism you are told to leave it behind you; baptism cleanses you and you remain clean. Later, this attitude caused delays of baptism: when you postpone baptism you are free to sin, and you make the time after baptism—and thus after the remission of sins—as short as possible in order to save both a life that is lived as you want and your eternal life with God. Constantine the Great is the most famous example of this idea. In the time of Tertullian it worked the other way around. People felt free to sin until baptism, and afterward they turned to a life of penitence, but they did not delay baptism. Then, however, after baptism they still had to learn about and exercise being a Christian. Tertullian is of a different opinion: the time of catechuminate is the time of learning and training. After the catechumens know and live what it means to be a Christian, this new life is sealed by baptism. Baptism is not cheap grace. It is the confirmation of a new life in Christ, and those who are not or not yet prepared to it should be excluded from baptism. ‘A presumptuous confidence in baptism introduces all kind of vicious delay and tergiversation with regard to repentance; for, feeling sure of undoubted pardon of their sins, men meanwhile steal the intervening time, and make it for themselves into a holiday-time for sinning, rather than a time for learning not to sin.’ If you think in this way, you cannot be baptized. ‘For who will grant to you, a man of so faithless repentance, one single sprinkling of any water whatever?’

Therefore we should wait with baptism until the catechumen has shown a new life and is settled in the knowledge and love of Christ. Then baptism is something that is desirable and not something that guarantees you salvation without true conversion. ‘Hasty reception is the portion of irreverence; it inflates the seeker, it despises the Giver. And thus it sometimes deceives, for it promises to itself the gift before it be due; whereby He who is to furnish the gift is ever offended’ (*De poenitentia* 6).

Tertullian’s argument in *De poenitentia* is clear: we have to take baptism serious, and it should be the sealing of a radical new life. This discourse belongs to the radical theologian that Tertullian is—both in his catholic time and in the time of his Montanist sympathies. His views in *De poenitentia* and in *De anima* are fully compatible: those who come from a pagan backdrop have to learn how to be a Christian, and they should be radically Christian. Those who are born in the Christian community must grow up in a fully Christian context. From their very beginning, they should not only be trained for a Christian life, but their whole experience should be in the community of Christ. Baptism is the sealing of this Christian environment that is their very life, as all kind of rituals of idolatry shape the life of pagans from their very beginning.

As far as *De baptismo* is about adults who want to be baptized, the argument is not different from *De poenitentia*. Catechumens should not hastily be baptized.⁷ Here, however, he extends his argument to specific groups that are especially in danger of not persevering because they are in an instable situation: those who recently have become a widow and are young, unmarried people. They should wait until they (re)marry, accept a stable life as a single, or enter a lifelong state of widowhood. The church should avoid the risk that they just join the church as one of the options for their future life that easily can be exchanged for something else during their instable period of life.

It is in this context that Tertullian speaks about children. Children cannot yet make stable decisions. We do not know how they will develop. Thus take your time to see what will happen to them. It is time enough to baptize them when they have grown up. There is only one exception: in case of the risk of death. Tertullian says we should wait with baptism, ‘if there

⁷ Tertullian refutes the argument that the chamberlain was quickly baptized by Philip (Acts 8) and Paul by Ananias (Acts 9). Both were clear exceptions indicated by the Lord himself. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III,12,15) argues similarly with regard to Cornelius (Acts 10).

is no need'.⁸ In a case of emergency, we should baptize children immediately. It is generally accepted in early Christianity that catechumens were baptized when their life was endangered. The reason for this opinion was the understanding that your salvation is at stake if you are not baptized. That does not differ for children.

But how can children come from a pagan context in order to be baptized if they are not yet able to ask for themselves, as Tertullian says? Of course, their parents could be catechumens, but that is not what it is about. In that case they would become holy by the faith and baptism of their parents, and a debate about the children would be superfluous.

In this regard, it must be noted that Tertullian speaks about *sponsors* and not about parents. According to the *Traditio apostolica* 21,4, parents (or someone else of the family) will answer for the children when they are baptized. Sponsors have a different role. They are Christians that advise about new members of the congregation, some kind of guarantee that this person can be accepted (*Traditio apostolica* 15,2 and 21,2; cf. Oskamp 1988: 31f). They take on the responsibility for this new Christian. In the case of children, they can hardly give such a guarantee. First, they are responsible for the future solidity of the children, but it is not at all certain that they will not die before these children have grown up and displayed a real Christian life. Next to that, the children can turn out to be avers of faith, and, in that case, they made a void promise. Thus it is better to wait until the children have grown up.

If we see the text in this perspective, it is not about children of Christians, but about children who newly enter the congregation⁹—maybe orphans or other children that are in relation to those who want to be a sponsor. The phrase about 'except in case of need' emergency fits in this interpretation. This is also the way early Christianity dealt with catechumens.

From the perspective of *De poenitentia*, we have to interpret the text of *De baptismo* as a warning to deal seriously with baptism. Baptism and renewal of life with a new ethics belong intrinsically together. This perspective is confirmed by the internal setting of the section in the whole of *De baptismo*. This is not a discourse on baptism as such, but part of Tertullian's anti-Gnostic campaign. He himself sets his writing in this context; he will oppose 'the Cainite heresy' (*De baptismo* 1). The Gnostics despise baptism. It is mere water; it has to do with the body. What is of interest for them is the spirit, not matter. Therefore baptism should be a spiritual baptism and not a bodily ritual with water.

Against them Tertullian stresses the importance of water (*De baptismo* 3), with reference to many biblical examples (4-9). God deals with concrete matter. That is his way of salvation, like He is the Creator of this concrete world. In obedience to Him, Christians also deal with matter. They are baptized with water, and it is in their concrete physical life that they participate in God's salvation. It is this life that is healed and renewed.

Both belong together: baptism with water and new behaviour—for both are the way God deals with his created world. If, however, Christians who are baptized do not convert and take it easy, how can we then argue against the Gnostics that salvation is about physical life? If the only physical visibility in salvation is the water and not the actions of Christians, is baptism than not a void ritual, indeed? A catholic church that will maintain the faith of the apostles should be faithful to physical reality.¹⁰ How very much salvation is physical is visible in the water

8 Thelwall 1885 translates 'si non tam necesse est' by 'if baptism itself is not so necessary' as if Tertullian would say that salvation does not depend on baptism. Tertullian explicitly states the opposite. Next to that it is grammatically incorrect. The text is: 'si ...', not 'quia ...'.

Some writings leave out the phrase. Migne (*Patrologia Latina* 1, 1221, note 3) follows these, with 'si non tam necesse (est)' only in a footnote. Recent critical editions like CCL 1: 293 consider it as authentic.

9 Jeremias 1958: 96-99 comes to the same conclusion.

10 See also Tertullian's *De resurrectione carnis*.

of baptism. But that cannot be isolated from the whole of physical reality as is expressed in Christians' behaviour.

Precisely because it is about the whole of physical reality, children are not excepted from the seriousness of baptism. It is also about their visible life. And it is about their whole life. Because they are still young and they have to go through the years of the instable puberty, it is better to wait until they have found a stable life—just as in the case of unmarried, young women or widows. In their early childhood they still can seem to be good people. They are still in the period of innocence. But you do not know what will come out when they become adults.

That is different for children of Christian parents, argues Tertullian in *De anima*. They have been born holy in the holiness of their parents and dwell in the community of the Holy Spirit. Their whole life—as physical as a physical birth—is in relation to Christ, and therefore, they are baptized immediately.

There is no theological difference in the two texts of Tertullian on infant baptism. In *De baptismo*, he stresses that baptism is about the whole of life and not a mere ritual. It would be strange if the increasingly radical Tertullian would have weakened his position in *De anima* when he sympathized with the radical Montanists. He did not change his mind.¹¹ He just focused on different groups in a debate with different opponents. We can say that he took baptism serious in both cases. We can even more emphatically say that he took children serious in both cases. In *De baptismo* he requires a stable Christian life for those who are baptized. He requires that for children and for adults. As long as they in their *aetas innocens*,¹² they do not really know what stability in the temptations of sin is, and we should wait. For why and how should the period of innocence run for remission of sins? In *De anima* he teaches that children from their very beginning are people that share the life of the community they live in. They may not be excluded from the life in Christ. In his debate with the Gnostics, he writes that everybody must convert with his or her whole physical life in order to be saved. In his debate with the pagan philosophers in *De anima*, he argues that children are people from the very beginning and must be taken seriously.

We can conclude that the text in *De baptismo* is about a specific issue in the debate with the Gnostics by the catholic Tertullian, and that his opinion in his *De anima* in the time of his Montanist sympathies is not less catholic. Infant baptism is not at stake, but physical salvation, and thus moral renewal, is at stake. At first sight, Tertullian's arguments may look like modern arguments for adult baptism. At a closer view, they are part of his own world with his debate with the Gnostics, and his plea for physical reality and a radical adherence to orthodox catholic Christian faith.

Our conclusion implies that there is no plea against infant baptism as such in the time

11 Many scholars solve the difference between both texts this way, e.g. Jeremias 1949: 31; Van den Bank 1983: 150.

12 Aland (1963: 104) and other authors stress this '*aetas innocens*' and use it as a technical term against original sin. We must wonder whether Tertullian has this in mind here and not merely the conscious sin done by people when they have grown up. Certainly, '*aetas innocens*' has a specific meaning in antiquity, but antiquity has no opinion on original sin. It might be very well possible that Tertullian in *De baptismo* just has the popular meaning in his mind: not yet conscious of actual sin and not accountable, and that he develops in *De anima* his more profound theological thought. Even Augustine can say that children do not have '*peccatum proprium*', while he is convinced they are unclean by the '*peccatum originale*' (*Contra Iulianum* III,11). It is good to notice the subtleties of this text. Augustine does not oppose '*peccatum proprium*' and '*peccatum originale*', but '*peccatum cuiusque proprium*' and '*peccati originale contagium*': actual sin is *somebody's* personal sin, original sin is an *infection*. See also Cyprian's letter to Fidus (epist. 59,5) where he distinguishes between some one's own sin and the sin of another (Adam).

before Nicea and Constantine. There is only a plea to be strict in the admission of new members of the church. This kind of plea was common in early Christianity. Tertullian's paragraph in *De baptismo* only says that this is also applicable to children—what no orthodox Christian of that time would deny.

3. GREGORY OF NAZIANZA

The second text that pleads for a delay of baptism for children is by Gregory of Nazianza at the end of the fourth century. In his *Oratio de Baptismo* (oratio 40,28) he writes:

Be it so, some will say, in the case of those who ask for Baptism; what have you to say about those who are still children, and conscious neither of the loss nor of the grace? Are we to baptize them too? Certainly, if any danger presses. For it is better that they should be unconsciously sanctified than that they should depart unsealed and uninitiated.

... But in respect of others I give my advice to wait till the end of the third year, or a little more or less, when they may be able to listen and to answer something about the Sacrament; that, even though they do not perfectly understand it, yet at any rate they may know the outlines; and then to sanctify them in soul and body with the great sacrament of our consecration. For this is how the matter stands; at that time they begin to be responsible for their lives, when reason is matured, and they learn the mystery of life (for of sins of ignorance owing to their tender years they have no account to give), and it is far more profitable on all accounts to be fortified by the Font, because of the sudden assaults of danger that befall us, stronger than our helpers.

According to Gregory, children can only be baptized when they at least understand something about baptism and can answer some basic questions. Of course, they cannot do that at the level of adults, but on their own level and fitting to their tender years.

Gregory's text is debated in most of the discussions about infant baptism in early Christianity and is usually just taken as it stands. In that case, we can only conclude that the church did not do very much with it, since infant baptism is practiced continuously not only in the West but also in the East where Gregory is one of the main authorities in the church.¹³

If we, however, look closer to the context and the whole oration, several things will strike us. Immediately after the quoted section, he says: 'But, one says, Christ was thirty years old when He was baptized, and that although He was God; and do you bid us hurry our Baptism?' Gregory does not plead for a *delay* of baptism, but he fears that people will think that he *hurries* them. It is not Gregory that wants to delay, but his audience.¹⁴ That is the main topic of his speech. Many people waited to be baptized so that all sins that they did before could be washed away. Often they even waited until their deathbed. It is this practice that Gregory opposes. You should give your whole life to Christ.

'If you are always passing over to-day and waiting for to-morrow, by your little procrastinations you will be cheated without knowing it by the Evil One, as his

¹³ Windisch's statement (1929:141) that children baptism at the age of about 3 years was common praxis in the East since the third century lacks every ground; it is only based on this text of Gregory.

¹⁴ Jeremias 1949: 34f and Van den Bank 1983: 160 do not take note of this and interpret Gregory's position just as a call for delay; Jeremias 1958: 104, however, notices Gregory's critical reaction to his context; nevertheless, Jeremias fully places Gregory in the general mood of the ending fourth century to delay baptism and returns to his position of 1949 (1958: 113f).

manner is. Give to me, he says, the present, and to God the future; to me your youth, and to God old age; to me your pleasures, and to Him your uselessness' (or. 40,14).

In case of children, you should baptize them as soon as they can understand the guidelines—that means, according to him, at the end of their third year. You should not wait longer. Then he has a counter argument to Tertullian: if you fear they might become sinners when they grow up, what will be 'more profitable on all accounts than to be fortified by the Font?'

Do not wait too long, but baptize as soon as children can understand the basics. And in case of emergency, you should not wait at all. Actually, Gregory's text does not differ very much from Tertullian's in *De baptismo*. In both cases it is about those who *ask* for baptism. Both agree that in case of death or crisis you should not wait. Both are actually dealing with people who are not yet baptized, and the topic of the children is just a detail. The differences are that in the time of Tertullian people took baptism (at least according to Tertullian) too easy and continued sinning, while in the time of Gregory people took baptism very serious—and went on sinning. Then Tertullian says: 'Wait until your life is renewed', while Gregory says: 'Hurry in order to be strengthened by the Trinity'. In both cases it is a stress on renewal of life, but in different circumstances.

In the very same oration Gregory has another paragraph on the baptism of infants (or. 40,17):

'Have you an infant child? Do not let sin get any opportunity, but let him be sanctified from his childhood; from his very tenderest age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Fearest thou the Seal on account of the weakness of nature? O what a small-souled mother, and of how little faith! Why, Anna even before Samuel was born promised him to God, and after his birth consecrated him at once, and brought him up in the priestly habit, not fearing anything in human nature, but trusting in God. You have no need of amulets or incantations, with which the Devil also comes in, stealing worship from God for himself in the minds of vainer men. Give your child the Trinity, that great and noble Guard.'

The gap between both statements seems not less than between both texts of Tertullian. And the solution to understand it is not different either. In chapter 17 Gregory speaks to parents who are Christian. They should give their whole life, including their children, to the Trinitarian God. Arguments that little children should be excluded are refuted. Hannah already devoted her son before his birth to God. Christians must likewise know that their children belong to Christ from their very beginnings. Here too, Gregory does not think differently from Tertullian, as he expresses in *De anima*.¹⁵

Many parents, however, did not baptize their children in his day, due to the tendency to delay baptism so that they did not run the risk of sinning after baptism and become lost because no remission of sins was left. Augustine is a clear example of this practice, and it is one of the few issues where he blames his mother Monica. His case also clarifies that it is not only due to negligent parents¹⁶ that children remain unbaptized. It can also be that the parents care very much for the eternal salvation of their children, and therefore postpone baptism so that their sins that they do after their childhood can be washed away. Gregory warns those parents,

¹⁵ See also Gregory's *Poemata dogmatica* 91f (Migne, PG 464): 'This remission of sin is a seal of God, a seal to infants on the one hand and a healing and the best seal to adults on the other.'

¹⁶ Wright 2007: 34, footnote 34, gives this interpretation to Gregory's remark about those who 'are not in a position to receive it, perhaps on account of infancy'.

just as people who do not care at all for baptism. Some people indeed 'are not in a position to receive it, perhaps on account of infancy' (or. 40,23). By consequence, they will not receive eternal glory, although they will not be punished either. It is not convincing for him to say they desired baptism, for 'if desire in your opinion has equal power with actual baptism, then judge in the same way in regard to glory, and you may be content with longing for it, as if that were itself glory' (or. 40,23).¹⁷

We can conclude that both Gregory and Tertullian consider it right that Christians baptize their children as soon as possible. If children do not belong to baptized parents, they must wait until they themselves can take responsibility for baptism. Both deal with that in the same way as they do with adults that prepare for baptism. Tertullian says: 'Wait until your conversion is solid', while Gregory says: 'Do not wait any longer than necessary'. Both do so in order to call people to a life without sin.

4. AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

The third theologian often referred to in regard to rejection of infant baptism is Pelagius. Actually, there is not a writing of his own where he states this, but several times Augustine opposes Pelagius and his followers about infant baptism. The most striking text is from Augustine's very last writing, *Contra Iulianum Pelagium* (III,11), where he jokes with the ideas about infant sin and infant baptism of the Pelagians: their opinion is that children are born without sin because they do not yet have a will to choose for evil, on the one hand, but nevertheless, keep infant baptism:

Thus, in vain, you state: "So there is no sin in the little ones because this cannot exist *without the will which is not at all in them.*" *For this is rightly said about somebody's own sin, but not about the original infection of the first sin. If this would be non-existent, no little child would, under such a great power of the just God, suffer anything evil either in the body or in the soul, since they are not confined to any evil. This sin did, unfortunately, derive the evil will of the first human beings.*

If there is not an evil will, then there is not any origin of any sin. If you would know this, you would simply and truly confess the grace of Christ for the little children and not be pushed to say very impious and absurd things, either that the children should not be baptized (what you could say consequently, after all) or that such a great sacrament with regard to them is actually a laughingstock, since they are baptized in the Saviour, but not saved; redeemed by the liberator, but not set free; washed in the

17 The delay of baptism from the perspective of remission of future sins itself displays a different view on baptism and a second penitence. In the fourth century, 'sin' is obviously conceived as any kind of sin. In the earliest centuries, it was first and for all lapse from faith and thus denial of Christ: who belonged to Christ through baptism and subsequently severed this bond by denial of faith in persecution, could not return or could only return with great difficulty. That it is not about any kind of sins might be clear from the moving end of Tertullian's *De baptismo*: 'Therefore, blessed ones, whom the grace of God awaits, when you ascend from that most sacred font of your new birth, and spread your hands for the first time in the house of your mother, together with your brethren, ask from the Father, ask from the Lord, that His own specialties of grace and distributions of gifts may be supplied you. Ask, says He, and you shall receive. Well, you have asked, and have received; you have knocked, and it has been opened to you. Only, I pay that, when you are asking, you be mindful likewise of Tertullian the sinner.' The radical Christian Tertullian knows him continuously dependent on forgiveness and the intercession of the other Christians.

Cf. also Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii* 28: 'But between the laver, where all past stains and deformities are removed, and the kingdom, where the Church will remain forever without any spot or wrinkle, there is this present intermediate time of prayer, during which her cry must of necessity be: Forgive us our debts.'

*bath of regeneration, but not cleaned; exorcized and blown on them, but not wrested from the power of darkness; let their price be the blood that is shed for the remission of sins, but they are not purified by the remission of any sin. All this only because you fear to say: 'Let them not be baptized' so that not only your faces may not be smeared by the spit of the men, but also your heads should not be beaten black and blue by the sandals of the women.'*¹⁸

This passage asks for several comments, just like most of the other passages by Augustine on this subject. First of all, it is not Pelagius and his followers themselves who state that infants should not be baptized. It is only Augustine who says this about them. More important, however, is that Augustine does not say that they reject infant baptism, but that they *should have to* reject it if they would be consistent in their theology.

It is always dangerous to draw conclusions from other authors that they do not draw themselves. It is usually only in order to make them suspect on the topic where this conclusion is drawn from. That is exactly the case here. Pelagius taught that humans are born without sin, and that they can choose freely for or against God, while Augustine believed in original sin and predestination. If Pelagius, according to Augustine, says that children are sinless, only adult people can be responsible for their sins. As a consequence, only adults must be baptized.¹⁹

Pelagius does not draw that conclusion himself. On the contrary, even Augustine knows that he does not do so.²⁰ But the church father blames his opponent that Pelagius—only because of opportunism—does not abolish infant baptism: ‘because you fear to say: “Let them not be baptized” so that not only your faces may not be smeared by the spit of the men, but also your heads should not be beaten black and blue by the sandals of the women.’ Thus Augustine not only accuses Pelagius and his followers of heresy and inconsistency, but also of dishonesty.

I think this is not the best way of dealing with your opponents. In any case, it is clear that Pelagius does not oppose infant baptism and neither do his followers. What is also clear from Augustine’s text is that infant baptism was so integrated into church life that any opposition against it would not have a chance. It was a fixed and solid custom that could not be debated.

It took more than a thousand years before people have completely drawn the conclusions from Pelagius’ theology. In the sixteenth century, people who stressed individual freedom of decision opted for adult baptism by free individuals who choose for faith. It is not before that time that adult baptism was practiced, if it was not in the case of a missionary situation, and infant baptism was rejected by Christians. And it was not until the twentieth century before similar voices were raised in the mainstream churches. Those voices are rooted in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and through these in the thought of the philosophers that Tertullian opposes in his *De anima*: those who think that a child is a *tabula rasa* that only develops its intellect by the years, instead of being lead by the community wherein you were born, with the spirit or the Spirit that dwells there, as expressed in rituals and education. The philosophical frameworks of modernity and early Christianity are different. Therefore they think differently about infant baptism.

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18 The word that Augustine uses for ‘women’ is a diminutive that cannot be easily translated in English. It is not just ‘little women’ but has also a notion of ‘angry’ or even ‘fanatic women’.

19 See e.g. *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* II,3; II,6f.

20 See e.g. *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali* 32; *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 1:40; II,11.

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