

DID THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH BAPTISE BABIES?

A SEISMOLOGICAL APPROACH¹

Anthony N. S. Lane

Summary

The direct evidence from the first century is insufficient to establish conclusively whether or not the apostolic church baptised babies. An alternative approach is to look at the practice of the post-apostolic church and to ask what must have happened in apostolic times to account for this later development. Unequivocal evidence is not found until the beginning of the third century and for the next two centuries and more we see a variety of practice, with the children of Christian homes being baptised at any and every age. Significantly, no one claimed that anyone else's practice was unapostolic or wrong in principle. Given that oral tradition offered real, though limited, access to the past, the most natural explanation is that this acceptance of a variety of practice goes back to apostolic times.

I. Introduction

These days, if there is an earthquake in Los Angeles, scientists in London can measure and describe it. How can they do this if they are not on the spot to witness it? The answer is that they can measure and interpret its effects at a distance. The situation is similar with the question of infant baptism in the apostolic church. We don't have an explicit witness from the time. One way of surmounting this problem is to torture the early evidence in order to make it say more than the

¹ I am very grateful to all of those who have commented on earlier versions of this paper, which have been given in various settings. I am especially grateful to David Wright for the stimulus both of his numerous writings on the topic and of our frequent conversations about it.

authors intended, to read between the lines of first-century documents. This is a valid approach, but there is another – to seek to measure first-century practice by its effects in subsequent centuries. This paper has no new evidence to offer. The topic is so well-discussed that it is unlikely that anything has been missed.² What it does offer is not so much a different interpretation of individual items of evidence as a fresh way of looking at the whole picture. We will adopt a ‘seismological approach’, asking what must have happened in apostolic times in order to account for the evidence of later centuries.

First, it might help to clarify what we are looking for. The word ‘infant’ will be used to refer to those considered too young to answer for themselves.³ There are a number of different questions to be answered. (1) When is the practice of believers’ baptism first attested? (2) When is the first indisputable reference to infant baptism? (3) When is the first indisputable reference to the baptism at *any* age of someone from a Christian home? (4) When is infant baptism first expected of *all* children born to Christians? (5) When is the first objection *in principle* to infant baptism? If we concentrate on only one of these questions we might reach false conclusions.

The first question is the easiest to answer. The practice of believers’ baptism is clearly attested on the day of Pentecost. In fact Peter commands his hearers to ‘repent and be baptised’, failing to mention faith, but Luke adds that it was ‘those who accepted his message’ who were baptised (Acts 2:38, 41), so we may concede that this was believers’ baptism. If we look more widely at the Acts of the Apostles we see the initiation of new converts to the Christian faith who repent, believe, are baptised and receive the Spirit. Luke doesn’t mention these four things every time, but this fourfold pattern emerges clearly from the narrative as a whole.⁴

So believers’ baptism began on the day of Pentecost. We have answered our first question, but unfortunately are no closer to

² Most of the relevant texts are found in H. Kraft (ed.), *Texte zur Geschichte der Taufe, besonders der Kindertaufe in der Alten Kirche* (Kleine texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen 174; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1953).

³ Following D. F. Wright, ‘The Origins of Infant Baptism – Child Believers’ Baptism?’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 2-3. Patristic writers regularly distinguish between those who can/cannot speak for themselves, although there was no universal agreement about the age.

⁴ J. D. G. Dunn, in his *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970): 91, sees three elements in Christian initiation: repentance, baptism and the gift of the Spirit. But he then states that repentance and faith are ‘opposite sides of the same coin’. It makes more sense to speak of four elements, as does David Pawson in *The Normal Christian Birth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989): 9-90.

answering the real question. In the Acts of the Apostles we see the practice of converts' baptism.⁵ People are baptised at the point of their conversion. But what happened to their children? What happened to the existing babies and children of those earliest converts? In particular, were they baptised with their parents? What happened to the children subsequently born to them? How were they initiated? Were they baptised at birth or at some subsequent stage? Unfortunately, as is well known, neither Luke nor any other New Testament writer gives an unequivocal, explicit answer to this question. It has sometimes been suggested that this did not become an issue until the second generation of the church, but that is far from the truth. The New Testament church was not a student Christian Union of youngsters who had yet to settle down and have families. The three thousand converts at the Day of Pentecost must have had many children of every age. Whether or not to baptise babies was an issue that had to be decided *that day*.

Unfortunately we don't know for sure how they decided it. Of one thing we can be sure, however. Whatever happened to those who were babes in arms that day, it was not the converts' baptism described in Acts. Whether they were baptised that day or when they had reached the age of three, ten, thirteen or eighteen, their baptism was an adaptation of the practice of converts' baptism to the changed situation of those raised in a Christian home. So the fact that in later documents (such as the *Apostolic Tradition*) infants are fitted into an adult ceremony need not imply that infant baptism is of recent origin.⁶ One point that all may agree is that the New Testament account of and theology of baptism is of converts' baptism and that *whatever* happens to those raised as Christians will be a variation on that.

The historical question was argued at some length in a famous exchange between two German scholars, Joachim Jeremias who defended the apostolic origin of infant baptism and Kurt Aland who

⁵ As is shown by G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

⁶ As late as Augustine we still find the sponsors of babies presented for baptism being asked whether or not the child believes (*Epistola* 98:7, cited by D. F. Wright, 'Augustine and the Transformation of Baptism' in *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. A. Kreider [Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 2001]: 300-301). The baptism of believers remained the norm when for centuries babies had been baptised.

denied it.⁷ C. F. D. Moule said of Jeremias' book that it contained *at least* all of the evidence in favour of infant baptism!⁸ The evidence before the end of the second century is so meagre and ambiguous that it is widely accepted that a firm verdict is not possible. It may be helpful, therefore, in seeking to answer the question, to work backwards using our seismological approach. That is, to start from a time in church history where it is clear what happened and to work back from that point to New Testament times. The evidence becomes clearer as the centuries go by, so we will begin with the third century, move on to the fourth and fifth, go back to the second century and end with the first century, in line with the principle of working from what is plain to what is obscure.

For the third century there are five major sources of information: the *Apostolic Tradition*, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen and inscriptions on Christian tombstones. It is important to distinguish different types of evidence.⁹ There are sermons and other writings that contain exhortations either to baptise or not to baptise babies. These testify to the views of the authors and show what views were considered acceptable, but do not in themselves prove that anyone actually followed the advice given. Then there is evidence as to when specific individuals were baptised, either through literary biographical information or from inscriptions. In between these two types are church orders and other works regulating practice. These do not give hard statistical information but are clearly a far more reliable indicator as to what actually happened than are exhortatory sermons.

The first of our witnesses, the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus, is the hardest to place. Many hold it to be by Hippolytus, composed at Rome in about AD 215. More recently it has been argued that the text as it is known today (in various translations from the Greek) is a composite work derived from different sources from the second to fourth centuries. On this understanding, the earliest core of

⁷ J. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM, 1960); K. Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (London: SCM, 1963); J. Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (London: SCM, 1963). K. Aland, *Die Stellung der Kinder in den frühen christlichen Gemeinden – und ihre Taufe* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967) has not been translated.

⁸ D. F. Wright, 'Out, In, Out: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism' in *Dimensions of Baptism*, ed. S. E. Porter & A. R. Cross (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002): 192.

⁹ I am indebted to David Wright for this point.

the work dates, maybe, from the mid-second century.¹⁰ Either way, the earliest material can be seen as evidence of what was happening at the beginning of the third century at the very latest. Chapters 16–23 describe the ceremony of baptism. This is still clearly geared to new converts and the only mention of infants comes in three sentences. After the statement that candidates are to be baptised naked, it is stated that the first to be baptised should be the little children. These should speak for themselves if they can, otherwise one of their family should speak for them.¹¹ These chapters in general, and the instructions about small children in particular, are found in the earliest core of the document.¹²

What is being described is a ceremony designed for adults in which small children are included – both those who could answer for themselves and infants who were too young. It should occasion no surprise that children are here (and elsewhere) fitted into an essentially adult ceremony since the practice of baptism described in Acts is *converts'* baptism. *Whatever* happened to Christian children at whatever age, it would involve adapting that process to include them.¹³ One cannot say how long children had been included by the time of the *Apostolic Tradition*, except that this is unlikely to have been a recent innovation. The practice that is described, and which presumably reflects the reality of what was then happening, included the baptism of little children both at an age when they can speak and at an earlier stage when they cannot. This is an account of a regular baptismal service and so *does not refer to the emergency baptism of dying babies*. While one cannot deduce that all Christians were having their infants baptised, the document is clear evidence that some infants (too young to answer for themselves) were being baptised.

At the turn of the third century Tertullian, at Carthage in North Africa, wrote a work entitled *Baptism*. Here he urges that baptism should be delayed, especially for little children.

¹⁰ P. F. Bradshaw, M. E. Johnson & L. E. Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002): 1-6, 13-15.

¹¹ Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition*: 112-113 (ch. 21:4). This material is found in the Sahidic, Arabic and Ethiopic translations.

¹² Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition*: 15, 124. The authors note that those unable to answer for themselves could even be as much as seven years old (p. 130). This is not important as the issue being examined is the baptism of those too young to answer for themselves, whatever age they might be.

¹³ Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?:* 102-103, correctly notes that in the early centuries the rapid rate of church growth meant that the number of adult converts was far greater than the number born into Christian homes, which is a further reason why infant baptism appears to be peripheral.

That baptism ought not to be rashly granted, is known to those whose function it is ... It follows that deferment of baptism is more profitable, in accordance with each person's character and attitude, and even age: and especially so as regards children [*parvulos*]. For what need is there, if there really is no need, for even their sponsors to be brought into peril, seeing that they may possibly themselves fail of their promises by death, or be deceived by the subsequent development of an evil disposition? It is true our Lord says, 'Forbid them not to come to me.' So let them come, when they are growing up, when they are learning, when they are being taught what they are coming to: let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ. Why should innocent infancy come with haste to the remission of sins? ... With no less reason ought the unmarried also to be delayed until they either marry or are firmly established in continence: until then temptation lies in wait for them, for virgins because they are ripe for it, and for widows because of their wandering about. All who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement. Faith unimpaired has no doubt of its salvation.¹⁴

Tertullian opposes the baptism of children, including those too young to speak for themselves (i.e. infants) and so needing sponsors. The fact that he counsels delay also means that the practice that he is opposing is the 'regular' baptism of infants, not the emergency baptism of dying infants. A superficial reading might portray him as a proto-Baptist fighting the emerging practice of infant baptism, but the situation is somewhat different. In the first place, one argument that Tertullian does not use against child baptism is that it is a recent innovation. In the ancient world novelty and innovation were regarded as something bad, not desirable and Tertullian, in particular, elsewhere argued at length that truth is ancient and goes back to the apostles while heresy is recent.¹⁵ He would hardly have neglected to use that argument here if he could. Tertullian was converted to the Christian faith by the mid-190s. At that time he would have known people who had been Christians for some time. If infant baptism had been unknown at the beginning of the African church or in the middle of the second century (whichever is later) Tertullian would have known it and would have mentioned it.

¹⁴ *De baptismo* 18, probably from around the year 200, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, ed. E. Evans (London: SPCK, 1964): 36-41, commentary in 101-106. Cf. ANF 3:677-678; PL 1:1220-22; CCSL 1:292-293.

¹⁵ E.g. *De praescriptione haereticorum* 31, 34-35, from roughly the same time as *De baptismo*.

In fact Tertullian urges against hurrying children to baptism while they are in the age of innocence and need not hasten to the forgiveness of sins.¹⁶ What motivates Tertullian here is the fear of post-baptismal sin. Baptism, it was believed, washes away all previous sin. But what of sins committed after baptism? Finding forgiveness for these was not so straightforward. Given that fact, it was prudent to time one's baptism so as to derive the maximum benefit. So, in the same passage, Tertullian urges the unmarried and widows to delay baptism until they are married, and thus safely out of temptation's way.¹⁷ Tertullian here is urging delay, but he is seeking a change of *established* practice and does so because of his beliefs about post-baptismal sin. Baptism was like a trump card – it is important to play it at the right time. Tertullian believed that baptising children was inexpedient; he did not claim that it was illegitimate, irregular or invalid. In short, Tertullian had no objection *in principle* to infant baptism. This was a question of strategy rather than principle. Tertullian bears witness to the fact that little children (*parvuli*) were being baptised for reasons other than emergency baptism. His own exhortation that baptism be delayed is not itself proof that his advice was followed, but such proof is found elsewhere.

But should one be talking of 'delay'? Does that not prejudice the issue by implying that infant baptism is the norm? Could one not equally speak of the 'premature' baptism of babies? This is a valid point, but in the present context it is Tertullian himself who uses the word delay. Also, we should distinguish between the non-baptism of babies, where delay is a loaded term, and the phenomenon of adults deferring baptism for fear of post-baptismal sin, where delay is certainly an appropriate term.

A generation after Tertullian, Cyprian (bishop of Carthage and an admirer of Tertullian) also wrote about baptism. His *Letter* 64 to Fidus, written in the early 250s, discusses the question of infant baptism in

¹⁶ This does not mean that Tertullian had no belief in original sin. Cf. *De anima* 38-40, esp. 39:4 (from a later date of about 210-213). Cf. J. H. Waszink (ed.), *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De Anima* (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1947): 54-57, 446.

¹⁷ Cf. *De paenitentia* 6 where Tertullian opposes those who delay baptism in order to continue in sin, while also warning against the presumptuous reception of baptism. This work was written not long after *De baptismo*. Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?:* 67-68, argues that it is the delay of repentance that Tertullian is opposing, which is true, but it is the delay of repentance on the grounds of a future, deferred baptism.

the light of controversy and reports the conclusions of a council of African bishops held at Carthage. The issues have changed since the time of Tertullian. Now the only point in question is whether or not to delay baptism until the child is eight days old, following the Old Testament pattern with circumcision. Various arguments were invoked in the debate, the most imaginative being that babies' feet are too repugnant at birth to receive the kiss of peace!

But as for what pertains to the case of the infants who, you said, ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after they were born and that the law of ancient circumcision must be considered, that you thought that he who was born should not be baptized and sanctified within eight days, we thought far otherwise in our council. For in this matter, no one agrees with what you thought ought to be done, but we all judge that the mercy and grace of God must be denied to no man born ...

Inasmuch as you have said also that the foot of the infant in the first days after his birth is not clean, that each one of us shudders at the thought of kissing it, we do not think that this ought to be an impediment to the giving of heavenly grace. For it is written, 'For the clean all things are clean.' Nor ought any of us to shudder at what God has deigned to make. For although a child is as yet of recent birth, yet he is not such that any one ought to shudder to kiss him in giving him grace and restoring him to peace ...

For because the eighth day was kept in the Judaic carnal circumcision, that was a pledge prefigured in the shadow and in the image, but it was fulfilled with truth with the coming of Christ.

Because of this, we think that no one should be prevented from gaining grace according to that law which has already been made: that spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by a carnal circumcision, but that all, indeed, should be admitted to the grace of Christ ... If, in the case of the greatest sinners and those sinning much against God, when afterward they believe, the remission of their sins is granted and no one is prevented from baptism and grace, how much more should an infant not be prohibited, who, recently born, has not sinned at all, except that, born carnally according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the first death from the first nativity. He approaches more easily from this very fact to receive the remission of sins because those which are remitted are not his own sins, but the sins of another.¹⁸

It has been suggested that this debate was about the appropriate time for the emergency baptism of sick children, but surely the appropriate time in such cases is when the emergency strikes. Infant mortality was by no means confined to the first few days of life. Also, it is hard to believe that considerations of the repugnance of the new born would really cause delay with a baby that was about to die. As Cyprian

¹⁸ *Epistola* 64:2-5 (FoC 51:216-219. Cf. PL 3:1013-19; CCSL 3C:418-425; ANF 5:353-354 [numbered 58]; ACW 46:109-112).

reports, the council resolved that newborn babies should not be hindered from being baptised.

While the council may have spoken, it does not follow that all African Christians had their babies baptised. But the fact that there was a serious controversy between baptism at birth and baptism on the eighth day means that a significant number of Christians must have been having their babies baptised. Further evidence for this is the practice of infant communion,¹⁹ which presupposes infant baptism. Infant baptism was seen as bringing the forgiveness of *original* sin. In the fifth century this was used to argue that *all* Christian babies should be baptised, but that did not happen in the third century, the fear of post-baptismal sin proving more powerful than the fear of original sin.

Origen was a contemporary of Cyprian who lived in Alexandria. He, like Cyprian, justifies infant baptism by an appeal to the doctrine of original sin. New-born babies are not pure and innocent. Origen claims that infant baptism is a tradition from the apostles.²⁰ Origen did not, of course, have any privileged access to apostolic times, but he was born into a Christian family in about AD 185, so his belief would require that infant baptism was an established practice at least by the last quarter of the second century. Henri Crouzel, in his *Origen*, asks whether Origen was baptised as an infant. He points out that ‘many known Christians of the fourth century, from Christian families, were not baptised until they were adult’. He concludes that it is ‘not unlikely’ that he was baptised as a baby, but not certain as ‘no source tells us anything about the age at which Origen was baptised’.²¹ It may be that we cannot be certain whether Origen was himself baptised as a baby, but there can be no serious doubt as to whether infant baptism was at that time being practised. Origen in his youth would have known people who had been Christians for sixty or seventy years. If *none* of these had been baptised as babies it is most unlikely that he would have claimed that the practice was apostolic. Indeed, it could be argued that this shows that infant baptism was practised by the early years of the second century.

Too many discussions of this topic play down the significance of tradition. I once heard a lady on the radio tell how her grandmother

¹⁹ Cyprian, *De lapsis* 9, 25.

²⁰ Commentary on Romans 5:9 and 6:5-7.

²¹ H. Crouzel, *Origen* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989): 5.

had described to her seeing Napoleon go into exile in 1815. That event was almost two hundred years ago yet I have heard a second-hand account of it. There are people alive today in the Congo who heard from their grandparents a first-hand account of David Livingstone's death (1873). Theology can of course change subtly over the years, but a simple fact like whether or not babies were baptised can easily be remembered. Polycarp knew from his own experience whether or not babies were baptised in the late apostolic age and it is unlikely that he and others took this information to the grave with them. This does not preclude changes taking place, but it does mean that informed Christians at the end of the second century were not as ignorant of early practice as is usually assumed. Of course, they often had no reason to divulge this information or indeed good reason not to. But had Tertullian, for example, had any reason to suppose that the practice of infant baptism was introduced after the time of the apostles, he had every motive to say so. Where an Origen makes claims that infant baptism is from the apostles, either he is lying or he knows of no time when babies were not being baptised. This is not to claim that *all* babies were being baptised at any point, but rather that there was no time accessible to these writers when the practice was unknown. If that is so, the baptism of babies must go back at the very least to the middle of the second century, if not to the beginning of the century.

Given the geographical diversity of Hippolytus (Rome),²² Tertullian (Carthage) and Origen (Alexandria), their evidence would seem to demonstrate fairly conclusively that by the last quarter of the second century infant baptism was well established across the Roman Empire, in the sense that at least some Christians were having their babies baptised. It would also suggest that the practice was very likely known in the early years of the second century. The *Apostolic Tradition*, Tertullian and Cyprian (and probably Origen too) all describe the 'regular' baptism of infants, rather than the emergency baptism of dying infants.

Another piece of evidence from the third century is found in the inscriptions on Christian tombstones.²³ Most of these are undated but

²² If the *Apostolic Tradition* be seen as a composite work, it might then reflect the practice of more than one region.

²³ E. Ferguson, 'Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism', *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979): 37-46. The text of many inscriptions is given (pp. 40-44).

many are from the third century and there is no evidence that any of them are earlier. These clearly testify to two points. First, many babies and children were baptised. Secondly, many were baptised not at birth but at a later stage when they were in danger of death. None say that a child was baptised as a baby and died at a later age. Emergency baptism was clearly common in the third century.²⁴ It is also noteworthy that emergency baptism was not just for children. There were adults, aged 34 and 51 for example, who were baptised shortly before death. The evidence from the inscriptions reinforces the picture that we have already seen. Infant baptism was practised, but not universally. Why were some not baptised as babies? There is no evidence, here or elsewhere, for any objection in principle to infant baptism. There is evidence elsewhere (as in Tertullian) for the fear of post-baptismal sin and the consequent postponement of baptism. This motive would equally explain the evidence of the inscriptions for the emergency baptism of mature adults as well as children.

There is no statement in the inscriptions that someone was baptised as a baby and died later. Ferguson notes that ‘*all* of the inscriptions which mention a time of baptism place this near the time of death’.²⁵ It would be wrong to deduce from this that infants were baptised *only* in case of emergency. All adults whose baptism is dated were baptised shortly before death. One cannot deduce from this that adults were being baptised *only* at the point of death; rather that the date of the baptism is only mentioned on the inscription when it occurred shortly before death. The same is true for infants. Those infants whose baptism is not dated were probably baptised at an earlier stage. This is not an arbitrary conclusion as the *Apostolic Tradition*, Tertullian and Cyprian all bear witness to the practice of infant baptism outside of the emergency context. That the inscriptions only record baptismal dates in the case of emergency/deathbed baptism in no way proves that all baptisms were such, either for adults or for children. The inscriptions are valuable evidence in that (like biographical evidence) they tell us what actually happened. They clearly prove that emergency baptism

²⁴ Why would it be seen as important that an infant should not die unbaptised? The belief that babies inherit not just a bias to sin but guilt does not appear to have been held by many in the second to fourth centuries. But John 3:5, ‘the favourite baptismal text of the second century’, could easily be seen as implying that unbaptised infants would be excluded from heaven (E. Ferguson, ‘Inscriptions’: 45).

²⁵ E. Ferguson, ‘Inscriptions’: 44 (my emphasis). It is only a small minority of inscriptions that record the time of baptism.

happened for those of every age. They do not prove either that emergency baptism was the only form of baptism or that infants were baptised only in the case of emergency.

We are ready now to answer our second and third questions. When is the first indisputable reference to infant baptism? No one seriously doubts that infant baptism was practised by the beginning of the third century. It is not hard to claim explicit testimony from the latter part of the second century,²⁶ but the demand that this be indisputable suggests that we go for a more modest claim. We cannot at that date name specific individuals who were baptised as babies, but one cannot make sense of the testimony of Tertullian and the *Apostolic Tradition* unless this was taking place. When is the first indisputable reference to the baptism at *any* age of someone from a Christian home? Again, it is to Tertullian and the *Apostolic Tradition* that we must turn. It is significant that the earliest evidence concerning the baptism of those raised as Christians is also evidence for the baptism of infants. Thus the answers to both the second and the third questions are the same – early in the third century. The silence before that time is not just a silence about infant baptism; it is a silence about the church's policy and practice regarding the baptism at *any* age of those raised as Christians. Also, Jeremias aptly notes regarding the paucity of early references to the baptism of babies, 'how seldom in the OT the circumcision of male infants is expressly mentioned'.²⁷

Tertullian indicates that although infant baptism may have been practised it was not the only form of initiation being proposed. It would be easy to write Tertullian off as being here, as elsewhere, an inveterate extremist. But the fact is that in the third and fourth centuries many Christian families did follow the course that he recommended, not having their children baptised. Tertullian's argument for the prudential delay of baptism until the worst onslaughts of temptation were past struck a chord and was followed in the fourth century by emperors and leading Christians. But neither in Tertullian nor in any other figure from that time do we find any objection in principle to infant baptism nor any denial of the claim that it was an apostolic practice. What controversy there was about infant baptism in

²⁶ Especially in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2:2:24, discussed below.

²⁷ *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*: 23.

the early Church concerned why it took place, rather than whether it should take place.²⁸

It might, however, be objected that the second and third centuries also saw the transition from the immediate conversion of converts as seen in Acts to a catechumenate of three years. The latter was clearly not apostolic practice and yet no one raised that objection against it. But the two issues are significantly different. The development of the catechumenate was universal and no one objected to it. By contrast, the practice of infant baptism was by no means universal and some (like Tertullian) had doubts about it. Also, it was claimed that the apostles baptised babies, but I know of no such claims for the catechumenate. Finally, it could be that the lack of any protest against the catechumenate indicates that practice in the apostolic age was not as uniform as might be deduced from the instances described in Acts.

What of the fourth and fifth centuries? A number of facts are undisputed. Some babies were baptised and not only at the point of death. No one objected in principle to infant baptism. But that does not mean that all Christians practised it. David Wright has shown that many of the leading Christians in the fourth century were raised in Christian homes and baptised not as infants but as young adults.²⁹ None of these criticised their parents' policy.³⁰ This is significant data that demonstrates clearly that infant baptism was not regarded as normative in the fourth century, especially among elite godly families. But it must not be mistaken for a statistical sample of fourth-century Christianity. This is a miniscule and unrepresentative sample and must not be allowed to obscure³¹ the clear evidence elsewhere for the

²⁸ A point made by D. F. Wright, 'How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism in the Early Church?' in *Church, Word, and Spirit*, ed. J. E. Bradley and R. A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987): esp. 50-51, 58-62.

²⁹ D. F. Wright, 'At What Ages were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?', *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997): 389-394. For the question of what, if anything, happened to babies instead of infant baptism, cf. D. F. Wright, 'Infant Dedication in the Early Church' in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, ed. S. E. Porter & A. R. Cross (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 352-378.

³⁰ Wright, 'At What Ages were People Baptized': 393. Augustine criticised his mother for not allowing him to be baptised as a young boy (*Confessions* 1:11:17-18) but this was not for failure to secure him baptism as an *infant*.

³¹ As for example in the statement that 'The evidence is plentiful, with no instances to the contrary, that the baptizing of their newborn children had no place in the minds of even the most pious Christian parents during this period' (D. F. Wright, 'Monnica's Baptism, Augustine's Deferred Baptism, and Patricius,' *Augustinian Studies* 29 (1998): 10).

widespread (not necessarily majority) practice of infant baptism.³²

The fourth-century fathers urged adults not to delay baptism, whether in order to postpone Christian commitment or for fear of post-baptismal sin. But none of them proposed infant baptism as the only correct policy. Gregory Nazianzen's advice to Christian parents in his fortieth *Oration* is often quoted. Earlier in the oration he appears simply to commend the baptism of babies: 'Have you an infant child [νήπιον]? Do not let sin get any opportunity, but let him be sanctified from his childhood [ἐκ βρέφους]; from his very tenderest age let him be consecrated by the Spirit.' But later, and at greater length, he offers a different recommendation:

Be it so, some will say, in the case of those who ask for baptism; what have you to say about those who are still children, and conscious neither of the loss nor of the grace? Are we to baptize them too? Certainly, if any danger presses. For it is better that they should be unconsciously sanctified than that they should depart unsealed and uninitiated ... But in respect of others I give my advice to wait till the end of the third year, or a little more or less, when they may be able to listen and to answer something about the sacrament; that, even though they do not perfectly understand it, yet at any rate they may know the outlines; and then to sanctify them in soul and body with the great sacrament of our consecration. For this is how the matter stands; at that time they begin to be responsible for their lives, when reason is matured, and they learn the mystery of life (for of sins of ignorance owing to their tender years they have no account to give), and it is far more profitable on all accounts to be fortified by the font, because of the sudden assaults of danger that befall us, stronger than our helpers.³³

Three general points can be noted from the fourth century. *First*, there was a frank acceptance of a variety of policy. This clearly goes back to the third century, as is shown by the evidence of the inscriptions. Is there any reason for supposing that this variety does not go back further still? It is significant that we have no record in the third or fourth century of anyone objecting in principle to anyone else's policy, nor of anyone's policy being branded as a novelty. This fact strongly supports the theory that the diversity goes back a long way – perhaps even into the apostolic age.

Secondly, many fourth-century Christians did not have their babies baptised. Why not? One suggestion is that infant baptism was a novelty that had yet to become fully accepted. There is no direct evidence for

³² The *Apostolic Constitutions* of 370/80 urges the baptism of infants (6:15; PG 1:949-950; ANF 7:457). Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*: 92-97, gives other evidence starting from the middle of the fourth century.

³³ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 40:17, 28 (PG 36:379-82, 399-400; NPNF 7:365, 370).

this and no one objected to the baptism of babies on the grounds that it was recent or unapostolic.³⁴ It has also been suggested that a motive for the non-baptism of infants might have been the perception that it is the baptism of believing converts that is normative and that waiting until one's children have come to a faith of their own fits that model better.³⁵ Again, there is no direct evidence for this, but it does cohere better with the known facts: that there was a variety of practice and that infant baptism was certainly not regarded as normative. The biggest motivation for delaying baptism, and one for which there *is* clear direct evidence, was the fear of post-baptismal sin. There is no shortage of evidence from the fourth century of *adults* delaying baptism through fear of post-baptismal sin.³⁶ Apart from Tertullian there is less evidence for this motivation for the non-baptism of children, but it would be extraordinary for it to have caused adults to delay baptism without also motivating delay in the baptism of children. Tertullian argued that it was prudent to wait till youngsters had been through the years of teenage rebellion, sown their wild oats and were ready to settle down. This would be a good time to be baptised, thus effectively availing themselves of a once-only offer of amnesty, and to knuckle under to the rigours of the Christian life and church discipline.

Thirdly, it is clear that the fourth-century Christians had no objection *in principle* to infant baptism. They did, however, see the merits of coming to baptism at the point when its one-off benefits could be used to greatest effect. It was in the fifth century West that infant baptism increasingly became the norm.³⁷ Various factors were at work, including an increasing emphasis on the doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace and the fear that babies dying unbaptised would go to hell. Now we can answer our penultimate question. When is

³⁴ It could be argued that the silence concerns not just this reason for not baptising babies but the giving of any reason for it. But the silence suggests that whatever the reasons for not baptising babies, these did not include any objection to it in principle, which would almost certainly have left some record.

³⁵ This suggestion was made to me in a very helpful private communication from Paul Fiddes (June 2002) in response to an earlier draft of this paper. He offers this as a second reason, in addition to the undoubted fear of post-baptismal sin.

³⁶ E.g. Chrysostom, *Homily 1 on Acts*, from the very end of the century.

³⁷ Especially through the influence of Augustine in the context of the Pelagian controversy. But Pope Siricius could already in AD 385 urge the baptism of infants for fear that they might die unbaptised and so lose eternal life (*Epistola* 1:2:3, PL 13:1134-35).

infant baptism first expected of *all* children born to Christians? In the fifth century.

What about our last question? When is the first objection *in principle* to infant baptism? The defence of an alternative to infant baptism goes back at least to Tertullian. But neither Tertullian nor anyone else in the early Church objected in principle to infant baptism. They may have urged prudential considerations for the delay of baptism (not only for infants), but they did not suggest that the practice was unapostolic, illegitimate or invalid. Tertullian was not the sort of polemicist to pull punches like that had they had any plausibility. Augustine cited the practice of infant baptism as evidence for original sin yet the Pelagians never questioned the validity of the practice. For such an objection in principle we have to wait until some small medieval sects³⁸ and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. If the practice was in fact unapostolic it is surprising to say the least that none of those who had hesitations about it in the second to fourth centuries saw fit to draw attention to that fact. Had infant baptism been universally practised in these centuries its opponents today could plausibly argue that its unapostolic origins were for this reason suppressed. But in fact it was far from universally practised and there would have been no such motivation for concealing any suspicions that it was not an apostolic practice.

What about the second-century church? The direct evidence is much less clear. There are two accounts of baptism. The *Didache*, or so-called *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is probably from around the turn of the century, possibly even from the first century. It contains a few rules about how to conduct baptism but makes no mention of children.³⁹ Justin Martyr, writing from Rome in the middle of the century, gives a fuller description of a baptismal service, also without mentioning children. This proves nothing as the Jewish tractate *Gerim* gives regulations for proselyte baptism which are designed for adults only, yet elsewhere indicates that children were baptised.⁴⁰ The fact that no other sources from *this* time prove that babies were being

³⁸ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Baptist Principles* (London: Kingsgate, 1945) draws attention to anti-sacramental protests against infant baptism in the twelfth-century West (pp. 51, 62-64) and to a Paulician document from c. 800 entitled *The Key of Truth* (pp. 58-62).

³⁹ *Didache* 7.

⁴⁰ Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism*: 39.

baptised does not invalidate this comparison.⁴¹ Also, Justin is explicitly describing the baptism of converts: ‘at our first birth we were born of necessity without our knowledge, from moist seed by the intercourse of our parents with each other, and were brought up in bad habits and wicked behaviour.’⁴² If this excludes Christian babies it equally excludes adults raised in a Christian home. To deduce that either of these were not baptised is to read more into Justin than he says.

Some time between 155 and 177 Polycarp bishop of Smyrna was martyred. At his trial he declared that he had served Christ for eighty-six years.⁴³ The eighty-six years takes us back at least to AD 91, possibly as far back as AD 69. Some in the past have claimed, rather optimistically, that this proves infant baptism. The most that can be said is that the reference is probably to the years since his baptism and that it is likely that he was still a child when baptised. There are other references to children at this time.⁴⁴ Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* states that ‘Many, both men and women, who have been Christ’s disciples from childhood [ἐκ παιδῶν], have preserved their purity at the age of sixty or seventy years; and I am proud that I could produce such from every race of men and women.’⁴⁵ Aristides says that if Christians have a slave or child [τέκνα] they persuade them also to become Christians.⁴⁶

The most significant testimony from the second century comes from Irenaeus, who grew up in Asia Minor but was writing from Lyon in the early 180s. In the context of teaching that Christ sanctified every stage of life, he makes the following statement: ‘For [Christ] came to save all through means of himself – all, I say, who through him are born again to God – infants [*infantes*], small children [*parvulos*], youngsters

⁴¹ Contra Wright, ‘Origins of Infant Baptism’: 9-10, who speaks of Hippolytus as breaking the ‘ritual silence’ concerning infant baptism. This might give the impression that there were previous church orders that failed to mention it, which there were not. The regulations in the *Didache* are very brief and selective; Justin is writing an account for unbelievers not giving liturgical directions.

⁴² *I Apology* 61 (ACW 56:66-67; cf. PG 6:419-22; ANF 1:183).

⁴³ Martyrdom of Polycarp 9.

⁴⁴ Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?:* 70-74, discusses some other, even more obscure, passages from the second century.

⁴⁵ *I Apology* 15.6 (ACW 56:32; cf. PG 6:349-350; ANF 1:167).

⁴⁶ *Apology* 15 (ANF 10:276). Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?:* 57-58, correctly observes that this does not support infant baptism.

[*pueros*], youths and old folk.⁴⁷ Given his usage elsewhere, ‘born again to God’ must refer to baptism.⁴⁸ Since *infantes* are distinguished from *parvuli* and *pueri* the reference must be to those too young to speak. It is hard to see what Irenaeus can mean if infant baptism is not in mind.

The only substantial evidence for infant baptism from the second century is Irenaeus’ statement, although there is the possibility that the instructions in the *Apostolic Tradition* go back to the middle of that century. But, as has been argued above, the evidence *for* the second century is not limited to evidence *from* the second century. Given the fact of tradition, one can draw conclusions from the statements of Tertullian and Origen in the third century about what was happening in the previous century. Finally, we cannot assume that there was one uniform policy. There may have been variations by region and according to individual choice.

If the second-century evidence is weak, for the first we are reduced to hints. Most explicit are the household or family baptisms of Acts 16:15, 33 and 1 Corinthians 1:16. It seems clear that this was the baptism not just of several individuals but of a family unit. Did this include babies? It is hard to be certain. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that none of these families included babies. Other household passages can be taken as pointing the other way. Acts 18:8 refers to a whole family believing. Cornelius is told that it is through a message that his household will be saved (11:14) and it is implied that it is those who heard the message who received the Spirit and who then were baptised (10:44-48). Some will say that just as these passages must exclude babies, so also the reference to family baptisms cannot include infants. Others have suggested that the concept of the family as a unit means that babies could be referred to as believers – just as people have no problem referring to Jewish or Hindu babies. There are third-century epitaphs on the tombs of babies which refer to them as

⁴⁷ *Against Heresies* 2:22:4 (ANF 1:391 (modified); cf. PG 7:784; SC 294:220-221). This passage survives only in the Latin translation but this is known to be close and accurate. As the French translator notes, ‘la première étape (*βρέφος*) ne peut donc être que le tout premier début de cette vie humaine: naissance et premières années’ (‘therefore the first stage, foetus, must be only the very beginning of human life, i.e. birth and early years’) (SC 293:286).

⁴⁸ *Against Heresies* 1:21:1; 3:17:1; 5:15:3; cf. SC 293:287. Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*: 58-59, correctly notes Jeremias’ failure to consider the wider context, but fails to suggest an alternative meaning for this particular statement.

fidelis or πιστος ('faithful') on the grounds that they were baptised.⁴⁹ The most natural reading of the references to household baptism, especially in the context of the Old Testament background, is that children were included. But this falls short of definite proof.

Jewish proselyte baptism was given to the whole family, including the youngest children. But it was not given to children subsequently born into the family. It has been suggested, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:14, that this might mean that babies were baptised when a family converted but that future children were not baptised at all.⁵⁰ To suggest that such were never baptised is an interesting theoretical interpretation of that verse, but does not square with history. Paul addressed his readers on the assumption that they were all baptised, while the suggested policy would mean that at Rome, for example, there would by that stage have been young adult Christians who had not been and would never be baptised. There is no evidence in the sources that any group of people were ever exempted from the need to be baptised and such a policy would make nonsense of the New Testament theology of baptism. But the possibility that while existing children were baptised with their parents (as with proselyte baptism) subsequent children were baptised not then but at a later stage should not be discounted.⁵¹ If this were so we would have a variety of practice already in New Testament times and this would account for the non-dogmatic approach taken in the following three centuries.

Mark 10:13-16 has long been cited as a proof of infant baptism. Jesus urges the disciples to let the children come to him. They are not to be hindered, a term that already in the New Testament (Matt. 3:14; Acts 8:36; 10:47; 11:17), as later, refers to obstacles to receiving baptism, and he lays hands upon them. Tertullian refers this to infant baptism, but it is unlikely to have that reference in Mark. The only other surviving patristic source before Augustine to associate the text with infant baptism is the Syrian *Apostolic Constitutions*, AD 370/80.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ferguson, 'Inscriptions': 40.

⁵⁰ This passage is discussed by Wright, 'Origins of Infant Baptism': 14-17, who mentions Jeremias' earlier suggestion (*Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 47-48). Wright correctly argues that the holiness of the children cannot have been based on their baptism, but goes too far in deducing that they therefore cannot have been baptised ('Origins': 14-15). Might their baptism not have been based on their 'holiness'?

⁵¹ Wright, 'Origins of Infant Baptism': 18, 22, discusses this possibility.

⁵² For the history of the use of this text, cf. Wright, 'Out, In, Out': 188-206.

So far we have looked for direct evidence for or against infant baptism. It is widely recognised that the surviving evidence does not enable a clear answer to be given until the last quarter of the second century. But our seismological approach provides an alternative way to answer the question. In the third and fourth centuries, the earliest period for which we have clear evidence, there was variety in practice. Christian children were baptised at every conceivable age. How can this variety be accounted for? There are three reasonable scenarios for the earliest apostolic church: either they did not baptise Christian babies, or they did, or there was already variety at this stage.

Which of these three scenarios is the most plausible, given the evidence? Consider the first scenario: that infants were not baptised. How is the later variety to be explained? Perhaps it began with emergency baptism of sick children and this led on to more regular infant baptism.⁵³ What is the evidence for this? There is evidence from the inscriptions for the emergency baptism of small children. On the other hand, there is no hint anywhere in the surviving Christian literature from the first five centuries that anyone objected *in principle* to infant baptism, that anyone considered it improper, irregular or invalid. If it was a post-apostolic innovation, this silence is remarkable. The emergency baptism of dying infants implies an acceptance in principle that it is not wrong to baptise infants and if this was in defiance of apostolic practice it is hard to believe that no single trace of protest would have survived – especially when there was no shortage of Christians who chose not to baptise their children and others who were recommending delay in baptism. Tertullian sought to discourage infant baptism, but failed to use what would have been his most powerful argument – the claim that it was unapostolic.

Also, there is no single piece of evidence from the first two centuries of a child being brought up as a Christian and baptised at a later age. If the problem with infant baptism is *inconclusive* evidence that it happened in the first 150 years of the church, the problem with the alternative theory is *total lack* of evidence. It is true that the New Testament evidence for the baptism of infants is inconclusive, but at least there are passages which may plausibly be interpreted as implying that infants were baptised – such as Acts 16:33. By contrast there is no New Testament evidence at all for the later baptism of Christian children. There is no record of such a baptism and no hint in the epistles that such children should be seeking baptism.

⁵³ As is argued by Ferguson, 'Inscriptions': 44-46.

Consider now the second scenario: that the earliest church did in fact baptise babies. While there is no unequivocal proof that this did happen, there is what can quite plausibly be seen as evidence of it. Whole households were baptised and these incidents can at least plausibly be seen as examples of infant baptism. It is also noteworthy that in the New Testament epistles the instruction given to the churches includes instruction to children (Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20). These children are not encouraged or instructed to be baptised, nor are their parents instructed to work to that end. Instead, the children are addressed as Christians, which fits best with the theory that they are baptised. But if the earliest practice was the baptism of infants, how is it that in later centuries not all Christian babies were baptised? Tertullian urges just such a change, on the ground of his fear of post-baptismal sin. Given the attitude of the second-century church to post-baptismal sin, seen in the *Shepherd of Hermas* for example, it is plausible that the delay in baptism began in the second century. In other words, if babies were baptised in the earliest church there is no difficulty in accounting for the later variation in practice. Those who delayed the baptism of their babies, not because of any objection in principle to infant baptism but for prudential reasons because of the fear of post-baptismal sin, would of course wish to have those children baptised should they fall ill and be in danger of death. Thus this theory also fully explains the existence of emergency baptism of children. But against it is the fact that Tertullian and others who urged delay in baptism were never accused of departing from the New Testament or from apostolic tradition.

The final scenario, variety of practice in the apostolic church is the most likely, based on the later evidence and using our seismological approach.⁵⁴ After all, the earliest *unequivocal* evidence for the initiation of Christian children comes from a time (early third century)

⁵⁴ D. F. Wright, 'George Cassander and the Appeal to the Fathers in Sixteenth-Century Debates about Infant Baptism' in *Auctoritas Patrum: Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the 15th and 16th Century*, ed. L. Grane, A. Schindler & M. Wriedt (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993): 267, observes that 'differences of category of infants, of circumstances and even of region alone make sense of the evidence'. (He also interestingly shows that the anabaptist Menno Simons accepted that infant baptism took place in the apostolic age, though regarding it as an abuse, p. 264.) Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*: 43-44, also postulates such variation.

when we know that there was variety of practice. What could have caused the variety? There are a number of options. We have already proposed the difference between babies born before and after their parents' baptism. Another option would be different policies for Jews, who circumcised their children, and Gentiles who did not. It is also possible that variety was introduced as the church spread into different places. The evidence from the New Testament that babies were baptised is impressive, though not conclusive. The evidence that *all* Christian babies were baptised is of course much weaker. While the New Testament offers no positive evidence for such a variety of practice, the later existence of a variety which is widespread, enduring and unchallenged leads us as seismologists to enquire about its origins and to ask whether it might not go back to the apostolic church. Such a hypothesis would explain the fact that we have no evidence for any objection in principle against either the baptism or the non-baptism of babies. This hypothesis is also supported by the fact that as far back as we have unequivocal evidence of how Christian children were initiated (early third century) we find variety. There is no evidence against the existence of such variety in the first and second centuries.

So what conclusion do we reach as twenty-first-century seismologists, drawing on the reports of witnesses from closer to the epicentre of the earthquake? Our evidence has not been confined to those witnesses residing at the epicentre itself but has also been drawn from nearby witnesses who witnessed the more immediate after-effects. This evidence leads to a number of conclusions. The meagre evidence from the first two centuries is consistent with the practice of infant baptism but does not demand it. The evidence from the third and fourth centuries unambiguously reveals a diversity in practice where the initiation of Christian children is concerned. There is a total lack of evidence in the first four centuries of any objection *in principle* to either the baptism or the non-baptism of babies. Given this evidence, what is most likely to have occurred in the apostolic church? That the practice of infant baptism was unknown seems to me to be the least likely hypothesis. That it was practised seems very likely. That it was *universally* practised is much less likely given the freedom that later Christians felt not to baptise their children.