HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

BAPTISM

Who should be baptized, when, and why?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - The Didache: Early Christian Baptismal Practice

The Didache, chapter 7 (late 1st or early 2nd century) - condensed reading

The Didache gives one of the earliest descriptions of Christian baptism outside the New Testament. Baptism is to be performed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Running or 'living' water is preferred, but other water may be used when necessary.

If sufficient water is not available for immersion or another fuller washing, water may be poured on the head three times in the triune name. The document also recommends fasting by the baptizer and the person being baptized.

The passage is important because it shows both a recognizable baptismal norm and practical flexibility. It does not settle the later debate over infant baptism; its focus is how baptism is to be administered.

Reading 2 - Justin Martyr: Baptism, Conversion, and New Birth

Justin Martyr, First Apology, chapter 61 (mid-2nd century) - condensed reading

Justin describes baptism in connection with instruction, persuasion, faith, repentance, prayer, and a changed way of life. Those who have come to believe Christian teaching are brought to water and washed in the name of the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

He uses strong language of regeneration and illumination. Baptism is not presented as a casual badge added after conversion but as the church's appointed initiation into the new life of Christ.

Justin's description most naturally pictures converts capable of receiving instruction. It therefore provides important evidence for second-century conversion practice while not, by itself, resolving whether Christian households also baptized infants.

Reading 3 - Tertullian: High Sacramental Language and a Reason to Delay

Tertullian, On Baptism, especially chapters 1 and 18 (early 3rd century) - condensed reading

Tertullian speaks of baptism as a God-appointed washing connected with forgiveness, cleansing, and entry into Christian life. He vigorously defends the use of water against those who considered such a physical rite too simple to carry spiritual significance.

Yet Tertullian also counsels delay in certain cases, including young children, unless circumstances make baptism urgent. His advice is striking precisely because it shows that the baptism of children was already being practiced or proposed in his setting.

The passage therefore cuts in more than one direction in later debates. It confirms an early high view of baptism and evidence for infant baptismal practice, while also demonstrating that the timing and prudence of infant baptism were not beyond discussion.

Reading 4 - Augustine: Infant Baptism and Original Sin

Augustine, anti-Pelagian writings and On Baptism (late 4th-early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine treats infant baptism as a received practice of the catholic Church and connects it strongly to the doctrine of original sin. Infants have committed no personal acts of sin, yet they belong to fallen Adamic humanity and therefore need the grace signified and given in baptism.

The church's practice becomes part of Augustine's argument against Pelagian claims about inherited sin. If infants were morally untouched by Adam's fall, the traditional baptismal language of forgiveness would be difficult to explain.

Augustine also insists that the sacrament's validity does not depend on the moral worthiness of the minister. Christ is the true giver. This principle, developed in controversy with the Donatists, becomes foundational for later sacramental theology.

Reading 5 - Martin Luther: Water Joined to God's Word

Martin Luther, Large Catechism, Part IV: Baptism (1529) - condensed reading

Luther rejects the idea that baptism is 'only water.' Ordinary water becomes Christian baptism because it is joined to Christ's command and promise. The power belongs to God's Word, not to a magical property in the water.

He speaks strongly of baptism as giving forgiveness, rescue from death and the devil, and salvation to those who believe the promise. Faith does not make baptism valid; faith receives what God promises in baptism.

Luther therefore defends infant baptism. Infants are not excluded from Christ's command or promise, and the church should not make the worthiness or conscious sophistication of the recipient the foundation of God's action.

Reading 6 - John Calvin: Baptism as Sign and Seal

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, chapters 15-16 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin describes baptism as a sign of cleansing, forgiveness, union with Christ, and new life. It assures believers that God's promise is directed personally to them, while the outward washing does not contain grace as though grace were physically stored in water.

The sacrament's benefit is received by faith through the Holy Spirit, and its efficacy is not confined to the exact moment of administration. Believers may look back to baptism throughout life as a continuing sign of God's promise.

Calvin also defends infant baptism by covenantal continuity. The children of believers belonged to the covenant community under Abraham, and he sees baptism as the New Testament sign corresponding to circumcision.

Reading 7 - Westminster and the 1689 Baptist Confession: The Subjects of Baptism

Westminster Confession, Chapter 28 (1646), and Second London Baptist Confession, Chapter 29 (1689) - comparative reading

Both confessions treat baptism as an ordinance instituted by Christ and require administration in the triune name. Both reject the idea that salvation is mechanically tied to the outward act. The dispute is principally over who should receive the sign and how covenant membership is identified.

Westminster says that professing believers and the infants of one or both believing parents should be baptized. The sign marks admission into the visible church and signifies union with Christ, regeneration, forgiveness, and commitment to God.

The Baptist confession restricts baptism to those who actually profess repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. It also describes immersion in water as necessary to the due administration of the ordinance.

The contrast therefore reaches beyond mode. Paedobaptists see children of believers as belonging to the covenant community and therefore entitled to its initiatory sign. Credobaptists see New Covenant membership as defined by personal faith and therefore reserve baptism for professing disciples.

Reading 8 - John Stott: Water Baptism and the Gift of the Spirit

John R. W. Stott, Baptism and Fullness - summary of copyrighted material

Stott distinguishes water baptism from the New Testament language of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. He argues that Spirit baptism is not a second-stage experience that only some Christians receive after conversion. The gift of the Spirit belongs to Christian initiation itself.

At the same time, Stott treats water baptism seriously as the commanded outward sign of belonging to Christ and his people. The New Testament can closely associate repentance, faith, baptism, forgiveness, and the gift of the Spirit without requiring Christians to collapse all of those realities into one mechanical event.

His emphasis is therefore both sacramental and evangelical in a broad sense: do not trivialize baptism as an optional symbol, but do not make the external rite a substitute for repentance, faith, or the Spirit's regenerating work.