

# TERTULLIAN ON BAPTISM

By Tye Rambo

## Introduction

The act of baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus Christ that has been widely discussed and debated throughout the history of the church. Christians have traditionally come to different conclusions regarding the purpose and meaning of baptism. Like many other doctrines and practices in the Christian church, baptism had to be dealt with by the early church fathers in order to stand against heretical perversion and misrepresentation.

Tertullian of Carthage<sup>1</sup> played a primary role in representing the traditional practice of baptism in the late second and third century church. In fact, he wrote the first surviving treatise on baptism<sup>2</sup> in his work entitled *De Baptismo* or *On Baptism*.<sup>3</sup> The bulk of Tertullian's thoughts

---

<sup>1</sup>Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born at Carthage around A.D. 160 to heathen parents and likely died during the second decade of the third century (around A.D. 220-225). He was the first Latin-writing Christian author whose works we still possess. Tertullian was responsible for much of the theological vocabulary of Western Christianity and we are able to see something of African Christianity in its early years because of him. There is disagreement among scholars concerning the specifics of his life. Traditionally, Tertullian was known to be a presbyter from Carthage who was skilled in Roman law and whose father was a centurion. Timothy Barnes and Geoffrey Dunn both reject this picture of Tertullian in their biographies. For a more extensive overview of Tertullian's life including his eventual turn to Montanism and further information on the disagreement over Tertullian's background see Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical And Literary Study* (Oxford University Press: USA, 1985), 57-84 and 130-142 and Geoffrey Dunn, *Tertullian* (Routledge Press: New York, 2004), 2-36 and Gerald Lewis Bray, *Holiness And The Will Of God: Perspectives On The Theology Of Tertullian* (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1979), 33-65.

<sup>2</sup>Everett Ferguson, *Baptism In The Early Church: History, Theology, And Liturgy In The First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 336. A work entitled *περι λουτρου*, *On the Laver*, by Melito of Sardis may have been known to Tertullian, though too little of it remains for us to judge the extent of his indebtedness. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae* 4.26, trans. Paul L. Maier under the title *The Church History* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 199), 143. Cf. Earnest Evans, ed. and trans., intro in *Tertullian's Homily On Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1965), xi. This is also the translation I used for this paper.

and beliefs concerning baptism are represented in this treatise. Since his arguments are most fully developed in his treatise on baptism, this paper will focus primarily on that text with occasional reference to his other works that sporadically speak to the subject.

A certain female teacher from the Cainite sect,<sup>4</sup> a group associated with Gnosticism, had made a particular goal of demolishing the ordinance of baptism.<sup>5</sup> The doctrine being espoused by this woman had infiltrated the walls of the church and there were even some within who were being carried off by it. Consequently, Tertullian's treatise on baptism was written as a defense against those who felt that baptism was unnecessary or ineffective. While the treatise was written to defend baptism, it was simultaneously intended to teach and encourage those who were recently baptized and had not sufficiently examined the reasons for having done so.<sup>6</sup> Since there were some who had been carried away by the teachings of the Cainite sect, Tertullian saw the importance of equipping the church so that they might guard against heresies. Thus, it is the aim of this paper to show that in an effort to defend against heresy, Tertullian taught the church that baptism was not only necessary but also the seal of faith. Faith in and of itself does not impart salvation, nor does baptism. Instead, faith and baptism depend on one another such that both must be present in order for salvation to occur.

---

<sup>3</sup>Tertullian's treatise or homily on baptism was likely written around the turn of the third century (198-203). It is hardly possible to give an exact date. This would place *On Baptism* as having been completed sometime after his apologetic works and before (or along with) the beginning of his disciplinary and theological works. This would also be before his Montanist conversion. See Evans, *Baptism*, xi.

<sup>4</sup>The Cainites opposed the God of the Old Testament as a malevolent deity who was inferior to the higher deity of Sophia. They honored those like Cain who were enemies of the Old Testament God. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* for a description of the sect. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.31, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *The Apostolic Fathers: With Justin Martyr And Irenaeus*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 358. Cf. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 301.

<sup>5</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1.2, ed. and trans. by Ernest Evans under the title, *Tertullian's Homily On Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964), 5.

<sup>6</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1.1.

### **The Importance of Water for Baptism**

In the first part of his treatise on baptism, Tertullian talks about the dignity and significance of water. The liquid element itself was there before the world was brought into order.<sup>7</sup> He cites Genesis 1:1-2, which says, “In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Although the water had to be separated and properly situated in its “unpolished form,” as the next several verses of Genesis indicate, it was of high significance because it was there in the beginning. Not only this, but the water was the place where the spirit of God hovered. Tertullian describes the water as being the resting place for the Spirit of God. It was perfect, joyous, simple, of its own nature pure, and was worthy to be the place where God could move. Simply, water was more pleasing to God than any other element.<sup>8</sup>

Water also played a part in carrying out God’s ordering of the world. The regulative waters of Genesis 1:6-10 were divided and set aside so that the heavens and dry land could be created.<sup>9</sup> They were even instrumental in bringing forth living things. Genesis 1:20 speaks of God commanding the waters to swarm with living creatures. Tertullian understands this to mean that water was the first to bring forth life.<sup>10</sup> Also, man was formed by the wetness of water. Matter was taken up from the earth but it was only workable because water was added to it.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 3.1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 3.2.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 3.3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 3.4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 3.5.

Tertullian is proposing the idea that if water was so instrumental in bringing forth life in the beginning, then why would one expect any less now. The waters of baptism have always and will always make alive.

Additionally, water is pointed out as the primary element involved in several other important events of the Old Testament. When Israel crossed the Red Sea, during their exodus from Egypt, water secured their escape from bondage by destroying their enemies. It was also water that flowed from the rock to quench Israel's thirst. In these events, Tertullian seeks to not only show how water is an important element to God, but how each of them attest in their own way to the importance of baptism as it is made blessed by water. For instance, just as the waters set Israel free from the Egyptians, so do the waters of baptism set Gentiles free from this world and the devil.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the waters that flowed forth from the rock to the people of Israel are allusive to the waters of baptism that are made blessed by Christ the rock.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, wherever Christ is there is water.<sup>14</sup> He was baptized in water, he inaugurates a marriage with water (John 2:7-11), he invites those who are thirsty to drink his everlasting water (John 4:14), he walks on water (Matthew 14:25), and when he receives a wound during his passion water bursts forth from his side (John 19:34). Simply, Tertullian believes that the importance of water is written all over the pages of scripture, which makes it the proper element for baptism.

### **The Spiritual Effects of Water**

---

<sup>12</sup>Tertullin, *On Baptism*, 9.1.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.3.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.4.

Tertullian does not merely emphasize the importance of using water for baptism, but also the spiritual effects that are contained therein. He does so by drawing attention to the Spirit of God that hovered upon the waters and would as baptizer abide upon the waters (Genesis 1:2) What this means is that the water that carried the Holy Spirit has now acquired holiness itself. Tertullian's rationale is that any matter placed beneath another is bound to take on the quality of that which is suspended over it.<sup>15</sup> Now that the waters have acquired holiness, they themselves have the power to make spiritually holy.

At this point, Tertullian anticipates his opponent's argument in regard to the spiritual effectiveness of water. If the water that carried the Holy Spirit has been made holy, then shouldn't one be baptized in those waters that were from the beginning?<sup>16</sup> After proposing this possible reaction, Tertullian answers that those very same waters do not need to be present. The element itself, however, must be used because the species is one. Although there are many individual instances of the species of water, that which has become an attribute of the species overflows in the individual instances. Consequently, since all water has acquired the ability to make holy, it makes no difference whether one is washed in a sea, pond, fountain, cistern, or tub.<sup>17</sup> Tertullian uses scripture to backup his argument. Matthew 3:6 speaks of John baptizing in

---

<sup>15</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 4.1.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 4.2.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 4.3. Tertullian could be justifying the use of water other than that which comes from a moving source like one would find in a river or pond. The moving source or "living water" is referred to in *The Didache*, "Now regarding baptism. This is the way ye must baptize. When ye have given them all this instruction, baptize them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in *living water*," as well as St. Hippolytus's recounting of the practice of baptism towards the end of the second century, "When they come to the water, let the water be a pure flowing stream." See *The Teaching Of The Twelve Apostles* or *The Didache*, 7, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. in *Fathers Of The Third And Fourth Centuries*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.7 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 379 and St. Hippolytus, *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of Rome*, 21.2, ed. and trans by Gregory Dix under the title *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of St. Hippolytus Of Rome* (London: SPCK, 1968), 33. Cf. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 341.

the Jordan river which is obviously different from the Tiber where Peter baptized. Simply, all waters have acquired the ability to make holy or sanctify.

Tertullian points out that “as we are defiled by sins as though with filth,” we are washed clean in water. Sins are committed in the flesh but one does not retain the visible signs of idolatry or adultery in their flesh. Rather, people who commit these sins become filthy in spirit. Even so, the spirit and the flesh both are guilty because the spirit directs the flesh and the flesh renders the service. Thus, the waters heal the spirit as well as the flesh.<sup>18</sup> Tertullian further defends the idea that water contains actual spiritual power by appealing to pagan lustrations or washings that occur in the Isis or Mithras cults.<sup>19</sup> His argument is that if cleansing is considered to be a characteristic of water for pagan washings, then how much more so should water that has had God’s holy attributes appointed to it be able to cleanse and heal.<sup>20</sup> Not that the pagan washings actually make clean because if they did then the devil would be putting down his own work by washing away sins that he himself inspires. Tertullian’s main point is that people give too little credence to the things of God and would rather give credit to God’s enemy who attempts to reproduce a godly thing.<sup>21</sup>

There are other ways that Tertullian chooses to describe the spiritual effectiveness of water. In the very first sentence of the treatise he says, “This discussion of the sacred significance of that water of ours in which the sins of our original blindness are washed away

---

<sup>18</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 4.5.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.1. The cult of Isis originated in Egypt and spread throughout the Empire as it changed in nature. The cult of Mithra originated in Persia but it also had undergone significant changes in Syria before it achieved its popular form. Both of these cults involved elaborate rituals and washings, which Tertullian is referring to. For a more in depth look at these cults as well as other mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world see James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World Of The New Testament World: Exploring The Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 96-100.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.2.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.3.

and we are set at liberty unto life eternal will not be without purpose...<sup>22</sup> Here, not only the washing of sins but the gift of eternal life is attributed to the waters of baptism. Tertullian also speaks about the effects of water by referring to humans as little fish. As little fish, we begin our life in water and are killed if taken out of it. Only while we abide in the waters of baptism are we safe as little fish.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, death is washed away, guilt and penalty are removed, and even salvation comes by water.<sup>24</sup>

Tertullian emphasizes the spiritual significance of water because he feared that it would be regarded as being unimportant. He states, “I should be explaining more fully that there is no room for doubt whether God has brought into his service in his very own sacraments that same material which he has had at his disposal in all his acts and works, and whether this which is the guide of earthly life makes provision of heavenly things beside.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, Tertullian was so afraid that the element of water and its provision would be downplayed that he stops himself short for fear that he may overemphasize the issue. He admits his desire to go on and tell more of the significance of the element, and the greatness of its power and function, but realizes that in doing so he may end up composing a doctrine of water as opposed to a doctrine of baptism. In summation, while Tertullian did not intend to compose a treatise on the element of water, he saw the importance of stressing the provision and spiritual effects of water that occur in baptism.

### **The Seal Of Baptism**

It is often difficult to distinguish whether Tertullian is referring to the whole ceremony

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 1.1.

<sup>23</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1.3.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 2.2, 5.6, 4.3.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 3.6.

or the actual act of being immersed<sup>26</sup> in water when he uses the term baptism. Gregory Dix asserts that when Tertullian uses the term *baptismum*, he not only means baptism in water, but other things as well.<sup>27</sup> For he writes:

“Not that the Holy Spirit is given to us in the water but that in the water we are made clean by the action of the angel, and made ready for the Holy Spirit...After that we come up from the washing and are anointed with the blessed unction (or blessed oil) in the name of the Lord...So also in this case, the unction (or the blessed oil) flows upon the flesh, but turns to spiritual profit...Next follows the imposition of the hand in benediction inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, Dix claims that for Tertullian all this together is to be understood as *baptismum* and it is not the water but the ‘seal,’ which imparts the Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Another issue must then be dealt with. What does the ‘seal’ in baptism represent?

Tertullian writes in regard to the rules to be observed when baptism is given, “the supreme right of giving it belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop: after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the Church’s dignity.”<sup>30</sup> Dix comments, in reference to Tertullian’s instructions, that the ‘seal’ is the bishop’s unction with chrism (or blessed oil) that turns to spiritual profit. He asserts that this was the general pre-Nicene understanding of the rite, save for some in Syria and Asia Minor who placed the giving

---

<sup>26</sup>Ferguson talks about Tertullian’s frequent use of *tingo* (to dip, to dye) and occasionally *mergo* (to immerse, to plunge) being used interchangeably with the transliterated *baptizo* and how this implies immersion. So too do his words, “After we come up from the washing” [lavacro] in *On Baptism*. Tertullian’s favorite word for baptism was *lavacrum* (bath) and he understood this as referring to the whole body and so refers to baptism as a washing of the whole body in Christ in *On Prayer*. See Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 7.1 and Tertullian, *On Prayer*, 13, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 685. Cf. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 341.

<sup>27</sup>Dom Gregory Dix, *The Theology Of Confirmation In Relation To Baptism: A Public Lecture In The University Of Oxford Delivered On January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1946* (Great Britain: Bowering Press, 1946), 17.

<sup>28</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6.1, 7.1, 7.2, 8.1.

<sup>29</sup>Dix, *Confirmation*, 17.

<sup>30</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 17.1.

of the ‘seal’ and ‘baptism of the Spirit’ before baptism in water. There were also a few in Africa who laid more emphasis on the simultaneous imposition of one hand.<sup>31</sup>

Conversely, G.W.H Lampe claims that it would be dangerous to cut the argument short by asserting that when Tertullian speaks of baptism he regularly means something wider in its scope than water baptism. Although Tertullian extends the meaning of *baptismus* to cover the entire ceremony in his treatise *De Baptismo*, there is little evidence to show that in his normal use of the word, he means anything more than baptism in the strict sense of the term.<sup>32</sup> For Tertullian also writes, “So also in our case, the unction (or blessed oil) flows, but turns to spiritual profit, just as in the baptism itself there is an act that touches the flesh, that we are immersed in water, but a spiritual effect, that we are set free from sins” (Sic et in nobis carnaliter currit unction sed spiritaliter proficit, quomodo et *ipsius baptismi* carnalis actus quod in aqua mergimur, spiritalis effectus quod delictis liberamur).<sup>33</sup> Lampe further comments that *ipsius baptismi* (or baptism itself) is to be understood as baptism distinguished from its accompanying rites.<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, Lampe proposes another understanding of the ‘seal’ in baptism. He points out how Tertullian speaks frequently of baptism setting a seal upon faith; that is to say the believer’s response of faith to the grace of God is sacramentally sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism, not the bishop’s unction. Furthermore, this faith is sealed in his baptism in the

---

<sup>31</sup>Dix, *Confirmation*, 17.

<sup>32</sup>G.W.H. Lampe, *The Seal Of The Spirit: A Study In The Doctrine Of Baptism And Confirmation In The New Testament And Fathers* (London: SPCK, 1967), 160.

<sup>33</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 7.2.

<sup>34</sup>Lampe, *The Seal*, 160.

Threefold name.<sup>35</sup> This is why Tertullian can say that the Holy Spirit will come upon us when our sins are cancelled in response to faith, which is signed and sealed in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> Also, while arguing against those who were proposing that no sacrament of water was needed, only faith, Tertullian states, “Yet now that the faith has been enlarged, for those who believe in his nativity and passion and resurrection the sacrament has been expanded and the seal of baptism added, in some sense a clothing for the faith which was previously unattired...”<sup>37</sup> For Lampe, this is further evidence that it is not the bishop’s unction that seals but the act of baptism where the Threefold name is given.

In regard to the reception of the spirit at the unction, Lampe argues that the post-baptismal anointing was an important part of the ceremonies of initiation. It was an anointing with *benedicta unctio* or blessed unction performed on the authority of the unction of priests in the Old Testament, but connected with the Messianic character of Christ, and it confers a spiritual benefit upon its recipients.<sup>38</sup> This benefit is explained as consisting in a consecration.<sup>39</sup> Simply, Lampe believes that the unction signifies the priestly character, which through Christ, has been imparted to the baptized. He states, “There is no evidence that Tertullian thinks of the post-baptismal chrismation as a sacramental sign of the gift of the Spirit, nor as conferring grace at all; it is a consecration to the universal priesthood which Christians possess in virtue of their

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>36</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6.1.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 3.2.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 7.1.

<sup>39</sup>Tertullian, *On the Resurrection Of The Flesh*, 8, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 551.

membership of Christ, the true Priest.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Lampe believes that the gift bestowed by the laying on of the hand was a charisma different from, and additional to, the Spirit’s indwelling in the soul.<sup>41</sup> He points to the phrase ‘grace of service’<sup>42</sup> that is used by St. Hippolytus of Rome in the confirmation ceremony to reason that the imposition of the hand was done in order to bless a new convert and member as they sought to serve the Lord.

Earnest Evans makes a helpful contribution to the discussion by pointing out that the spiritual effects, which Tertullian conceives to result from the baptismal ceremonies, are as manifold and complicated as the ceremonies themselves.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it may not be necessary to try and follow him in his attempt to assign a grace of God to its own particular ceremony. Furthermore, he proposes, “The one all-inclusive act of washing in water with the spoken word of the Trinitarian formula may be supposed to effect not only the removal of sins and regeneration to newness of life, but also to carry with it those further graces of which the subsidiary ceremonies may have been (in their origin) illustrative tokens rather than effective signs.”<sup>44</sup>

First, Evans is correct about the complicated nature of Tertullian’s comments about baptism. As has been pointed out, it is often difficult to distinguish whether Tertullian is referring to the whole ceremony or the actual act of being immersed in water when he uses the term baptism. Dix and Lampe both make valid points about the way that Tertullian uses the word baptism. Lampe’s argument that there is little evidence to show that in his normal use of the

---

<sup>40</sup>Lampe, *The Soul*, 159.

<sup>41</sup>Lampe, *The Soul*, 162.

<sup>42</sup>St. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 22.1.

<sup>43</sup>Evans, *Baptism*, xxix.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, xxix.

word Tertullian means anything more than baptism in the strict sense of the term is valid. He does, at points, seem to distinguish baptism itself from its accompanying rites. This can be seen when he uses the term baptism to reference just water or the act of being immersed.

However, Dix's argument that the whole ceremony is to be understood as baptism is correct as well. Lampe himself admits that *De Baptismo* covers all that which Tertullian considers to be baptism, which includes immersion in water, the anointing with the blessed oil, and the imposition of a hand. Furthermore, if Tertullian did not mean for each of these rites to be considered a part of the baptism ceremony, such as the imposition of hands that in the *Apostolic Tradition* seems to be an all together separate ceremony itself,<sup>45</sup> then one wonders why he didn't leave them out like he did the Eucharist and other events that occurred before and after the baptismal ceremony.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, Lampe is more concerned with Dix's contention that when Tertullian speaks of baptism he *regularly* means something wider in its scope than water baptism. This is a legitimate concern because of the fact that Tertullian at times speaks of baptism in a more narrow sense. Thus, it seems best to conclude that when Tertullian uses the term baptism he does employ it loosely. Baptism refers to the actual act of being baptized in water but it is not limited to this alone. For Tertullian, it also includes its accompanying rites.

Evans also states that the "all-inclusive act of washing in water with the spoken word of the Trinitarian formula" is what may be supposed to carry with it those further graces, which includes the 'sealing' of the Holy Spirit. This is the idea that Lampe proposed when he stated

---

<sup>45</sup>The imposition of hands seems to be a part of the confirmation ceremony in *The Apostolic Tradition*, which was written after *On Baptism*. See St. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 22.

<sup>46</sup>There was much that took place to lead up to the baptismal ceremony as well as after. Tertullian states that Passover was the most solemn day for baptism followed by Pentecost and then finally any day of the week in *On Baptism*. See Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 19. He also references the fasting and praying that ought to occur before baptism in *On Baptism*. See Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20.1. For a further discussion on the specifics such as Holy Week and the Eucharist that followed the ceremony see St. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 20.1-14. Cf. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 344-345

that the Christian's faith is sealed in his baptism in the Threefold name. Evans and Lampe are both right to assert that Tertullian places the sealing of the Holy Spirit with the Threefold name<sup>47</sup> that most certainly occurs in the actual act of being immersed in water. This can be seen more clearly in the *Apostolic Tradition* where one is baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost three separate times.<sup>48</sup> However, it has already been noted that Tertullian also includes the anointing with the blessed unction and the imposition of a hand to be included in baptism. When one investigates these two rites in the *Apostolic Tradition*, there is good indication that the Threefold name is also given just after the anointing of oil and during the imposition of a hand.<sup>49</sup> This would lend support to Dix's argument that the 'seal' was given during the bishop's unction or the imposition of a hand.

The issue is further complicated when one considers the way that Tertullian speaks of the baptism and its spiritual effects. As has already been indicated, he finds it important to defend not only the importance of water for baptism but also the effects of it on the spirit. There is a strong expression of the Spirit's activity in water throughout the opening chapters of *De Baptismo* and this indicates that Tertullian does in fact find significance in the way that water cleanses, sanctifies, washes away death, sets one free from sins, removes guilt and penalty, and even saves.<sup>50</sup> He also discusses the spiritual effects or spiritual anointing that occurs during the blessed unction of the bishop, "So also in our case, the unction flows upon the flesh, but turns to

---

<sup>47</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6.1.

<sup>48</sup>St. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21. 10-20. Triple immersion is even pointed out by Tertullian in *On The Crown*. "We are immersed [*Mergitamur*] three times..." See Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, 3, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 94. For further discussion on triple immersion in Tertullian and the second and third century see *The Didache*, 6-7 and St. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21.11-18. Cf. Ferguson, 341.

<sup>49</sup>St. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21. 10-11 and 22.1-6.

<sup>50</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 3-5, 2.2, 5.6, 4.3, 7.2.

spiritual profit...”<sup>51</sup> Finally, the Holy Spirit is invited and welcomed in the imposition of the hand and another spirit of excellent clarity comes to play a tune over the soul.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, Evans is helpful in contributing that it may not be necessary to try and follow Tertullian in his attempt to assign a grace of God to its own particular ceremony. First, Evans mentions “a grace of God” and it must be noted that there are other graces of God besides the sealing of the Holy Spirit that occur in baptism. Some of those graces have already been pointed out in reference to the spiritual effects of water itself. However, Tertullian’s fullest summary of all that occurs in baptism is found in his writing *Against Marcion*:

“To what purpose is baptism as well as faith acquired of his adherents? If there is remission of sins, how shall one be found to remit sins who, as it appears, does not retain them? He could only retain them by judging them. If there is a loosing of the bonds of death, how should one let loose from death who has never held any in bondage to death? He could only have had them in bondage if he had condemned them from the beginning. If there is a man’s second birth, how does one grant a second birth who has not yet given a first birth? Repetition of an act is beyond the power of one who has not done the act to begin with. If there is reception of the Holy Spirit, how can he impart the Spirit when has not first supplied a soul? For soul is in some sort that which spirit takes for foundation.”<sup>53</sup>

Tertullian here summarizes baptism as that which, remits sin, delivers from death, regenerates, and bestows the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup> All of these then are graces of God or spiritual effects that occur during baptism. Unfortunately, Tertullian is not clear about when exactly these graces, including the ‘seal’ of the Holy Spirit, occur. Thus, Evans is right to say that it may not be necessary to try and follow Tertullian in his attempt to assign each grace of God to a particular point in baptism.

---

<sup>51</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 7.2.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 8.1.

<sup>53</sup>Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.28, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 293.

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 346.

What is clear is that, for Tertullian, baptism is the ‘seal’ of faith<sup>55</sup> where God’s graces are bestowed upon the baptized.<sup>56</sup>

### **Baptism The Seal Of Faith**

For Tertullian, baptism presupposed faith and repentance.<sup>57</sup> After talking about general matters concerning the religious significance of baptism, Tertullian moves on to talk about the baptism of John the Baptist. He begins by answering the question of whether John’s baptism was from heaven or earth. John’s baptism was of heavenly appointment in that God commissioned John for the task, but it was of only earthly effect. It was a baptism of repentance in preparation for the remission and sanctification, which were to be given in Christ, who would baptize with the Spirit and with fire.<sup>58</sup> Tertullian uses this illustration to get at his main point, which is that repentance comes first and remission follows. Summarily, John’s baptism of repentance represents a true and steadfast faith that precedes Christ’s baptism of remission unto salvation. Or negatively, John’s baptism of repentance may represent a feigned and feeble faith that precedes Christ’s baptism of fire unto judgment.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere, Tertullian indicates that sins

---

<sup>55</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6.1.

<sup>56</sup>Tertullian concludes *On Baptism* with reference to those coming up from the most sacred washing of rebirth extending their hands in prayer in church and petitioning for grace and spiritual gifts or *chrismatum*. See Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20. Killian McDonnell and George Montague understand the spiritual gifts or *chrismatum* to mean observable experiential phenomena. This is curious considering that the writing of *On Baptism* preceded Tertullian’s Montanist days. For a further discussion see Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Initiation And Baptism In The Holy Spirit: Evidence From The First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 100-104.

<sup>57</sup>Ferguson, *Baptism*, 338.

<sup>58</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 10.2-6.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.7.

are cancelled “in response to faith signed and sealed in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>60</sup>

However, Tertullian’s statement that sins are cancelled “in response to faith” also indicates that faith must be “signed and sealed in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.” Therefore, faith is essential but faith alone does not suffice for salvation. This is indicated in part by the way that Tertullian so closely ties baptism with spiritual reformation, which has already been noted. Nonetheless, Tertullian goes to great lengths to prove that baptism must also be present in order for salvation to occur.

He begins his argument for the necessity of baptism by simply affirming “there is a standing rule that without baptism no man can obtain salvation.”<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, he deals with the question of whether the apostles themselves were baptized, and if not how they were saved. He answers that they had likely received John’s baptism and so they would not have needed to be baptized by the Lord. Peter asked the Lord whether he should be baptized again to which the Lord answered no (John 13:10). Therefore, the apostles did not need to be re-baptized as well.<sup>62</sup> Tertullian also recognizes those who attributed the apostle’s baptism to having been splashed in the sea.<sup>63</sup> He, of course, denies this possibility and ultimately concludes that it makes no difference whether the apostles were baptized or not. Their close attendance upon the Lord and

---

<sup>60</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6.1. Tertullian also seems to indicate that repentance must precede baptism in *On Repentance*. Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 4-6, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]*. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 200.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.1.

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

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.6. Sprinkling was another legitimate means by which one could be baptized. See. *The Didache*, 6-7.

faith are sufficient assurance of their salvation, but what is normal for the apostles is not normal for others.

Finally, Tertullian addresses those who would say that faith is enough for salvation. There were those who had apparently concluded that since Abraham was saved by his faith then so should everyone else.<sup>64</sup> Tertullian argues that in all matters later instances take precedence over earlier instances. Though there may have been a time when salvation was by faith unattired, Jesus' declaration in Matthew 28:19 to go and "baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" has become law. Therefore the faith, which was previously unattired can no longer be separated from its law of baptism.

### **Conclusion**

It has been suggested that in an effort to defend against heresy, Tertullian taught the church that baptism was not only necessary but also the seal of faith. Faith in and of itself does not impart salvation, nor does baptism. Instead, faith and baptism depend on one another such that both must be present in order for salvation to occur. Within this main thrust, there are points where Tertullian is unclear about the specifics of baptism and all that it conveys. At the end of the treatise he asks the reader to pray about all that he has portrayed and keep in mind that he is a sinner.<sup>65</sup> It is important that we do as Tertullian asks and pray that the Lord would stamp the words of scripture in our heart so that we might know where Tertullian has erred. We can, however, be thankful for Tertullian's willingness to be at the forefront of the discussion; for where he had no one's mistakes to learn from we have had many.

---

<sup>64</sup>Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 13.1.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.5.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Primary Sources**

*The Didache or The Teaching Of The Twelve Apostles.* trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Third And Fourth Centuries.* Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.7. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

Eusebius. *Historia Ecclesiae.* trans. Paul L. Maier under the title *The Church History.* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 199.

Irenaeus. *Against Heresies.* trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *The Apostolic Fathers: With Justin Martyr And Irenaeus.* Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.1. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

St. Hippolytus. *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of Rome.* ed. and trans by Gregory Dix under the title *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of St. Hippolytus Of Rome.* London: SPCK, 1968.

Tertullian. *Against Marcion.* trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian,* Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Chaplet, 3.* trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian.* Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On Baptism.* ed. and trans. by Ernest Evans under the title, *Tertullian's Homily On Baptism.* London: SPCK, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On Prayer, 13,* trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian.* Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On Repentance, 4-6,* trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian,* Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985

### Secondary Sources

- Barnes, Timothy David. *Tertullian: A Historical And Literary Study*. Oxford University Press: USA, 1985.
- Bray, Gerald Lewis. *Holiness And The Will Of God: Perspectives On The Theology Of Tertullian*. John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1979.
- Dix, Gregory Dom. *The Theology Of Confirmation In Relation To Baptism: A Public Lecture In The University Of Oxford Delivered On January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1946*. Great Britain: Bowering Press, 1946.
- Dunn, Geoffrey. *Tertullian*. Routledge Press: New York, 2004.
- Evans, Earnest. *Tertullian's Homily On Baptism*. London: SPCK, 1965.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Baptism In The Early Church: History, Theology, And Liturgy In The First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009.
- Jeffers, James. *The Greco-Roman World Of The New Testament World: Exploring The Background Of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- Lampe, G.W.H. *The Seal Of The Spirit: A Study In The Doctrine Of Baptism And Confirmation In The New Testament And Fathers*. London: SPCK, 1967.
- McDonnell, Killian and Montague, George T. *Initiation And Baptism In The Holy Spirit: Evidence From The First Eight Centuries*. Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991.

Tertullian, *On the Resurrection Of The Flesh*, 8, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]*. American Edition. Vol.3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985)