

# Baptism in Early Christianity

Riemer Roukema

Published in *Studia Theologica Debrecinensis* 4 (2011), 33-40) and on  
www.riemerroukema.nl

Before I come to the theme of this paper, I will start with two preliminary observations.

1. In the church and in theology, the New Testament is often used as a quarry (kőbánya according to my Hungarian dictionary), in which you can find stones for the house you wanted to build anyway, irrespective of the origin of the stones. So the question is always: what is the house we want to build? And is it the task of a New Testament scholar to provide us with the stones for the house we would like to construct anyway?

2. Furthermore, because of their slogan *Sola Scriptura*, traditional Protestants often have an ambivalent relationship with everything that comes after the Bible – although they do not want to ignore, of course, the creeds of the first centuries, the Church Father Augustine and the Protestant confessions of the sixteenth century that are considered the matrix of the interpretation of Scripture. Rarely, however, there is a special interest in the early Christian developments after the New Testament, since these are considered part of the Catholic ‘tradition’ that is not acknowledged by Protestants. Yet, this interest does exist with regard to those themes that are not fully clarified in the New Testament writings. Concerning our theme, baptism, this happens to be the case, for one of the most urgent questions regarding baptism is whether the tradition to baptize little children, even babies, can be based on the Bible. The New Testament is not quite clear about this, and for that reason in this case the testimonies of the Church Fathers are often taken into account.

Since among Protestants there is no unanimity about the practice of infant baptism, and also the members of Reformed congregations sometimes wonder whether they should baptize their children or even whether they should be rebaptized themselves as adults, the leading questions of this paper will be, 1. whether in the New Testament there are any cues for baptism of little children, and 2. how early patristic authors testify to the tradition of infant baptism. This implies that in the present paper I accept the function of a stonecutter in the quarry of early Christianity.

## The New Testament Epistles

Let us look at the earliest Christian writings that have been preserved, the undisputed epistles of Paul. In his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul writes that he has not been sent to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, yet he admits that he baptized several of the Corinthians such as Crispus, Gaius, and Stephanas and his household (1:14-17). Later on he calls the household of Stephanas the first fruits, in other terms: the first converts of Achaia (16:15). In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul refers to the Corinthians’ baptism when he reminds them that after their previous sinful lives they were washed, sanctified and justified in the name of Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God. This clearly refers to their conversion and to the new life they received in baptism, which implies that Paul has adults in mind. Furthermore he reminds them that the Israelites were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the Red Sea and yet were struck down in the wilderness, which means to Paul that the Corinthian believers too may have no profit of their baptism if they do not live according to God’s will (1 Cor. 10:1-12). In the first

place this points to adult Christians who had converted recently, but did not live according to Paul's teachings.<sup>1</sup>

A question that has puzzled many Protestants is, whether there may also have been children in Stephanas's household, children who were baptized together with the adults. Does the quarry of the New Testament provide us with some stones for this part of the Christian building, infant baptism? As a matter of fact, Paul did not write his epistle in order to answer this question, but in any case we may say that it cannot be excluded, or even that it is likely, that children were included in the household, although these children were not necessarily infants, that is, babies. However, admittedly this text does not *prove* that Paul administered baptism to children.

In his epistle to the Romans Paul mentions baptism only in passing. He reminds his readers that when they were baptized they had been buried with Christ into death, 'so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:4). Paul explains that therefore sin may no longer exercise dominion in their mortal bodies (6:12). He does not say explicitly that those who were baptized have risen with Christ, but he says that they might walk in newness of life. The reason of this subtle formulation is that, according to Paul, the resurrection will take place in the future, as he says in Romans 8:11, 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'

Only in the deutero-Pauline epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians, which have probably been written by one or some of Paul's pupils, we read that God raised up those who believe in Christ, as if spiritually the resurrection has taken place already. The epistle to the Colossians explicitly mentions baptism in this context: 'When you were buried with him [Christ] in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead' (Col. 2:12; cf. Eph. 2:4-6). It is often thought that in Romans 6 Paul already interprets baptism in terms of death and resurrection, as if the baptized person rises out of the water as being new-born and resurrected, but a careful reading of Romans 6 does not allow this interpretation. In any case, these texts suggest that the baptism to which they refer is administered to adults who consciously strove for the newness of life given and expected by God. There is no reference to children, and unfortunately it is not explained either how baptism was practiced. Was it done by immersion or by affusion? Since Paul refers to the Israelites as being baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, which obviously did not take place by immersion – even the Egyptians were immersed, but not baptized!<sup>2</sup> – we may probably conclude that for Paul the idea of baptism does not necessarily presuppose immersion.

The epistle to the Colossians not only interprets baptism in terms of burial and resurrection with Christ, but also says that it is related with circumcision. The text reads that, 'In him [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hand, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ' (Col. 2:11). The argument is that the 'circumcision not performed by human hand' refers to circumcision of the heart, which amounts to conversion.<sup>3</sup> The text means that Christ brought about this spiritual circumcision; therefore it is called 'the circumcision of Christ'. The result of this spiritual

---

<sup>1</sup> Another reference to baptism in this epistle can be found in 1 Cor. 12:13, 'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.' For Biblical quotations in this paper I use the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Howard Marshall, 'The meaning of the verb "baptize"', in Stanley E. Porter, Anthony R. Cross (eds), *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies* (JSNT.SS 234), London, New York, 8-24 (20).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; *1QpHab* 11:13; 1 QS 5:5; *Jubilees* 1:23; Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* I, 305; Rom. 2:29.

circumcision is that one puts off the body of the flesh, which refers to moral and spiritual renewal. The reference to spiritual circumcision by Christ does not imply any comparison between the Jewish practice to circumcise the boys on the eighth day and Christian infant baptism. The denial of this comparison is implicitly confirmed by the Church Fathers, who – to my knowledge – do not interpret Colossians 2:11 as a proof text for baptism of little children<sup>4</sup>, and this is also true for John Calvin’s *Commentary on Colossians*. In passing I note that even in the epistle to the Galatians, in which Paul extensively deals with circumcision, he does not say that for the church baptism took the place of circumcision; his single reference to baptism in this epistle (3:26-29) is only loosely related to circumcision.

Other references in the New Testament epistles do not clarify either whether children were included in the early Christian practice of baptism. On the contrary, they rather seem to refer to adult baptism. In this sense we may understand Titus 3:5, ‘the water of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit’, Hebrews 10:22, ‘let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water’,<sup>5</sup> and 1 Peter 3:21, ‘And baptism (...) now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’ It might be considered whether a testimony to the baptism of children can be found in 1 Corinthians 7:14, where Paul calls the children of a mixed marriage of Christian and non-Christian parents ‘holy’,<sup>6</sup> but since this text does not explicitly refer to baptism at all, it cannot be used as a proof that at that time children were baptized.<sup>7</sup>

#### The Synoptic Gospels and Acts

The Acts of the Apostles also inform us, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 1:16, that several times someone became a believer or was saved or baptized with his or her household (Acts 11:14; 16:15; 16:31-33; 18:8). Just like Paul’s household text in 1 Corinthians, the book of Acts does not explicate that children were included in these households and were baptized as well, but this is certainly possible. In Acts 2:38-39 Peter invites the bystanders to repent and be baptized, and almost in the same breath he speaks about the promise that is ‘for you and for your children’. This text too may certainly allude to baptism of children, but it does not mention it explicitly.

The same conclusion has to be drawn from the synoptic passages of Jesus blessing the little children (Mat. 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17); Luke even tells that these children were ‘infants’ (*ta brephê*, Lk. 18:15). It is possible that the *Sitz im Leben* of this narrative is a dispute about infant baptism, and means that one should not prevent little children to be baptized, but this is not sure. In this case there are a few patristic testimonies to the use of this passage in the context of infant baptism. Around 200 C.E. Tertullian of Carthage, who himself was rather in favour of delaying baptism of children, admits that Jesus said, ‘do not prevent them to come to me’.<sup>8</sup> This most probably implies that Tertullian knew people who appealed to this text as an argument in favour of infant baptism. The first patristic text that positively connects this Gospel passage with infant baptism is a section of the pseudepigrapha-

<sup>4</sup> I checked this in the commentaries of Ambrosiaster, John Chryostom, and Theodoret of Cyrus and in Peter Gorday, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (ACCS NT 9), Downers Grove, Illinois 2000, 31-33 (on Col. 2:11-13); furthermore, modern commentaries or monographs on baptism do not give such a reference.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Hebr. 6:2, ‘instructions about baptisms’, which are included in the ‘basis teaching about Christ’ (Hebr. 6:1), but unfortunately the content of these instructions is not given there.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten*, Göttingen 1958, 52-56.

<sup>7</sup> We will see, however, that Tertullian, *About the Soul* 39, 4 (CCSL 2), thought that children who had a Christian parent were holy (1 Cor. 7:14) because they were born of water and of the Spirit (John 3:5). This clearly suggests that he interpreted Paul’s text with regard to baptism.

<sup>8</sup> *About Baptism* 18, 5 (CCSL 1); cf. Mat. 19:14; Mk 10:14; Lk. 18:16.

phic *Apostolic Constitutions*, from circa 380 C.E., where the apostles reportedly say, ‘Baptize also the infants, and “bring them up in the discipline and the instruction of God”, for he says, “Let the little children come to me and do not prevent them”’ (cf. Eph. 6:4; Lk. 18:16).<sup>9</sup> But even so, these two ancient texts do not prove that the synoptic passage really refers to the practice of baptism of little children; it is only a possibility. Other Church Fathers who quote one of these texts do not relate it with baptism, not even Augustine.<sup>10</sup>

Other Gospel texts that deal with baptism do not explicate anything about children. However, the risen Jesus’ saying, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Mat. 28:19), appears to reflect a broad view of baptism of the nations, which include children, of course. Yet, its counterpart in the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark rather points to adults who consciously believed the Gospel, for it reads, ‘The one who believes and is baptized will be saved’ (Mk 16:16).

### Patristic Testimonies

However, in spite of the absence of definite New Testament proof texts about the practice of infant baptism, in my view we may still assume that in the first century C.E. baptism of children was practiced. The ‘household texts’ do not prove this, but they are implicit witnesses to this custom. We have to be aware that the New Testament texts have neither been written nor collected into the canon in order to describe all the details of the early Christian rituals. There are far more aspects of early Christianity that we do not know exactly, and the reason of this is that many of these aspects were simply known to the Christians of that time, so there was no need to describe all of them in detail. For that reason we are not sure either, for example, about the precise use of water in the ritual of baptism in the New Testament period. Were all candidates immersed, or was affusion of a large amount of water sufficient, or even the sprinkling of a little bit of water?<sup>11</sup> In later, non-canonical texts, however, we sometimes find explicit references to the traditions of the apostles, and in my opinion we have to listen carefully to these testimonies and should not dismiss them as being totally unreliable.<sup>12</sup> In any case, in the first centuries of Christianity the slogan *Sola Scriptura* would have been an anomaly. The church relied on its tradition, which could be found in the ultimate New Testament, but which was also transmitted orally.

Although Irenaeus of Lyons (around 180 C.E.) does not explicitly mention infant baptism, he may still be considered the first witness to it, since he writes, ‘for he [Christ] 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 elderly people’.<sup>13</sup> In this context rebirth undeniably refers to baptism.<sup>14</sup>

The second witness to infant baptism is Tertullian, who preferred, as we saw, the postponement of baptism. In his short treatise *About Baptism* (from about 200 C.E.) he argues that the godparents (*sponsors*) would run the risk of not keeping their promises in case they would die prematurely or in case the children would not accept the faith in which they were

---

<sup>9</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions* VI, 15, 7 (SC 329); see David F. Wright, ‘Out, In, Out: Jesus’ Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism’, in Porter, Cross (eds), *Dimensions of Baptism*, 188-206 (194-195).

<sup>10</sup> Wright, ‘Out, In, Out: Jesus’ Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism’, 195-201.

<sup>11</sup> The *Didache* 7 explains that immersion in running water is preferable, and immersion in some other water is acceptable too; only if this is not possible, the pouring out of water on the head is valid as well.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Riemer Roukema, *Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma*, London 2010, 134-135.

<sup>13</sup> *Against Heresies* II, 22, 4 (SC 294); for the translation, cf. Ante-Nicene Christian Library 5, 200.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., e.g., Titus 3:5; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 21, 1; III, 17, 1; V, 15, 3 (SC 264; 211; 153); *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 3 (SC 406).

educated.<sup>15</sup> He writes, ‘Let them know how to ask for salvation, that you may seem to have given to him who asks’ (cf. Lk. 6:30).<sup>16</sup> He therefore prefers that the children would come when they had grown up (*dum adolescent*), after having received instruction. Tertullian even suggests that, because of carnal temptations, youths defer their baptism until they marry.<sup>17</sup> The fact that he has to defend his position confirms that in Christianity as he knew it children were baptized. In his later work *About the Soul* (from 208-212 C.E.) Tertullian allusively confirms that children who had a Christian parent were holy (1 Cor. 7:14) since they were born of water and of the Spirit (John 3:5).<sup>18</sup>

An ancient text that briefly describes the rite of baptism can be found in a writing that is lost in its original shape and language, Greek, but has been reconstructed out of the translations into various languages and out of later Greek versions; I mean the *Apostolic Tradition* from the third or fourth century C.E., the beautiful church order that has erroneously been attributed to Hippolytus of Rome. It first prescribes how those who are to receive baptism at Easter have to prepare themselves.<sup>19</sup> In the subsequent chapter, the text evokes the hour when the cock crows, and the pool (*kolumbêthra*) is to be filled with water. The neophytes have to put off their clothes, and the children have to be baptized first. Those who can answer for themselves should do so, but if they cannot, their parents or someone from their family is to speak for them. After that, the grown men, and finally the women are to be baptized.<sup>20</sup> This work pretends to transmit the ‘apostolic tradition’, so it is unlikely that it proposes tremendous liturgical and practical innovations. This implies that it describes the practice of the second century church, which in part may go back to the first century.

The next patristic testimony to infant baptism occurs in Origen of Alexandria’s extensive *Commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, written in Greek about 243 C.E. Unfortunately, the Greek text is lost for the most part, so that for our knowledge of this work we depend on the abridged and free Latin translation made by Rufinus of Aquileia in the first decade of the fifth century C.E. In general, we may assume that this translation is relatively reliable, except for some doctrinal matters for which Origen was criticized in Rufinus’s time. In his interpretation of ‘the body of sin’ in Romans 6:6, Origen refers to the Mosaic command that sacrifices be offered for a newborn child: ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young doves; one of which was offered for sin and the other as a burnt offering’ (cf. Lev. 12:7-8; Lk. 2:22-24). Origen asks, ‘For which sin is this one dove offered? Was a newly born child able to sin?’ He then alludes to Job 14:4-5 (LXX), where it is denied that anyone is pure, even if his life should be one day long, and he quotes David in Psalm 50:7 (LXX; 51:7 MT), ‘in sins my mother conceived me’. He adds that the biblical narrative does not relate any sin of David’s mother, and comments,

It is on this account as well that the Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children (*paruulis*). For they to whom the secrets of the divine mysteries were committed were aware that in everyone was sin’s defilement, which needed to be washed away through water and the Spirit (cf. John 3:5). Because of this defilement as well, the body itself is called the body of sin; it is not because of sins the soul committed when it was in another body, as they who introduce the doctrine of *metempsychosis* [reincarnation] imagine. But because the soul was fashioned

<sup>15</sup> *About Baptism* 18, 4, ‘etiam aetate cunctatio baptismi utilior est, praecipue tamen circa paruulos’ (CCSL 1, 293).

<sup>16</sup> *About Baptism* 18, 5. In *About Baptism* 18, 1, Tertullian had quoted those who invoked Lk. 6:30 as an argument that baptism was not to be refused to those who asked for it.

<sup>17</sup> *About Baptism* 18, 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> *About the Soul* 39, 4 (CCSL 2).

<sup>19</sup> *Apostolic Tradition* 20 (translation Gregory Dix, London 1968, or Paul F. Bradshaw et al., Minneapolis 2002).

<sup>20</sup> *Apostolic Tradition* 21.

into the body of sin, and the body of death and lowliness (cf. Rom. 7:24; Phil. 3:21), and just as he said, 'You have lowered our soul to the dust' (Ps. 43:26 LXX, 44:26 MT).<sup>21</sup>

These comments show that Origen does not accept infant baptism because of an 'Augustinian' doctrine of original sin related to sexuality,<sup>22</sup> but because the soul's sin is that it has fallen from its original bliss in heaven into a material body on earth, which is therefore called 'the body of sin' in Romans 6:6. This view of the fall of human souls derives from Platonic philosophy,<sup>23</sup> but Origen does not accept the Platonic anthropology to the extent that he also agrees with the possibility of sins in a previous body, as the gnostic teacher Basilides did.<sup>24</sup>

This testimony to infant baptism is confirmed by Origen's *Homilies on Luke*, where he also writes that little children are baptized 'for the remission of sins' (cf. Acts 2:38), quotes some of the same Biblical texts (Job 14:4-5; John 3:5), and explains that by the sign (*sacramentum* in Jerome's translation) of baptism the stains of birth are taken away.<sup>25</sup>

### In Conclusion

To conclude, I will briefly deal with the question how it can be explained that baptism, which confirms one's conversion, was also administered to little children who could not yet be converted or ask for baptism themselves. Origen's argument concerning the fall of the souls into material bodies was clearly inspired by Platonic philosophy and cannot be considered as being traditional. Remarkably enough, we have no earlier testimonies that explain which reasons were given for infant baptism. The absence of any traces of a debate on infant baptism before Tertullian strongly suggests that from the beginning of Christianity children could be baptized with their parents. We may assume that this was done because baptism was considered the sign of salvation which guaranteed that the baptized person belonged to Christ and God and no longer to the devil. In the mid-third century (251 C.E.), such an argument is given by Cyprian of Carthage.<sup>26</sup> Only from Tertullian onward, we have testimonies to the view that parents or godparents should delay the baptism of their children.<sup>27</sup>

On the basis of these texts from the New Testament *and* later patristic writings, we may conclude that the Reformed custom to baptize the children who grow up with Christian parents is in line with the primitive church.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Commentary on Romans* V, 9 (AGLB 33, 440; PL 14, 1047BC); translation Thomas P. Scheck, *Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Books 1-5* (FaCh 103), Washington D.C. 2001, 367.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 3, Kampen 1929<sup>4</sup>, 70-73.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church*, London 1985, 103-107.

<sup>24</sup> See *Commentary on Romans* V, 1 (AGLB 33, 378; PL 14, 1015A-C).

<sup>25</sup> *Homilies on Luke* 14, 5 (FC 4, 1). Apart from Greek fragments, a selection of these homilies has survived in Jerome's Latin translation of 392. Max Rauer's edition of 1930 (GCS 35), p. 25, also includes a Greek fragment about infant baptism which closely corresponds with the Latin text.

<sup>26</sup> Cyprian, *Epistles* 64, 2-6 (ed. Bayard, vol. 2, 214-216).

<sup>27</sup> See Holger Hammerich, *Taufe und Askese: Der Taufaufschub in vorkonstantinischer Zeit* (doctoral thesis University of Hamburg), Hamburg 1994.