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## Tertullian Rejects Baptismal Regeneration

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Tertullian is an interesting character. When he writes about the doctrine of the invisible church in one of his pre-montanist books he's written off as a heretic giving zany opinions. When Tertullian writes about prayers for the dead in his monanist book *On Monogamy*, all of the sudden he is a valuable resource of what orthodox, early Christians believed. Then, when Tertullian teaches that Mary had sons other than Jesus in his orthodox work *Against Marcion Book IV*, he's back to being an unreliable heretic.

With whatever weight you would like to assign Tertullian, know this: he was the first early church father to explicitly teach the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and his passages reflect that this belief was relatively widespread among those circles he was privy to. However, in doing so, he specifically rejects the doctrine.

In *On Repentance* he writes:

*Moreover, a presumptuous confidence in baptism introduces all kind of vicious delay and tergiversation with regard to repentance; for, feeling sure of undoubted pardon of their sins, men meanwhile steal the intervening time, and make it for themselves into a holiday-time for sinning, rather than a time for learning not to sin. Further, how inconsistent is it to expect pardon of sins (to be granted) to a repentance which they have not fulfilled (Chapter 6)!*

The above clearly shows that people presumed upon the instantaneous forgiveness of sins via baptism.

*Not that I deny that the divine benefit— the putting away of sins, I mean— is in every way sure to such as **are on the point of entering the (baptismal) water**; but what we have to labour for is, that it may be granted us to attain that blessing. For who will grant to you, a man of so faithless repentance, one single sprinkling of any water whatever? To approach it by stealth, indeed, and to get the minister appointed over this business misled by your asseverations, is easy; but God takes foresight for His own treasure, and suffers not the unworthy to steal a march upon it (Chapter 6).*

Here, Tertullian teaches that sins are put away *just previous* to baptism, and that forgiveness does not occur without a repentant mindset. Other translations confirm the underlined rendering. For example, Reverend C. Dodgson's 1842 translation of the passage states: “Nor do I deny the good gift of God that is the blotting out of sins entirely secured to those **who are about to enter into the water ...**”

The need for the repentant mindset, repeated by Justin Martyr, Origen, and Cyril of Jerusalem is elaborated upon by Tertullian:

*But some think as if God were under a necessity of bestowing even on the unworthy, what He has engaged (to give); and they turn His liberality into slavery. But if it is of necessity that God grants us the **symbol of death**, then He does so **unwillingly** (Chapter 6).*

Tertullian's point is clear. Just as God does nothing unwillingly, nor does He really baptize unrepentant sinners. Further, we can see that Tertullian views baptism as a **symbol** of one's death to sin. In doing so, he obviously rejects that the water itself accomplishes regeneration, but rather, the repentance of the believer does. As he argues in Chapter 5, those who do not repent were never faithful to begin with:

*But some say that God is satisfied if He be looked up to with the heart and the mind, even if this be not done in outward act, and that thus they sin without damage to their fear and their faith..But these dispositions have been wont to sprout from the seed of hypocrites, whose friendship with the devil is indivisible, whose repentance never faithful (Chapter 5).*

Later in Chapter 6, Tertullian explains again how we are baptized before we are immersed into water and conflates this with the idea that true baptism occurs when one is repentant, and thereby, soundly faithful:

*[B]aptismal washing is a sealing of faith, which faith is begun and is commended by the faith of repentance. We are not washed in order that we may cease sinning, but because we have ceased, since **in heart we have been bathed already**. For the first baptism of a learner is this, a perfect fear; thenceforward, in so far as you have understanding of the Lord faith is sound, the conscience having once for all embraced repentance (Chapter 6).*

Just as the earliest mention of baptismal regeneration in Church History, by Irenaeus in Chapter 21 of Against Heresies criticizes those who think so highly of their baptisms that they wait before death to do them (as if the baptism itself carries that sort of power), Tertullian is chronologically the second earliest, specific witness of the idea that baptism itself literally forgives sins.

Though he is the second earliest, he is in fact the earliest as it pertains to the idea that orthodox Christian water baptism really wipes away sins. And, in being the earliest to mention the idea, he does so in the midst of specifically *rejecting* the idea such as in the above. Christians have been spiritually baptized inwardly before they approach the waters, as confirmed by their repentance.

### **In Review:**

When I began this article, my honest intent was to show that Tertullian taught the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration. In fact, that was the article's original title. However, as I continued to read *On Repentance* I was compelled to write on the exact opposite.

In my study of baptism in the early Church, I have found that the following men (in chronological order) taught that baptism *is* repentance:

1. Justin Martyr
2. Theophilus of Antioch
3. Irenaeus
4. Origen
5. Tertullian

Ironically, other than Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome\*, roughly Origen's and Tertullian's contemporaries, the above list includes every single Christian writer that we have extent works from from the latter half of the second century to the early third century. \*Having not read Clement of Alexandria or Hippolytus I cannot comment on their views of baptism, but with such a great witness among the other five men it would appear a Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox, and whomever else that adheres to baptismal regeneration should exercise some serious pause. *None* of these men though that apart from repentance, one can be saved. And as much as one would like to posit that the faith of the Church stands in for infants, the fact of the matter is, true faith is coupled with repentance. And no one else can repent for you, let alone have faith in your stead.

Lastly, it is worth noting that only Irenaeus and Tertullian literally wrote about baptismal regeneration in the sense that we know it today. While Irenaeus, Theophilus, Origen talk about regeneration, they never state that the water literally regenerates someone and that this process can be divorced from *the repentance of the individual*. Yet, ironically, the first groups of people in recorded history who understood the doctrine of baptismal regeneration as the moderns do were Gnostic schismatics (Irenaeus' time) and then antinomians (Tertullian's time). Isn't this more than enough reason to reject the practice as fundamentally unchristian?

Yet, within a short period of time notable figures such as Constantine put off their baptisms until death, and then by Augustine's time the widespread baptism of infants gained sway—all because of this doctrine. Yet, without genuine repentance (the "first baptism" according to Tertullian), how can there be true baptism? There cannot be. So do not put your trust in water. Place your trust in the God who "give[s] repentance for sins" (Wis 12:19) and has granted it to us to believe (Phil 1:27). Our true faith in Christ, which bears fruits of repentance, saves. Not simply getting wet.

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