

Andrews University  
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A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE PRIMARILY INDEPENDENT ORIGINS OF  
ORIGINAL SIN AND INFANT BAPTISM IN THE FATHERS UNTIL AUGUSTINE

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## INTRODUCTION

The old dictum *lex orandi lex credendi*—“how the Church prays is how the Church believes”—can also be reversed: *lex credendi lex orandi*—“what the Church believes is the foundation for how the Church prays.” What the Church believes is closely connected to how it functions. These are especially true in regard to what the Church believes about salvation and how it is accomplished. As Millard Erickson writes, “the one factor that gives basic shape to everything the church does, the element that lies at the heart of all its functions [is] the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> What the Church believes about sin and salvation are deeply connected to the question of the nature of the sacraments. “One of the truisms of systematic theology is that no doctrine can float freely or independently from others. . . . For doctrines do not sit in the Christian faith like marbles in a jar; they are more like threads in a garment.”<sup>2</sup> Paul’s discussion in Romans of the problem and nature and origin of sin and the solution proffered by Christ reaches a focal point in his discussion of the role of Adam in Romans 5:12–21,<sup>3</sup> and is followed directly by a discussion of baptism in chapter 6. The Reformers defined the nature of the Church according to its relationship to the sacraments: The “visible church is the assembly of those who hold the Gospel of Christ and rightly use the sacraments.”<sup>4</sup>

All of this points toward a close connection between soteriology and ecclesiology. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical development of original sin (the foundational

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 980.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Reeves and Hans Madueme, “Threads in a Seamless Garment: Original Sin in Systematic Theology” in Madueme and Reeves, eds., *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 210.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Lloyd Jones (*Romans: Chapter 5*, [London, England: Banner of Truth, 1971]), 210, suggested that this passage is the central and most significant passage of Romans, and that it connects Paul’s discussion of “central and fundamental biblical doctrines.”

<sup>4</sup> Philipp Melanchthon and Jacob A. O. Preus, *The Chief Theological Topics: Loci Praecipui Theologici 1559*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 2010), 240. See also Melanchthon, *The Augsburg Confession*, Article VII, “Of the Church” <http://www.lcms.org/lutheranconfessions>; Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 289. (4.1.9).

element of soteriology) and that of baptism (one of the essential rituals of the Church which concerns its nature), particularly infant baptism, something closely associated with original sin after the time of Augustine. This study will show that the origins of infant baptism were largely independent of the emergence of the doctrine of original sin, but that it arose instead due to various other historical and theological factors—a certain reading of John 3:5, high infant mortality rate, “emergency baptisms” immediately before death (due to the preceding two items), and especially the *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments.

This paper will consist of three sections: 1) An examination of the scholarly discussion of the most important primary sources related to infant baptism and original sin in the Church Fathers before Augustine, 2) An evaluation of the preceding, and 3) a summary and conclusion with recommendations for further study.

## THE CHURCH FATHERS BEFORE AUGUSTINE<sup>5</sup>

### **Justin, Polycarp, and Irenaeus**

Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland engaged in an important scholarly debate in the early 1960s regarding the question of the origins of infant baptism. Jeremias took the view that the practice went back to apostolic times, whereas Aland proposed a much later (third or fourth century) origin. Jeremias took a statement from Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* (150–155 AD) as

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<sup>5</sup> A study of the New Testament evidence regarding both the nature and province of baptism lies beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to note here that the evidence has been claimed strongly by both proponents and detractors of paedobaptism, and that some passages’ ambiguities and absence of determinative elements regarding the question at hand tend to lend themselves readily to such a situation. David F. Wright, in *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies*, “The Origins of Infant Baptism—Child Believers Baptism?” (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 5 writes, “The study of the New Testament might conceivably justify a range of conclusions. It may be held that its evidence does not enable us to decide whether infant baptism was practiced in apostolic Christianity.” Not all view the situation in this light, however. Both advocates and detractors of infant baptism see clear evidence in support of their views in the New Testament writings. Perhaps one way of expressing the situation is to say that some, at least, of the New Testament references can be viewed as “silent on the specific question of infants, and an argument from silence is always the most difficult either to defend or refute,” Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 36.

evidence that he knew of infant baptism being regularly practiced.<sup>6</sup> “Many, both men and women, who have been Christ’s disciples from childhood, remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years.”<sup>7</sup> Aland avers that this passage does not seem to provide sufficient evidence for infant baptism, but could be read simply as saying that “they had been instructed in Christian faith from childhood, and grown up in a Christian family.”<sup>8</sup> Jeremias responded by noting that Justin uses “become disciples” in another place (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 32) as a reference to Matt. 28:19 and baptism.<sup>9</sup> Everett Ferguson, however, much of whose own work has centered on the early church, its background and rituals, especially baptism, is also skeptical of this being a reference to paedobaptism. He suggests that this passage “says nothing about the age of their baptism, for someone raised in a Christian home could be spoken of in the same way.”<sup>10</sup> Wright is also not convinced by Jeremias’ argument regarding the Greek phrase *ek paidōn*, and he suggests that it means “from childhood” rather than “from babyhood,” and that this would fit the context of the quotation more convincingly.<sup>11</sup>

Jeremias also suggests that a quotation from *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (9)<sup>12</sup> is evidence of paedobaptism: “Eighty and six years have I served Him.” Aland’s response was that “the text is made to yield too much.”<sup>13</sup> In his later rejoinder to Aland, Jeremias admitted that “this confession does not indeed mention baptism. Yet it permits an inference to be made.”<sup>14</sup> David Wright, another scholar who has specialized in the study of the origins of infant baptism,

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 72.

<sup>7</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 15 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers; Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325*, American reprint of the Edinburgh ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1953), 10 vols., 1:167. Hereafter ANF.

<sup>8</sup> Aland, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremias, *The Origins*, 55–58.

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, 363.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, “Origins” in *Infant Baptism*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9 in ANF, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Aland, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremias, “Origins,” 58.

suggests that this dialogue is “inconclusive” and Ferguson notes that this kind of testimony from Polycarp from c. AD 190–191 “could have been spoken without dating his baptism.”<sup>15</sup>

A quotation from Irenaeus in the second book of *Against Heresies* has also been viewed by some (including Jeremias) as being evidence for widespread belief in infant baptism in the second century. “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.”<sup>16</sup>

Jeremias views the phrase “reborn to God” as a certain reference to baptism, and the subsequent mention of infants as being unequivocal evidence for their baptism—“he bears witness in our passage to infant baptism.”<sup>17</sup> Aland responds by noting that the context mentions Jesus own baptism at the age of thirty, and His sanctifying of all ages of humanity by His life, by being their example. “Nothing more than this is presupposed; nothing more than this is stated; therefore nothing more than this should be sought from it.”<sup>18</sup>

Jeremias, in his rejoinder, reiterates his point that “reborn to God” is consistently attested as a reference to baptismal regeneration in early Christian sources,<sup>19</sup> and thus it follows that this offhand reference to widely used and known terminology confirms it as inclusive of infant baptism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, 363.

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.22.4 in NNF 391.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Aland, 59.

<sup>19</sup> He mentions Justin, *First Apology*, 61.3, 10; 66.1; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 138.2; *Oracula Sybillina* 8.316; *Acts of Thomas*, 132; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.12; *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 7–8; Origen, *Homiliae in Lucam*, 28; *Commentaria in Evangelium Joannis*, Fragment 121; *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, 7.8.1; 11.26.1 f.; 11.27.2. To these could be added Theophilus, *Theophilus to Atolycus*, 16, “On the Fifth Day;” ANF 2, 101. An examination of these sources reveals that Jeremias is essentially correct in his assertion that regeneration or being “born again” is associated with baptism regularly during the first two centuries, though some references, such as Origen’s Commentary on John, are less definitive.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremias, “Origins,” 62–63. W

Wright, who does not accept the apostolic origins of the practice, nonetheless concurs with Jeremias' argument here, and suggests that the practice may have indeed begun around 150 A.D. However, he also deduces that the uniform mention of adult candidates until this time and the lack of infants being mentioned explicitly in the language of baptismal rites until Hippolytus and Tertullian (of which more below) militate against Jeremias' hypothesis of the early Christians following the Jewish practice of including infants in proselyte baptism. In the case of the Jewish proselytes, there is evidence other than the rites by which inclusion of infants is clearly demonstrated, whereas it is just this kind of evidence is lacking in the earliest Christian sources.<sup>21</sup>

Ferguson says, regarding this Irenaeus quote, that "this may be the earliest reference to infant baptism." But he goes on to suggest that such a conclusion might be premature. He notes that the term "regeneration" can be used by Irenaeus to refer to "Jesus' work of renewal and rejuvenation effected by his birth and resurrection without any reference to baptism" and that this kind of meaning "fits the context of recapitulation in which the passage occurs. The coming of Jesus brought a second beginning to the whole human race. He sanctified every age of life." As such, he concludes that baptism "falls outside the purview of this passage."<sup>22</sup>

### **Tertullian**

As Wright notes, "all the earlier evidence is vulnerable to some element of uncertainty or qualification."<sup>23</sup> This is not the case, however, in regard to evidence from the late second and third centuries. A passage from Tertullian's treatise on baptism (c. 200) constitutes the earliest non-disputed reference to the inclusion of infants. He argues against the practice based on the

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, "Origins" in *Infant Baptism*, 10–11.

<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, 308.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, "Origins" in *Infant Baptism*, 8.

“innocence” of infants, and the dangers attending the sponsors and the infant if later apostasy occurs. Only in cases of “necessity” should an infant be baptized.<sup>24</sup>

While Tertullian certainly acknowledged a basic initial corruption of human nature, due to both the influence of Satan as well as Adam’s fall in his *Treatise on the Soul*,<sup>25</sup> even going so far as to say that human beings, “being given over to death on account of his sin, the entire human race, tainted in their descent from him, were made a channel of transmitting his condemnation,”<sup>26</sup> it appears that the nature of this condemnation, based on this context as well as other passages in the *Treatise*, appears to be limited to physical death. He also affirmed that there is both good and evil in the soul from the outset, and that neither the spirit of God nor the devil is naturally planted in the soul at birth.<sup>27</sup> Consistent with the above quotation, he did not affirm that any guilt was attached to the initial state of the soul at birth. As Ferguson notes, “There is no contradiction between *On the Soul* 39–41 and *Baptism* 18 if guilt is not imputed for the corruption in human nature.”<sup>28</sup> Ferguson, among others, also significantly affirms that the innocence of infants was widely held throughout Christendom by “a host of earlier Christian writers”<sup>29</sup> (more on this below). Tertullian’s objection regarding the dangers of early baptism is suggested by Maxwell Johnson to be connected with the reality of the arduous difficulties associated with post-baptismal sin. “His concern here, undoubtedly, is to spare both children and

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<sup>24</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18 in ANF 3, 678.

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 16; 39–41 in ANF 3, 194–195; 219–221.

<sup>26</sup> Tertullian, *The Soul’s Testimony*, 3 in ANF 3, 177.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11; 41, ANF 3

<sup>28</sup> Ferguson, 365, n. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, 365. See also Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), 1:53–54. Ferguson here quotes ten early sources which affirm the view that infants and children were innocent. W. Travis McMaken, *The Sign of the Gospel: Toward an Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism after Karl Barth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 17. See also David F. Wright, “How Controversial was the Development of Infant Baptism?” in *Infant Baptism*, 28.

their sponsors from any eventual need to undertake what was a rather harsh penitential discipline.”<sup>30</sup>

It should also be noticed, as Ferguson suggests, that there is a hint in this passage regarding a possible cause of the origins of infant baptism (discussed further below) by the mention of cases of “necessity.” This could be a reference to an established practice of baptizing infants who were near death, who, despite their innocence, were viewed as being in danger without baptism, due to a certain reading of John 3:5, i.e. that baptism was absolutely essential for salvation. Tertullian himself echoes this understanding while quoting John 3:5 in *On Baptism*, 12—“without baptism, salvation is attainable by none,”<sup>31</sup> though (consistent with his admonitions to delay baptism) he acknowledged exceptions: being covered by faith until baptism<sup>32</sup> or by obtaining salvation through martyrdom—the baptism of blood.<sup>33</sup>

Jeremias, in his reply to Aland, seeks to emphasize that Tertullian did in fact view Christian children as being sinful and in need of baptism, and adduces a number of quotations from Tertullian which emphasize the effects of Adam’s fall. Of these, the most compelling is from *The Soul’s Testimony*: “The angel of evil, the source of error, the corrupter of the whole world, by whom in the beginning man was entrapped into breaking the commandment of God. And (the man) being given over to death on account of his sin, the entire human race, tainted in their descent from him, were made a channel for transmitting his condemnation.”<sup>34</sup> While this appears to be one of the adumbrations of the doctrine of original sin before Augustine (discussed further below), such a conclusion might be premature given all the evidence discussed so far,

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<sup>30</sup> Johnson, 89–90.

<sup>31</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 12 in ANF 3, 675.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 16 in ANF 3, 677.

<sup>34</sup> Tertullian, *The Soul’s Testimony*, 3 in ANF 3, 177.

especially that of the dual impulses upon the soul, the reluctance to baptize infants due to their innocence, and (see below) the notion of puberty driving out such innocence. It could be the case, as Ferguson argues, that the “condemnation” referred to here is that of physical death, not lostness and guilt.<sup>35</sup> It appears that Tertullian viewed the soul from birth as being both tainted by the sin of the fall but also essentially innocent. Aland pointed toward Tertullian’s description of puberty at the age of fourteen driving man “out of the paradise of innocence and chastity.”<sup>36</sup> It should also be noted that Jeremias eventually conceded the following points: He no longer viewed *De Anima* as recommending infant baptism, and that while “Tertullian is acquainted . . . with the idea of Adam’s ‘original sin’ with all its depraving consequences for each of his offspring; . . . he has not yet developed an explicit doctrine of the ‘original guilt’ of Adam’s descendants.” If he had, he would have assented to the baptism of infants in all cases.<sup>37</sup> Wright consonantly notes that “no close connection had yet been forged by him or the church between original sin and infant baptism or that, in his thought about the benefits of baptism, the sins of responsible free will loomed much larger than the inheritance from Adam, in whatever terms this was defined.”<sup>38</sup> It should also be noted that a minimal conclusion can be adduced that the beginnings of infant baptism preceded Tertullian, and perhaps also that “the practice was neither long established nor generally accepted.” But neither was it a “novel practice.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Hippolytus and The Apostolic Tradition**

To the degree that the *Apostolic Tradition*, ascribed to Hippolytus, is authentic,<sup>40</sup> this document (traditionally dated to c. 215 A.D.) is also explicit in its reference to the practice of

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<sup>35</sup> Ferguson, 365, n. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Aland, 67; Tertullian *A Treatise on the Soul*, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremias, *Origins*, 68–69.

<sup>38</sup> Wright, “How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism?” in *Infant Baptism*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Ferguson, 366.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the textual problems and variants, see Johnson, 101–110.

infant baptism: “And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family.”<sup>41</sup> While this also (with the above contingency of authenticity) constitutes strong evidence for the emerging of infant baptism as a more regular practice from the middle of the second till the beginning of the third century, there is nothing in the document to indicate any reasons for why children unable to answer for themselves were included. Jeremias suggests that these were cases of “missionary baptisms” in which whole families were baptized together, and thus also argues that this was the continuation of the New Testament “household baptisms.”<sup>42</sup> Aland’s response, however, is that the children were probably children of Christian parents, since parents or other family members were to speak for them, and this could only take place by those who were already Christians.<sup>43</sup> According to Ferguson, the whole liturgy is based on the assumption of adult candidates, in which case it could be assumed that the inclusion of children in the order was a later interpolation.<sup>44</sup>

In either case, this source provides evidence in regard to a possible date of the beginning of infant baptism, but not any theological reason for why it was being practiced.

### **Origen—The First Connection to Original Sin?**

Such a reason, is given, however, in three passages from the writings of Origen. In all three, he cites the LXX of Job 14:4–5 (“No man is clean of stain, not even if his life upon the earth had lasted but a single day”) as a reason for why small children are baptized. In the first of these passages, after referring to a recurring question among believers as to why infants are

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<sup>41</sup> Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 21.4–5, in *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr = [Apostolikē Paradosis]*, ed. Gregory and Henry Chadwick Dix (London; Ridgefield, CT: Alban Press; Morehouse Pub., 1992), 33.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 74–75; *Origins*, 28–32.

<sup>43</sup> Aland, 51–52.

<sup>44</sup> Ferguson, 366–367.

baptized, he mentions that the rite is to remove the “stains of birth.”<sup>45</sup> In the second, he refers to the baptismal formula “for the forgiveness of sins,” and argues that baptism of infants would be “superfluous” if they did not have sin of some kind.<sup>46</sup> In the third, he refers to the offerings given at birth (Lev. 12:8), quotes Psalm 51:5, and mentions that “the Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children because of “innate defilement . . . washed away through water and the Spirit” to cleanse the “body of sin.”<sup>47</sup>

Jeremias deduces from these quotations that infant baptism was “so natural and undisputed that it can provide extra support to underpin his assertion based on Scripture that newborn children are tainted with sin.”<sup>48</sup> He views the discussion among believers alluded to as evidence for the question of *why* infants are being baptized, not *whether* they should be. He views this as an example of *lex orandi lex credendi*—as the church prays so it believes (more on this below). Aland, however, proposes that the discussion involved was due to disagreement among “circles, and that not small and uninfluential, whose members held a different opinion as to the necessity of infant baptism.”<sup>49</sup> Wright suggests that Jeremias is essentially correct in his conclusions that it was the “why” rather than the “whether” question that was at stake.<sup>50</sup> He also proposes that this was a case of *lex orandi lex credenda*—“the rite in search of an agreed meaning.”<sup>51</sup> In regard to the meaning of the passages quoted above and their relationship to the doctrine of original sin as articulated by Augustine, Aland states that Origen (along with

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<sup>45</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Luke ; Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, vol. 94, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 58–59.

<sup>46</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus: 1–16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, vol. 83, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 157–58.

<sup>47</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Books 1–5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, vol. 103, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 367.

<sup>48</sup> Jeremias, *Origins*, 72.

<sup>49</sup> Aland, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, “How Controversial?” in *Infant Baptism*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Cyprian, discussed below) was indeed a precursor of Augustine in this regard, and that in fact it was rather a case of *lex credendi lex orandi*. “As soon as the conviction becomes prevalent, however, that an infant participates in sin, even when born of Christian parents, infant baptism as a requirement or practice is unavoidable.”<sup>52</sup>

Ferguson, Wright, McMacken, and Johnson<sup>53</sup> have all challenged this historical interpretation, on the grounds that infant baptism was in fact a practice that preceded the doctrine of original sin as theological justification for it, and moreover that it was practiced by Church Fathers (especially in the east) who presupposed the innocence of infants yet baptized them anyway for other reasons (see below), as well as the actual content of the quotations noted above.

In regard to the latter, Ferguson urges caution in seeing adumbrations of original sin in the quotations cited here. He draws attention to the context in which the first quotation occurs in the *Homilies on Luke*, where it appears that Origen is referring to some kind of ceremonial defilement. In 14.3 of the same Homily 14, Origen cites the same Job passage (14:4–5 LXX) that he does in section 5 in regard to infants, and also applies it to Jesus, who had “stains” because of taking on a human body.<sup>54</sup> “The same impurity that attached to Jesus’ birth applies to all human beings.”<sup>55</sup> In regard to the passage from his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Wright notes that “Origen’s conception of original sin was hardly mainstream,” and Johnson suggests that for Origen and others in the Greek-speaking East, the narrative of Adam

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<sup>52</sup> Aland, 104.

<sup>53</sup> Ferguson, 378. Wright, “How Controversial?” in *Infant Baptism*, 33. “It is difficult to point to a single eastern Father in the fourth century who links infant baptism with sin or original sin.” As shown above, he views infant baptism as a “rite in search of an agreed meaning.” <sup>53</sup> McMacken, 17–18, writes, “Only with Augustine did the damning guilt of original sin become significant. Even here, however, one must note that Augustine’s argument with the Pelagians moves from the practice of infant baptism—which he represents as standard practice stretching back to the apostles—to the doctrine of original sin, and not the reverse. Both parties accept the possibility of infant baptism, but they disagree as to why it is done.” Johnson, 195, refers to infant baptism as “a practice which antedates any theological rationale for it.”

<sup>54</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 14.3, in trans. Lienhard, 57.

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson, 368–369. See also Johnson, 74–75.

and Eve was “a fitting model of a fallen humanity, who continues to ratify the ‘original sin’ of Adam by its own sins,”<sup>56</sup> as Pelagius would later argue against Augustine’s ideas. Other passages from Origen’s commentary on Romans show clearly his denial of the essential elements of Augustine’s concept of original sin and his affinity with and pre-echoes of Pelagius’ views: Adam was essentially a poor example, and each person dies because of their own sins—not Adam’s.<sup>57</sup>

### **Cyprian—Toward a Connection?**

In c. 250 A.D., a council of sixty-six bishops including Cyprian, held at Carthage, in response to a letter by one Fidus, dealt with the latter’s question regarding the proper time for baptizing infants—the eighth day or immediately after birth. After advocating that it was not necessary to follow the practice of “spiritual circumcision” in exact parallel with “carnal circumcision”—i.e. the rite should be administered immediately after birth, he added,

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson, 195.

<sup>57</sup> Support for this interpretation appears evident from Origen’s other comments on chapter 5 of Romans in the *Commentary*. “If sin and death entered into this world and inhabit this world, it is certain that those who are dead to this world through Christ, or rather with Christ, are strangers to death and sin.” Origen, *Commentary* 5.1.16, trans. Scheck, 312. For a child who commits an act of sin, such as striking his father or mother, “because the natural law does not yet exist in him” and because of his ignorance, “sin is dead in him” and “sin cannot be reckoned to him.” Origen, *Commentary* 5.1.25, trans. Scheck, 317. “Those who are born become not only sons of their parents but also their pupils; and they are not prodded into the death of sin so much by nature as by instruction.” Only in those who follow the bad example of their parents are persons for whom “death reigns in Adam.” Origen, *Commentary*, 5.2.10, trans. Scheck, 332. In commenting on the dominion of death by the transgression of Adam, he states that death is the result for personal sin, not Adam’s. Death “cannot exercise dominion in anyone unless it receives the right to rule from transgression. . . . A soul created by God is itself free, it leads itself into slavery by means of transgression and hands over to death, so to speak, the IOU of its own immortality which it had received from its own Creator.” Origen, *Commentary*, 5.3.3, trans. Scheck, 336. He interprets the condemnation from Adam as a reference to the common death of all people, because all are fashioned in the “valley of tears.” Origen, *Commentary*, 5.5.5, trans. Scheck, 341. In commenting on Paul’s statement that all have been made or constituted as sinners due to Adam’s transgression, Origen proposes that this does not apply to all equally. “Not all, but many have been made sinners. . . . It is one thing to have sinned, another to be a sinner.” Origen, *Commentary*, 5.5.2–3, trans. Scheck, 341–342. “Adam offered sinners a model through his disobedience; but Christ, in contrast, gave the righteous a model by his obedience. . . . Those who follow the example of his [Christ’s] obedience might be made righteous by righteousness itself, just as those others were made sinners by following the model of [Adam’s] disobedience.” Origen, *Commentary*, 5.6.9, trans. Scheck, 344.

But again, if even to the greatest sinners, and to those who had sinned much against God, when they subsequently believed, remission of sins is granted—and nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace—how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins—that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another.<sup>58</sup>

At least two important observations can be made here: First, as Ferguson notes, “there was no direct connection between circumcision and baptism in the theological reflection of the time.”<sup>59</sup> Second, there is the question of whether the final part of the passage represents an adumbration of the Augustinian conception of original sin. According to Wright, Cyprian here “made original sin part of the framework of thought about infant baptism for the first time in the West.” He also suggests that Cyprian’s prestige, martyrdom, and the conciliar authority of the statement ensured that this passage “would prove a priceless weapon in Augustine’s armory against the Pelagians.”<sup>60</sup>

Ferguson again urges more caution, and suggests that Cyprian may be operating with the same category of ritual defilement as was the case with Origen.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Cyprian’s emphasis is on the inheritance of physical death as a result of Adam, “so one should be cautious about concluding too much of a doctrine of original sin in Cyprian’s reference to the sins (note the plural) of another.”<sup>62</sup> Notwithstanding that it is “‘the contagion of the ancient death’ [which] is what is inherited, not original sin as such, but there may be the beginning of a theology of original sin.”<sup>63</sup> Johnson agrees with this assessment:

[This text] shows the *beginnings* of a theology of original sin in relationship to baptism based on the inheritance of that sin from Adam. To be precise, however, what is inherited, according to Cyprian, is “the contagion of the ancient *death* at *its* earliest birth,” rather than original sin *per se*. Furthermore, since this “sin” is still that of another (i.e. of Adam) and not their own, infants themselves remain innocent.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 58 [64].4–5 in *ANF* 5, 354.

<sup>59</sup> Ferguson, 370.

<sup>60</sup> Wright, “How Controversial?” 31.

<sup>61</sup> Ferguson, 371.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 27.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, 92.

Finally, it should be noted that this passage from Cyprian appears to view infant baptism as something regular and even required at his place and time. But as we have seen, and will see further, this does not appear to be the case at all places and times before the time of Augustine. As Aland points out, “We must conclude that infant baptism at this time in Africa was not only a Church rule but a Church requirement.”<sup>65</sup>

### **The Fourth Century East: No Connection—Infant Innocence and Infant Baptism**

Gregory of Nazianzus, in his *Oration* 40, discusses infant baptism. He approved of the baptism of infants and small children, at first seemingly under all conditions. “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!”<sup>66</sup> But a bit later he discusses some further details. He suggests that they should be baptized if they are near death (“if danger presses”), but in all other circumstances, they should wait until at least the age of three, when they can understand and “answer something about the Sacrament” even if it is not completely understood—they can learn more later. He assumes the innocence of infants—they have no account to give for “sins of ignorance,” but argues that emergency baptism is better than their departing life “unsealed and uninitiated.” As a precedent, he offers circumcision, in which there was a sort of typical seal, and was conferred on children before they had the use of reason.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Aland, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.17, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, ed. Philip and Henry Wace Schaff, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, Grand Rapids: T. & T. Clark; Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 7:365. Hereafter *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.28 in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 370.

Wright sees inconsistencies between Gregory's admonitions to baptize infants in certain situations and his reluctance to do so in other cases. "His inconsistency illustrates to a tee the difficulties churchmen got into in encompassing within a rite created for responsible—literally, capable-of-answering—sinners infants who could neither answer for themselves nor had any sins to be forgiven."<sup>68</sup> Ferguson proposes that this quotation gives evidence that Gregory "does not recognize it [infant baptism] as the normal practice, and he knows questions about it, factors that do not encourage the thought that it was a long-standing routine practice."<sup>69</sup> He also suggests that the reason for advocating the delay was "another indication of the importance he attached to the confession of faith in connection with baptism."<sup>70</sup> He additionally points out that Gregory addresses the fate of those infants who are not baptized in this same *Oration* on baptism: they "will be neither glorified nor punished by the righteous Judge, as unsealed and yet not wicked, but persons who have suffered rather than done wrong."<sup>71</sup> An interesting, an indeed new theme, is the explicit argument for a parallel between circumcision and infant baptism,<sup>72</sup> even if they are not so conjoined as to necessitate an obligatory and regular practice, as was later argued.

Of Gregory of Nyssa, it has been written that he "appears to ignore infant baptism altogether."<sup>73</sup> He "seems to ignore the custom of infant baptism with the theories that have grown out of it, and to maintain the primitive point of view according to which the normal recipients of baptism are adults, and the sins which are forgiven through the sacrament are the actual sins committed by the neophytes in their past lives."<sup>74</sup> This is all the more interesting

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<sup>68</sup> Wright, "At What Ages Were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?" in *Infant Baptism*, 64.

<sup>69</sup> Ferguson, 595.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

<sup>71</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.23 in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 7:367.

<sup>72</sup> Ferguson writes, "He makes a new application of the analogy from circumcision" (594).

<sup>73</sup> Wright, "How Controversial?" in *Infant Baptism*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Norman Powell Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1927), 279.

because he wrote a treatise titled *On Infants' Early Deaths*, where he writes of infants maturing in the afterlife in a kind of pleasant purgatory of growth.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, he concludes in this treatise, similarly to Gregory of Nazianzus, that infants are neither doomed to hell nor are given the same pleasures of those who have had time to develop virtue so as to receive a due reward.<sup>76</sup> With John Chrysostom, we find, as with Gregory of Nazianzus, a willingness to baptize infants while holding simultaneously to their innocence, but in his case there is no reluctance about baptizing them immediately upon birth, “although they are sinless,” so that they can receive sanctification, justice, filial adoption, and inheritance, that they may be brothers and members of Christ, and become dwelling places for the Spirit.<sup>77</sup>

In summary, with regard to the question of connecting original sin to infant baptism, Wright categorically states that “it is difficult to point to a single eastern Father in the fourth century who links infant baptism with sin or original sin.”<sup>78</sup>

While Chrysostom’s comments could be taken to mean that infants were baptized regularly, it could also be the case, as Ferguson proposes, that the baptisms referred to were emergency baptisms. A possible reason for this interpretation is the fact that the norm among prominent Christian leaders in the fourth century was to be baptized as an adult. “The church

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<sup>75</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Infants' Early Deaths* in *NPNF<sup>2</sup>*, 5:377.

<sup>76</sup> “But the soul that has never felt the taste of virtue, while it may indeed remain perfectly free from the sufferings which flow from wickedness having never caught the disease of evil at all, does nevertheless in the first instance partake only so far in that life beyond (which consists, according to our previous definition, in the knowing and being in God) as this nursling can receive; until the time comes that it has thriven on the contemplation of the truly Existent as on a congenial diet, and, becoming capable of receiving more, takes at will more from that abundant supply of the truly Existent which is offered. . . . The premature deaths of infants have nothing in them to suggest the thought that one who so terminates his life is subject to some grievous misfortune, any more than they are to be put on a level with the deaths of those who have purified themselves in this life by every kind of virtue; the more far-seeing Providence of God curtails the immensity of sins in the case of those whose lives are going to be so evil” (*Ibid.*, 377, 381).

<sup>77</sup> John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, 3.6 in *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, trans. Paul W. Harkins, vol. 31 of *Ancient Christian Writers*, eds. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1963), 57.

<sup>78</sup> Wright, “How Controversial?” in *Infant Baptism*, 33.

fathers of the fourth century, who were not themselves baptized as infants, but never before Augustine reproached their parents for not having them baptized as children, nonetheless urged that baptism could be administered at any age.”<sup>79</sup> Wright, Ferguson, and Jeremias provide lists of these leaders including Ambrose, Augustine, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Paulinus of Nola as well as members of their families who were baptized as adults.<sup>80</sup>

### **The Fourth Century Delay of Baptism**

As Ferguson notes, the legalization and promotion of Christianity in the fourth century after Constantine resulted in a situation in which “affiliation with the church was advantageous for those politically and socially ambitious, but not all were willing to undertake full responsibilities of church membership.”<sup>81</sup> As a result, with the assumptions that baptism just before death was appropriate (as was the case with “emergency” infant baptisms) and that baptism forgave all previous sins and was essential for salvation fully in place, many people began to postpone their baptisms until such times as they were sick and near death.<sup>82</sup> As Ferguson also writes, this resulted in exhortations from Christian leaders to the people to not delay their baptisms.<sup>83</sup> According to Jeremias, consonant with his view that infant baptism had been the norm until this time, the reason for the arising of this trend of delay was the pagan and superstitious infiltration of the Church after Constantine—i.e. that it was people who had not grown up in the church that precipitated this trend.<sup>84</sup> Aland, however, posits that this kind of situation can be explained “only when it is recognized that infant baptism was not an absolutely

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<sup>79</sup> Ferguson, 628.

<sup>80</sup> Wright, “At What Ages?” in *Infant Baptism*, 65; Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 88–89; Ferguson, 626–627.

<sup>81</sup> Ferguson, 617.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 617–626; Jeremias, *Origins*, 41–43.

<sup>84</sup> Jeremias, *Origins*, 41–43.

binding requirement everywhere in the Church, or at least that it was not compulsory in certain quarters, and that with that practice existed a baptism of children of a mature age which met with no ecclesiastical objection.”<sup>85</sup> This interpretation comports with that of Ferguson. Before the fifth century, “if children were healthy, there is no evidence that their parents presented them for baptism.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Christian Tomb Inscriptions**

Ferguson notes that these inscriptions do not serve to adjudicate the question of *when* infant baptism commenced, since all of them date from times beyond the first evidence for the practice,<sup>87</sup> but they might shed light on the question of *why* infant baptism began.

The ages on the inscriptions range from twenty-four days to fifty-nine years. After going through over thirty of them, Ferguson writes, “It is noteworthy that all of the inscriptions which mention a time of baptism place this near the time of death.”<sup>88</sup> Jeremias, again consistent with his view that Christian infant baptism was the norm, and according to his assessment of the evidence from Origen and Cyprian, concludes that “these emergency baptisms were administered to children of non-Christians.”<sup>89</sup> Aland, however, views the inscriptions as clear evidence of emergency baptisms. In regard to one of the baptisms, that of a twelve year old that was apparently the child of Christian parents, Aland writes that this “inscription actually shatters the thesis that infant baptism was administered to Christian children, and at the same time it tears a very large hole in the idea that infant baptism was obligatory in the third century.”<sup>90</sup> Ferguson

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<sup>85</sup> Aland, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Ferguson, 627.

<sup>87</sup> Everett Ferguson, “Inscriptions and the Origins of Infant Baptism” in Everett Ferguson, *Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church, Studies in Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1993), 391.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>89</sup> Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 80.

<sup>90</sup> Aland, 78–79.

concurr in writing that “the newborn were not routinely baptized in the period of our early inscriptions. Baptism was administered before death, at whatever age. The fact offers the most plausible explanation for the origin of infant baptism.”<sup>91</sup> He suggests that the essentially universal interpretation of John 3:5 in the early church was that baptism was indispensable for salvation, and that this also played a significant role in the emergence of the practice.<sup>92</sup> Wright specifically rejects Jeremias’ theory regarding requests for baptism from pagans as being “anachronistic,” but notes that Ferguson’s thesis is consistent with the evidence, and that his theory goes some way towards explaining certain historical questions such as why Justin did not mention infant baptism and Irenaeus did. “Justin’s silence would show that the emergency baptism of infants had not by then become the regular baptism of all infants, while Irenaeus might be alluding to the regular practice of emergency baptism of children.”<sup>93</sup>

### **Ambrose—Pre-Cursor of Augustine**

In Ambrose a crucial element emerges which prepared the way for Augustine’s very close connection with the already existing (but not universally accepted) practice of infant baptism, and thereafter, for the next thousand years, the inextricable connection of with it: original guilt.<sup>94</sup> While we have seen previous writers embrace concepts such as “recapitulation”—in which Christ reversed and “re-lived” human history as it came from Adam, ceremonial defilement through birth, the curse and condemnation of death because of Adam’s sin, as well as the differing ideas of the retention of righteousness after the fall, there was also

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<sup>91</sup> Ferguson, “Inscriptions” in *Conversion*, 398.

<sup>92</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 378.

<sup>93</sup> Wright, “Origins” in *Infant Baptism*, 12–13.

<sup>94</sup> See Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants*, 3.14 in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 5, 74; *Enchiridion*, 26 in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup>, 246.

universal avowal of infant innocence, and the assumption that Adam serves as a bad example more than anything else.

With Ambrose, what would appear to be the most unambiguous affirmations of the idea of original guilt until his time emerge—that is to say, if one accepts the interpretations offered by Ferguson above regarding the quotations from Cyprian and Origen, the former being taken by some to be the originator of the concept.<sup>95</sup> Not only did he affirm the “birth stains” idea we have seen in Origen and Cyprian, he also echoed their (and many others) view that the act of sex itself was sinful,<sup>96</sup> and was part of the reason why there was this initial defilement, an idea that Augustine would later emphasize considerably. “For He was not begotten, as is every man, by intercourse between male and female, but born of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin; He received a stainless body, which not only no sins polluted, but which neither the generation nor the conception had been stained by any admixture of defilement.”<sup>97</sup> He goes further than the various strains of recapitulation in the Fathers (noted in Irenaeus above), and begins to introduce the idea of a solidarity in Adam that leads to guilt. “In Adam I fell, in Adam I was cast out of Paradise, in Adam I died; how shall the Lord call me back, except He find me in Adam; guilty as I was in him, so now justified in Christ.”<sup>98</sup> “All of us have sinned in the first man and by natural succession there has also been a transmission of guilt from one to all. . . . Adam is in each one of us. In him the human condition transgressed, because through one person sin passed to all.”<sup>99</sup> The idea of seminal solidarity in Adam was not unique to Ambrose. Ambrosiaster wrote that “all

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<sup>95</sup> Williams, 295; Aland, 103–104; Wright, 30–31.

<sup>96</sup> See Williams’ observation regarding Origen and others that there was a “tendency to assume that all sex-activity is intrinsically dangerous and wrong” (226). He describes Ambrose as having “that curious vein of subconscious feeling which we have noted all through the history of the Fall-doctrine, a feeling which may be described as a horror or phobia of sex” (394).

<sup>97</sup> Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance*, 1.3.13 in *NPNF<sup>2</sup> 10*, 331.

<sup>98</sup> Ambrose, *On the Decease of his Brother Satyrus*, 2.6 in *NPNF<sup>2</sup> 10*, 175.

<sup>99</sup> Ambrose, *Apologia prophetæ David ad Theodosium Augustum*, quoted in Pier Franco Beatrice and Adam Kamesar, *The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and His Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 147.

have sinned in Adam as though in a lump. For being corrupted by sin himself, all those whom he fathered were born under sin. For that reason we are all sinners, because we all descend from him.”<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, neither of these writers can be seen as complete predecessors to Augustine because of their seemingly contradictory affirmations which are more Pelagian. Ambrosiaster, for example, in the same passage from his commentary on Romans could write, “We do not suffer this [second] death as a result of Adam’s sin, but his fall makes it possible to get it by our own sins.” And he goes on to say that “many sinned by following Adam, but not all.”<sup>101</sup> Ambrose also affirmed paradoxically that children are innocent,<sup>102</sup> and that they will not suffer torment in hell after death if not baptized, as Augustine would later argue. Instead, “they have a hidden place exempt from punishment, yet I do not think they have the honor of the kingdom.”<sup>103</sup> While Ambrose did appear to teach the idea of original guilt, he “disappoints us if we are looking for an unambiguous declaration that children are baptized for the forgiveness of original *guilt*, although he certainly taught this doctrine.”<sup>104</sup>

#### A SUMMARY AND EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE BEFORE AUGUSTINE

This section will address two primary considerations and tentative conclusions based upon the evidence adduced thus far. First, the question of the origins of infant baptism, including to what degree conceptions of original sin may have played a role, will be addressed. Second, a summary of the essential elements that would underpin and solidify Augustine’s understanding of the connection between infant baptism and original sin will be examined. This discussion will

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<sup>100</sup> Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans*, 5:12, in Ambrosiaster and Gerald Lewis Bray, *Commentaries on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians, Ancient Christian Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 40.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:19, 45.

<sup>102</sup> Ambrose, *Paradise*, 6.31 in Ambrose and John J. Savage, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel, The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation V 42* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961), 309.

<sup>103</sup> Ambrose, *On Abraham* 2.11.84 quoted in Ferguson, 646.

<sup>104</sup> Wright, “How Controversial” in *Infant Baptism*, 37.

highlight both the elements which have been seen in the evidence presented, as well as introducing two other elements, hitherto largely unaddressed, which may in fact be the most determinative—the theology of baptism itself—especially that of an *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacrament, and the negative conceptions of human sexuality.

Ferguson summarizes six theories regarding the origins of infant baptism, most of which have been alluded to above: 1) Jeremias' view that it began in New Testament times based on certain passages therein (including household baptisms) as well as analogies with Jewish proselyte baptisms and the nature of family and household solidarity in the ancient world; 2) Aland's theory that a change in conceptions of original sin, such as in Origen and Cyprian, wherein some kind of remission of sins was envisioned for the infant, was the basis for infant baptism becoming a requirement; 3) Mystery religion rites of initiation; 4) The Punic practice of child sacrifice; 5) Wright's theory that children's baptism was extended to younger and younger ages; and 6) Ferguson's theory that emergency baptism (i.e. due to impending death) eventually became extended into a normal practice.<sup>105</sup>

Ferguson rejects the third and fourth theories, partially because “it is dubious that the practices of the mystery religions were influencing Christian activities in the earliest period,” and that the parallels are insufficient in scope—the mystery religions dealt with children, not newborns, and the Punic rites dealt with the firstborn only.<sup>106</sup> While it seems quite unlikely that the theories of pagan child sacrifice or child initiations were determinative, it could be the case that the certain aspects of pagan magic may have in fact influenced the conception of the Fathers in regard to the power of the ritual acts and words themselves, such that an *ex opere operato* approach began to emerge, which guaranteed the efficacy of the rites performed, not only

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<sup>105</sup> Ferguson, 377–378.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

regardless of the disposition, faith, and life of the administering priest (as was the question during the Donatist controversy) but also regardless of the faith, piety, or lack thereof in the recipient of the ritual.

Given the variety of practices (especially between east and west), the widespread viewpoint that infants were innocent, the delay of baptism in the fourth century, the (I believe) correct observation of Ferguson that Origen's and Cyprian's views of defilement were essentially based on Old Testament ritual rather than Augustine's conceptions of original guilt due to Adam's sin, the mention of "necessity" (implying emergency baptism) in the first undisputed reference to the practice in Tertullian, and the common interpretation of John 3:5, the weight of evidence appears to support Ferguson's theory that the regular practice of infant baptism emerged primarily because of parents viewing the rite as essential before death—i.e. that baptism was absolutely—under all conditions and ages—a necessary requirement for salvation; and given the very high infant mortality rate in the ancient world, it would be a reasonable deduction that such an emergency practice could eventually lead to parents wishing to have their children baptized immediately after birth as a precautionary measure, because one could never know when death might come suddenly.

I would also suggest, however, that there were two other factors, ones which have been alluded to by the scholars thus far cited, sometimes tangentially rather than germanely, that undergird the practice even more fundamentally: 1) the coupling of the aforementioned view that baptism was essential for salvation in all circumstances and ages (excepting martyrdom) with baptismal regeneration effective *ex opere operato*, as hinted at by Ferguson's mention of the common interpretation of John 3:5 and 2) the view of human sexuality as being inherently evil (as we saw above in regard to Origen and Ambrose, but which, as has been noted, was

pervasively present, and which is particularly evident in Augustine). It would seem that infant baptism could not have arisen without these two crucial factors—the first leading inevitably to emergency baptisms (which in turn led to the regular practice) and the second leading to the extension of the idea of birth defilement to the sexual desire itself being inherently evil—even in marriage, such that the products of this act (children) were stained by concupiscence from birth. These two factors were certainly essential ingredients of the Augustinian conception of original sin and its connection with infant baptism;<sup>107</sup> and as has been suggested, it appears that they may have been essential factors in the origination of the practice as well.

Accordingly, in regard to the question which underlies this historical survey—the relationship between original sin and infant baptism—it can be said that the origins of the latter, while not completely unrelated, were largely independent of the former. “Only with Augustine did this link between infant baptism and the damning guilt of original sin become significant.”<sup>108</sup>

### **Pagan Roots of *Ex Opere Operato***

As was mentioned above, there is some evidence for an emerging, possibly magic-influenced *ex opere operato* conception in the Fathers in regard to the efficacy of the sacraments, notwithstanding the fact that this often exists alongside an emphasis upon the faith and life of the participants in Christian ritual. Several have noted a connection between pagan thought and the Fathers’ conception.<sup>109</sup> E.G. Wetlin, in an important article, traces the evidence for these possible connections among them.

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<sup>107</sup> On Augustine’s *ex opere operato*, see footnote 120 below; on his view of the evil of sexual desire, see Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.17, in *NFPF*<sup>1</sup> 5, 270; 2.25 in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 5, 292–293; and 1.27 in *NFPF*<sup>1</sup> 5, 274–275.

<sup>108</sup> McMacken, 17.

<sup>109</sup> Arthur Yates notes that a number of scholars have linked the sacramental nature of Christian ritual in the early centuries with the influence and infiltration of pagan thought. Arthur S. Yates, *Why Baptize Infants? A Study of the Biblical, Traditional, and Theological Evidence*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1993), 121–123. “It is said that the insistence in the early centuries on the objective efficacy of the sacrament of baptism is mainly the result of pagan presuppositions” (Ibid., 132). A. S. Martin wrote in “Grace” in James Hastings, John A. Selbie, and John C. Lambert,

Their general orthodox outlook which naturally demands a sustained intolerance of the magical, admittedly makes scattered, oblique, or inconsistent remarks inviting a magical interpretation very difficult to interpret and assess. But some passages seem sufficiently clear to rule out the possibility that they are meant merely as symbolical, metaphorical, or rhetorical devices.<sup>110</sup>

He looks for three essential elements that comprise an *ex opere operato* conception:

1) evidences of faith in the inherent power of words and signs both in themselves and as imitative operations, 2) signs of efficaciousness in important ceremonies regardless of the subjective intention or character of the ministrant or recipient, 3) indications that God's attention, response, and even presence can be compelled by the ministrant whenever he speaks the required words and makes the prescribed esoteric signs.<sup>111</sup>

He goes on to mention some important examples that evince all three elements in the Fathers, a few from each of the more important first and second categories will suffice to demonstrate that there is some degree of validity to his theory. He mentions Origen's idea that names, properly used, 'produce certain effects, owing either to the nature of those names or to their powers'" and that those of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have "intrinsic efficacy."<sup>112</sup> Quite germane to the subject here explored, in regard to baptism, Cyril writes,

For just as the offerings brought to the heathen altars, though simple in their nature, become defiled by the invocation of the idols, so contrariwise the simple water having received the invocation of the Holy Ghost, and of Christ, and of the Father, acquires a new power of holiness.<sup>113</sup>

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*Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, 2 vols. (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1922), 1:513. "Soon pagan and superstitious elements were to enter in, to alter this free spiritual idea of sacramental grace into 'another grace' altogether—a lapse from personal to sub-personal categories, in perfect consonance with the new and attractive idea of the Church in its visibility and authority as the exclusive custodian of grace." Bultmann observed that the early Christian view of sacrament was that it was an "act which by natural means puts supernatural powers into effect, usually by the use of spoken words which accompany the act and release those powers by the mere utterance of their prescribed wording" Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1951), 1:135. C. Ryder Smith, an advocate of infant baptism, points out the pagan influences of its *ex opere operato* conception. "What is to be said about Infant Baptism? If I understand the Sacerdotalist answer aright, it asserts that by the act of Baptism itself, if properly administered by a right person, 'grace' is given to the child, and by this 'grace' it becomes a child of God. It seems to me that this doctrine has no warrant either in the New Testament or in psychology. I cannot but think that it crept into the Church from the so-called Mystery Religions and other such heathen sources in the days when the Church was far too susceptible to their influence. If the word 'magical' be used in the popular and not in the scientific sense, it seems to me difficult to refuse it to this concept," Charles Ryder Smith, *The Sacramental Society* (London: Published for the Fernley Lecture Trust by Epworth, 1927), 126–27.

<sup>110</sup> E. G. Weltin, "The Concept of *ex-opere-operato* Efficacy in the Fathers as an Evidence of Magic in Early Christianity" in *GRBS* 3, (1960): 74–100, 78.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 80; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 5.45 in *ANF* 4, 563.

<sup>113</sup> Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures*, 3.3 "On Baptism," in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 14–15.

As noted above, this kind of affirmation does not prevent a simultaneous affirmation of the importance of the faith and conduct of the candidate. In this same passage, Cyril writes of the importance of “piety of soul with a good conscience.”<sup>114</sup> But it is not unreasonable to suspect that such attributions of power to the words and water themselves might lead eventually to a de-emphasis upon the attitudes of the recipient, which is in fact eventually what occurred.

Early on the view emerged that the very words spoken over the elements of the Eucharist involved an actual change in them. Wetlin mentions passages from Justin, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose. Justin wrote of the Eucharist,

[It is] not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.<sup>115</sup>

Most pertinently and essentially supportive for Wetlin’s theory, Justin goes on to say that “the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding *the same thing to be done*. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain *incantations in the mystic rites* of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn” (italics supplied).<sup>116</sup> Of course Wetlin would argue that it would be the other way around, i.e. that the pagan context of early Christianity came to influence the ways in which its rites were conceived. Gregory of Nyssa spoke of the power of the sacraments as well as other objects as having an essentially intrinsic efficacy once certain words were pronounced, and that erstwhile common objects and common people would “suddenly” become ontologically holy, transformed into “a higher condition” by means of words pronounced.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 1.66 “On the Eucharist” in *ANF* 1, 185. See also Gregory of Nyssa, who argues for the transformation of the elements into the body and blood of Christ that the believer may be “deified.” *The Great Catechism*, 37 in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 5, 503–504.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ* in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 5, 515.

Wetlin mentions cases which the recipient was an indifferent or even reluctant participant in a ritual which was nonetheless considered to be effective by means of its sacramental nature, such as Sozomen's acceptance of the efficacy of a make-believe baptism participated in by children, saying that it was "unnecessary to rebaptize those who in their simplicity had been judged worthy of divine grace."<sup>118</sup> Wetlin also mentions infant baptism itself as an example of this second category. It would seem to be the case that infant baptism does in fact presuppose the efficacy of the sacrament regardless of the state of the participant, as does an inordinate delay of baptism as well. "Late baptism, supposedly justified by no theological warrant, is supported by a magical misunderstanding of the nature of the sacrament. As a blanket, *ex-opere-operato* erasure of all one's past offenses and proclivities it was supposedly being interpreted more as a magical panacea than as a Christian rite advancing grace."<sup>119</sup> He also mentions examples of forced or unwilling ordinations of a number of prominent Church leaders.<sup>120</sup>

In summary, the argument is not that the Fathers neglected to discuss the importance of faith, preparation, dedication, life change, etc. in association with Christian rituals, but rather that the emphasis became weighted toward the efficacy of these rituals becoming dependent upon the words, elements, or actions associated with them to the degree that eventually the latter eclipsed the former in a number of demonstrable cases. This weight of emphasis toward *ex opere operato* becomes explicit in Augustine.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Wetlin, 90; Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, 2.17 in *NFPF*<sup>2</sup>, 269–270.

<sup>119</sup> Wetlin, 92.

<sup>120</sup> Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Jerome's brother, Martin of Tours, as well as others who sought to evade ordination at all costs from those who sought it for them. Wetlin gives the caveat that some of these stories may have been invented for the purposes of feigned modesty, but that some or most of them are authentic indications of an *ex opere operato* conception of the rite of ordination (Wetlin, 92–93).

<sup>121</sup> He wrote, "Some, indeed, bring their little ones for baptism, not in the believing expectation that they shall be regenerated unto life eternal by spiritual grace, but because they think that by this as a remedy the children may recover or retain bodily health; but let not this disquiet your mind, because their regeneration is not prevented by the fact that this blessing has no place in the intention of those by whom they are presented for baptism. For by these persons the ministerial actions which are necessary are performed, and the sacramental words are

Thus despite the avowal of the importance of preparation, faith, commitment, knowledge of certain theological tenets, renunciation of the devil, etc. in the writings of the Fathers, the pervasiveness of a sacramental-magical conception of these rites came eventually to outweigh the importance of the attitudes of the administrators and recipients, to the point where *ex opere operato* became the most determinative concept. The case of Origen is paradigmatic. After cataloguing the extensive instruction and examination of prospective catechumens advocated by Origen, Ferguson observes, “All this about the word, faith, and repentance might seem inconsistent with infant baptism. . . . The overwhelming tenor of his remarks shows what an anomaly infant baptism was in the thought and practice of the ancient church.”<sup>122</sup>

In light of the preceding evidence, I cannot entirely agree with the idea that infant baptism was a “practice which antedates a theological rationale for it,”<sup>123</sup> or that “the practice preceded the doctrinal defense,”<sup>124</sup> or that it was “an unmistakable illustration of *lex orandi lex credendi*.”<sup>125</sup> There were in fact sacramental, sexual, and perhaps hamartiological theologies that undergirded the inception of the practice. That being said, I would agree with the idea that the practice of infant baptism certainly did precede *Augustine’s* reasoning for the *essential*, *inextricable* connection between this rite and the doctrine of original sin.

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pronounced, without which the infant cannot be consecrated to God. But the Holy Spirit who dwells in the saints, in those, namely, whom the glowing flame of love has fused together into the one Dove whose wings are covered with silver, accomplishes His work even by the ministry of bond-servants, of persons who are sometimes not only ignorant through simplicity, but even culpably unworthy to be employed by Him. The presentation of the little ones to receive the spiritual grace is the act not so much of those by whose hands they are borne up (although it is theirs also in part, if they themselves are good believers) as of the whole society of saints and believers. For it is proper to regard the infants as presented by all who take pleasure in their baptism, and through whose holy and perfectly-united love they are assisted in receiving the communion of the Holy Spirit. Therefore this is done by the whole mother Church.” Augustine, *Letter 98.9* in *NFPF*<sup>1</sup> 1, 410.

<sup>122</sup> Ferguson, 423.

<sup>123</sup> Johnson, 195.

<sup>124</sup> Ferguson, 369.

<sup>125</sup> Wright, “How Controversial?” in *Infant Baptism*, 29.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As all of the above evidence has shown, the essential ingredients were already in place for the forging of the indissoluble connection between infant baptism and original sin that Augustine would come to precipitate by the time his controversy with Pelagius came about in the early fifth century. I would suggest that these essential ingredients (already discussed above) are the following: corporate and seminal solidarity in Adam, a view of sexual desire as being inherently evil, original guilt, high infant mortality rate, the concept of baptismal regeneration, and *ex opere operato* as the final, and perhaps most important ingredient in the connection. Augustine's contribution was to combine and connect all of these elements together into one systematic theology of sin and sacrament, something, as previously discussed, that had essentially been lacking.

Hjalmar Evander's observation aptly summarizes the findings of this research: "The field was made ready for infant baptism, partly by the sacramental-magical character which baptism gradually took under the influence of the mystery cults, partly through the analogy with circumcision on the eighth day, partly through the teaching on inherited sin . . . and finally to the conception of the Church as the exclusive institution of salvation, into which one came through baptism and from which it was not desired to exclude infants."<sup>126</sup> Augustine thus built upon existing assumptions and presuppositions in forging his indissoluble (at least for a thousand years) connection between infant baptism and original sin. He brought all of these preexisting elements together and systematically argued for the connections between them. It has been shown that it is probably the element of *ex opere operato* in the context of mother Church which

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<sup>126</sup> Hjalmar Evander, *Det kristna dopet, dess uppkomst och betydelse: Några synpunkter till ledning för diskussionen vid prästmötet i Lund den 20, 21 och 22 September 1938*, Lund, 1938, quoted in George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London, New York: Macmillan; St Martin's Press, 1962), 354.

is the most foundational element of infant baptism (not original sin—especially since it has been shown that infant baptism was practiced widely before and in times and at places without any such concept). Without *ex opere operato* the practice of infant baptism could neither have arisen nor been solidified as it was by Augustine, who built on this existing presupposition of those before him. As Ferguson writes, with a conclusion consonant with these findings, “The development of the view of baptism as objectively effective paralleled the development of infant baptism. If baptism is defined as consisting of water and the Trinitarian formula, then conscious faith and obedience become less important.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, it seems apparent that it could be said that in such a case they would not be important at all—at least at the time of the administration of the sacrament.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

Important areas for further study would include an examination of the New Testament evidence regarding the meaning and province of baptism, including the question of its propriety for infants, a biblical study on the nature of original sin, and an examination of the connection or lack thereof between infant baptism and original sin and infant baptism from the time of the Reformation to the present, and an exploration of the question of the salvation of some or all infants and its theological grounding.

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<sup>127</sup> Ferguson, 857.

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