

Orthodox Christian Theology

"Fight to the death for the truth and the Lord God will fight for you." (Sir 4:28)

CHURCH HISTORY

Tertullian, Baptismal Regeneration, and the Danger of Presuppositions



Date: May 7, 2016 Author: Craig Truglia 15 Comments



Whenever we read an ancient text, even in the original language, we have to keep several things in mind. People looked at the world different than we do today. Their paradigms are different, as are their lifestyles, upbringings, priorities, technology, climates, and etcetera. In fact, probably the only thing we share in common with the ancients is the proclivity to sin and a need for a Savior.

Note: This article was written before the author's conversion to Orthodoxy.

Because the ancients are so different, there is a real danger of misunderstanding their thoughts and feelings, because they do not express themselves in the way we do. So, when an ancient writes something that appears to agree with us or the opposite, we must take a lot of care in investigating the context of what was written, the reasoning behind what was written, and how the same writer has defined his terms elsewhere in order to know his meaning.

Recently, I blew a lot of Catholics' minds by arguing that Tertullian rejected baptismal regeneration—something he clearly and unequivocally does in his treatise *On Repentance*. The reason many Catholics have so much trouble with this is that some of the things these men say awfully sound like modern Roman Catholic doctrines.

Whenever Catholics read the words “laver of regeneration” and “washing away of sins,” they automatically assume that the church father means the same thing they mean by these words. **So, their presuppositions actually dictate the meaning of what the church father is saying, instead of allowing the historical witness of the Church to bear witness for itself.**

For example, in Tertullian's work *On Baptism* he begins by saying: “Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free *and admitted* into eternal life” (Chapter 1)! How many Catholics stop reading, simply because Tertullian's point appears so clear?

In my previous article, I showed that Tertullian defined baptism to be:

- “The **symbol** of death.”
- “[A] **sealing of faith**, which faith is begun and is commended by the faith of repentance” so that before every approaching the waters “in heart we have been bathed already.”
- Of two varieties: The “**first baptism** is perfect fear [i.e. repenting of sins and placing faith in Christ, as said in the previous bullet point]” and the “**second baptism**” is performing

works of penance.

While it is entirely possible that a church father can contradict himself between writings, because only God does not change His mind, we must at least attempt in our analysis to let the church father speak using the definitions of terms that he has provided for us.

So, if we read about the sacrament of water washing away sins, but then we add in the three bullet points, we realize that Tertullian is saying that the *sacrament* is **the symbol of one's death** to sin, which **begun** when one had **faith** and **repented**, and is **sealed** by the *sacrament of water*. (*Italics* are from *On Baptism* and **bold** from *On Repentance*.)

Clearly, the above is not a mangling of his thought, but pretty much explains his view in his own words. Now, all of the sudden, Tertullian does not sound very Catholic, does he? But, we are not trying to make him sound like anyone, we are trying to make him sound like himself!

To find out more about what Tertullian believes about baptism, let's go over his writing on the subject. The treatise *On Baptism* was written to counter the "Cainite [gnostic] heresy" of those who taught that we need not baptize at all—something that Quakers teach today.

In it, he makes a few statements, when properly understood that appear to reconcile easily with the view he takes in *On Repentance*. As we shall see, knowing historical context, Tertullian's reasoning in the book, and his own definitions help us understand his meaning:

*There is absolutely nothing which makes men's minds more obdurate than the simplicity of the divine works which are **visible** in the act, when compared with the grandeur which is **promised** thereto in the effect...a man is dipped in water, and amid the utterance of some few words, is sprinkled, and then rises again, **not much (or not at all) the cleaner**, the consequent attainment of eternity is **esteemed** the more incredible (Chapter 2).*

The above words do not lend themselves to the understanding of a literal regeneration happening via the water, but rather to the symbolism inherent in the act itself.

In chapter three Tertullian addresses a Cainite objection that sounds a lot like a Quaker today: "How foolish and impossible it is to be formed anew by water. In what respect, pray, has this material substance merited an office of so high dignity?"

Let's remind ourselves. **The Cainites are a gnostic, antinomian sect.** They thought the material substance of everything was evil. The creation of the material universe is the result of the Aeon Sophia [i.e. lady Wisdom] trying to contemplate the chief Aeon [the Propator], and in her despair at failing created a substance that is the material world.

So, the Cainites were rejecting baptism because *they opposed all material substance as wicked*. They used this as justification to live as complete hedonists in the flesh, as the flesh was tainted and cannot be made clean (so let's eat, drink, and be very merry!) My point in bringing this up is that Tertullian is arguing against an objection whose meaning is very specific given the era. We must evaluate for this when understanding his response.

Tertullian invokes Genesis throughout chapter three to show the exalted state of water as a substance in creation, in order to counter the creation mythology of "Aeonic emanationism" central to gnosticism. They don't believe God made the material universe, as the material

universe is a defect. Genesis 1 clearly teaches that He did and that the material universe is good. He ends the chapter on this note:

*[H]ow many functions, how useful an instrumentality, it affords the world, I fear I may seem to have collected rather the praises of water than the reasons of baptism; although I should thereby teach all the more fully, that it is not to be doubted that God has made the material substance which He has disposed throughout all His products and works, **obey Him also in His own peculiar sacraments; that the material substance which governs terrestrial life acts as agent likewise in the celestial.***

The underlined is obviously in reference to the use of water in creation itself. The embolden merely is a reference to God's sovereignty over the matter of water for its use in something of "celestial" significance (just like creation). Of course, if someone does not understand Gnosticism, it appears that Tertullian is arguing that water, in its own right does something magical. However, this is not Tertullian's point. His point is that water is divinely significant and part of a good creation, *not* the pollution of an Aeon who failed to contemplate God. Therefore, God can use the substance for lofty purposes—something the Cainites deny, as water is the result of a defect.

Tertullian continues this argument in Chapter 4:

*Thus the nature of the waters, sanctified by the Holy One, itself conceived withal the power of sanctifying...All waters, therefore, **in virtue of the pristine privilege of their origin**, do, after invocation of God, attain the sacramental power of sanctification; for the Spirit immediately supervenes from the heavens, and rests over the waters, sanctifying them from Himself; and being thus sanctified, they imbibe at the same time the power of sanctifying.*

Tertullian's point is because water is not a wicked substance but esteemed and set apart as holy by God in creation, that it is fitting that it be used in the sacrament of baptism. This is contrary to the Gnostic view that water is a wicked material substance and therefore cannot be imbued with the Spirit, or any divine qualities, whatsoever. Tertullian ends the chapter thus:

*[A]fter the waters have been in a manner endued with **medicinal virtue** through the intervention of the angel, the spirit is corporeally washed in the waters, and **the flesh is in the same spiritually cleansed.***

What is the "medicinal virtue?" Well, I can tell you what Roman Catholics/Lutherans/Eastern Orthodox mean—complete annihilation of previous sins. Yet, does Tertullian teach this idea? No! One has to completely shoehorn the idea in. What literally occurs at baptism according to Tertullian?

[B]aptismal washing is a sealing of faith, which faith is begun and is commended by the faith of repentance (On Repentance, Chapter 6).

It seals faith. Let's compare this to starting a business. You sign a rent and start serving your customers on May 1st. However, the government requires that you must register your business with the state within 30 days. You submit your paperwork to the state, and the state approves and sends you a license and registration number. Your right to do business has been sealed, which is significant, even though you were conducting business before you were officially registered.

Not only does the NY DMV work in a way similar to this, so did early church practice! One was catechized before he can be in communion with the Church. If someone being catechized died before being baptized, no one taught he was damned. All of the early fathers, when addressing the question, taught he was already baptized *by desire*. After being catechized, the individual was baptized and now part of the visible body of the Church. The significance of this is that he can partake in the Lord's Supper. The partaking in the Lord's Supper meant you were part of the Body of Christ and had attained to the benefit of salvation. If one had committed sins, the same Body would cut you off from the Lord's Supper, and thereby communion, so that you may be spiritually cleansed through public penance.

Tertullian speaks thus in Chapter 5:

And thus, when the grace of God advanced to higher degrees among men, an accession of efficacy was granted to the waters and to the angel. They who were wont to remedy bodily defects, now heal the spirit; they who used to work temporal salvation now renew eternal.

Did you catch that? Baptism does not *attain* for one eternal salvation—it **renews** the state, as the state was already attained when one repented and trusted in Christ.

So, in short, we start being Christians before baptism, but we attain to very real and tangible benefits through and after baptism as it is a seal of our faith, the registration from the Government so to say—we gain membership into the visible Church. Take note, the above are things that *Tertullian actually teaches*.

He does not actually teach the complete annihilation of sins by virtue of getting wet.

However, he speaks of a group of people that do adhere to such an idea in Chapter 5:

[A]t all events, at the Apollinarian and Eleusinian games they [the pagans] are baptized; and they presume that the effect of their doing that is their regeneration and the remission of the penalties due to their perjuries.

Just like in Irenaeus time, and in Tertullian's treatise *On Repentance*, the only people that these men write about who literally did ascribe to baptismal regeneration ascribed to gross, heretical, errors!

As we go farther along in the book, we see Tertullian flesh out the same view of baptism I, and not the baptismal-regeneration apologists, have been elaborating:

*[T]he angel, the witness of baptism, make the paths straight for the Holy Spirit, who is about to come upon us, by **the washing away of sins, which faith, sealed** in (the name of) the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, **obtains** (Chapter 6).*

Faith obtains the washing away of sins. Tertullian, given time to elaborate upon his own thought, plainly agrees with what he wrote in *On Repentance*.

But if repentance is a thing human, its baptism must necessarily be of the same nature: else, if it had been celestial, it would have given both the Holy Spirit and remission of sins. But none either pardons sins or freely grants the Spirit save God only (Chapter 10).

It is not enough to merely repent—this is what John’s baptism represented. One must repent and believe on Christ, for this baptism into Christ is what saves. However, as we already detailed, this has already occurred for believers before baptism (again, that’s not my words—*that’s what Tertullian actually said*). Baptism serves as a seal where henceforth the believer participates as part of Christ’s body.

[H]ow, in accordance with that prescript, salvation is attainable by the apostles, whom — Paul excepted — we do not find baptized in the Lord?...Now, whether they were baptized in any manner whatever, or whether they continued unbathed to the end...still, to determine concerning the salvation of the apostles is audacious enough, because on them the prerogative even of first choice, and thereafter of undivided intimacy, might be able to confer the compendious grace of baptism, seeing they (I think) followed Him who was wont to promise salvation to every believer. “Your faith,” He would say, “has saved you;” and, “Your sins shall be remitted you,” on your believing, of course, albeit you be not yet baptized. If that was wanting to the apostles, I know not in the faith of what things it was (Chapter 12).

I recommend reading the whole chapter if you are confused, but let me sum up in short: certain Gnostics claim that none of the Apostles other than Paul were baptized into Christ, but rather just into John’s baptism. They use this as justification to not baptize whatsoever.

Tertullian responds *that even if it were so*, because he does not concede the point, that the Apostles’ *faith* was sufficient in giving them the authority to subsequently baptize believers. Further, the embolden makes explicitly clear that sins are remitted by faith, before baptism!

[The Cainites argue:] “Baptism is not necessary for them to whom faith is sufficient; for withal, Abraham pleased God by a sacrament of no water, but of faith.” But in all cases it is the later things which have a conclusive force, and the subsequent which prevail over the antecedent. Grant that, in days gone by, there was salvation by means of bare faith, before the passion and resurrection of the Lord. But now that faith has been enlarged, and has become a faith which believes in His nativity, passion, and resurrection, there has been an amplification added to the sacrament, viz., the sealing act of baptism...For the law of baptizing has been imposed... The comparison with this law of that definition, “Unless a man have been reborn of water and Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of the heavens,” has tied faith to the necessity of baptism. Accordingly, all thereafter who became believers used to be baptized (Chapter 13).

Tertullian argues that the faithful are compelled to be baptized, because Christ demands it by imposition. Nowhere does this teach that baptism annihilates all sins, nor redefines what he means by baptism as I laid out earlier in this article.

These two baptisms He sent out from the wound in His pierced side, in order that they who believed in His blood might be bathed with the water; they who had been bathed in the water might likewise drink the blood. This is the baptism which both stands in lieu of the fontal bathing when that has not been received, and restores it when lost (Chapter 16).

In *On Repentance* the first baptism was faith coupled with repentance and the second is penance. The first baptism here is, after having believed in His blood, getting physically baptized and the second is baptism-by-blood. Being that baptism-by-blood restores what is lost, it essentially is an act of penance.

And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary— if (baptism itself) is not so necessary — that the sponsors likewise should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfil their promises, and may be disappointed by the development of an evil disposition, in those for whom they stood (Chapter 18)?

Here, Tertullian either parenthetically states baptism is unnecessary for salvation or speaks of an unsaid opposition (who clearly are not the Cainites as they did not baptize) that states the same. He does not refute the parenthetical statement in any case.

Further, he cautions parents not to claim that very young children are faithful, only to incur guilt for having lied when those same children failed to persevere in the faith. While Origen speaks of the baptism of infants, as does Cyprian a few decades later, Tertullian is not necessarily speaking of infants. It appears he is speaking of small, impressionable children before marriageable age. After all, his own rules for baptism in chapter 20 include all-night vigils and confessing of sins—something impossible for infants.

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For a while now, probably two years, I was convinced that Tertullian believed in baptismal regeneration. I, like many of my detractors, simply read modern presuppositions into Tertullian's language. However, I find the weight of evidence so great that I must recant such an idea. Tertullian did not adhere to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. In fact, he refuted it in specific terms and specifically ascribed the doctrine to antinomians and pagans! I believe his words are self-explanatory, without modern presuppositions.

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Published by Craig Truglia

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15 thoughts on “Tertullian, Baptismal Regeneration, and the Danger of Presuppositions”

Add Comment

1. Maximilian Nightingale says:
May 7, 2016 at 10:29 pm

“Recently, I blew a lot of Catholics’ minds by arguing that Tertullian rejected baptismal regeneration.”

Which Catholics? How many? Sorry, I didn’t see any comments on either of these posts here or on Facebook, so it seems like a strange claim to make.

The last post says little that is revolutionary. It is Catholic teaching that an unrepentant sinner does not receive grace from baptism. See Thomas on insincere baptism: <http://www.dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/TP/TP069.html#TPQ69A9THEP1>

I started reading Tertullian *On Baptism* out of curiosity, and the first three chapters already set out in clearest terms the Catholic teaching on baptism: that the waters (by a God granting it) really do cause an effect, namely, the washing away of sins and admittance to eternal life.

You seem to see contradictions or dilemmas where there aren’t any. I will cite Thomas’ *Summa theologiae* on the following points: Catholics also hold that repentance with faith removes sins (III, q.69, a.1, rep.2), the water is symbolic (III, q.66, a.3, body), insincere baptism does not remove sin (III, q.69, a.9).

One point of discrepancy is that Tertullian discourages the baptism of children, and yet not because it is without effect. On the contrary, it is precisely *because* of the gravity of its effect (in this case, the obligations of sponsors) that he discourages.

I will concede that his view is certainly at odds with Catholic practice, and disagree with him. Yet even contemporary Church practice agrees to the extent that “there must be a founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion;” and “if such hope is altogether lacking, the baptism is to be delayed according to the prescripts of particular law after the parents have been advised about the reason.” (1983 Code, Canon 866) This is not shoe-horning: there is obviously a discrepancy, but one can look for the principles behind the difference.

Reply

1. **Craig Truglia says:**

May 8, 2016 at 12:35 am

“Which Catholics? How many?” Two or Three on the Catholics and Reformed Facebook group 😊

Reply

2. **Craig Truglia says:**

May 8, 2016 at 12:36 am

Max, it appears you haven’t actually read the article. The last post shows how Tertullian defines baptism and he specifically says it occurs before the water sacrament. To ignore this and then say “this is consistent with Catholic teaching” seems to me like you actually did not read what he wrote.

Reply

3. **Maximilian Nightingale says:**

May 9, 2016 at 10:47 am

I have read the article. I see no problem (where confusion can be avoided) with referring to the renewal of the soul in faith as a washing, while still attributing efficacy to the sacrament of baptism. Again, I think you find false dilemmas, where one thing does not necessarily preclude the other.

I think Tertullian is manifoldly explicit about the waters effecting a cause. You cite chapter 2 above and then say one cannot infer from it that he is speaking of literal regeneration, but I think it can be inferred very easily: he speaks in the language of cause and effect, and speaks of eternity as consequent. You say he is speaking of what is symbolized, but in the text he is simply contrasting the magnitude of the cause (water) with that of the effect (eternal life). The discrepancy would not seem so wide if he pointed out what is symbolized (the death and resurrection of the God-man, Christ). Further, in chapter 3 he says, "that the material substance which governs terrestrial life acts as agent likewise in the celestial." Here he calls the water an agent with a celestial effect. This would not be without the Lord's power and words, but with them it is so.

Also: What do you think of chapter 17 of his treatise on Baptism?

Reply

1. **Craig Truglia says:**

May 9, 2016 at 10:49 am

"Tertullian is manifoldly explicit about the waters effecting a cause."

Is he not manifoldly explicit that faith and repentance effects a cause before the water?

2. **Craig Truglia says:**

May 9, 2016 at 10:50 am

As for chapter 17, it does not say anything that Protestants would not follow with their own church governments.

3. **Maximilian Nightingale says:**

May 9, 2016 at 12:41 pm

Yes, he is explicit that faith and repentance have an effect, even before baptism. As does St. Thomas Aquinas and the tradition of the Church. This need not, as I said, contradict that water is actually the instrumental cause of grace in the soul.

Also: I would be interested in hearing more of your thoughts on Church governance, and the basis of authority in the Church. This is one issue where, lacking a sort of historical continuity (in many cases), it seems Protestants need to improvise. Should it be democratic? Or would it be a charismatic grace? But that's altogether a separate topic.

God bless,

Max

4. **Craig Truglia says:**

May 9, 2016 at 8:58 pm

"This need not, as I said, contradict that water is actually the instrumental cause of grace in the soul."

Not exactly, as Tertullian explicitly stated that repentance and faith are actually instrumental, preceding the literal sacrament. I know that Catholics believe in baptism-by-desire, but Tertullian is not speaking about those who die before baptism, he is in fact literally speaking about the baptized!

As for the other questions, I am very much leaning in your direction but I would need to talk to you about them, as I am uncertain. Would you be able to talk some time this week via Google or something?

God bless,
Craig

5. Maximilian Nightingale says:

May 9, 2016 at 10:07 pm

Ah, but even Thomas says this, "Reply to Objection 2: No sin can be forgiven save by the power of Christ's Passion: hence the Apostle says (Heb. 9:22) that "without shedding of blood there is no remission." Consequently no movement of the human will suffices for the remission of sin, unless there be faith in Christ's Passion, and the purpose of participating in it, either by receiving Baptism, or by submitting to the keys of the Church. Therefore when an adult approaches Baptism, he does indeed receive the forgiveness of all his sins through his purpose of being baptized, but more perfectly through the actual reception of Baptism." It would sound strange to most Catholics, but this seems to be the common opinion among theologians (going back to Tertullian). And here he is speaking about those about to be (even actually) baptized.

I'd certainly be interested in discussing the other topic! I'll send you an email in the near future.

6. Craig Truglia says:

May 9, 2016 at 10:29 pm

We're speaking Tertullian, not Thomas ;)

7. Craig Truglia says:

May 9, 2016 at 11:10 pm

By the way, if forgiveness is received before baptism, how is it made more perfect after baptism (in your own words). It would help me understand 😊

2. Maximilian Nightingale says:

May 7, 2016 at 10:48 pm

I also want to address chapter 16, as it seemed particularly odd to me. The last line of the chapter says, "This is the baptism which both stands in lieu of the fontal bathing when that has not been received, and restores it when lost." Now, having my Catholic presuppositions, I would say that he is referring to baptism by blood—that is, martyrdom. The Church holds that Christians who are martyred for the faith are saved, whether baptized in water or not. The blood taking the place of water.

And yet you said it refers to the Lord's Supper, and the text indicates this: "they who had been bathed in the water might likewise drink the blood." I was honestly puzzled by the conjunction, since drinking blood sounds like nothing other than the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood, and yet the following line sounded like nothing other than baptism by blood. So, I checked the Latin....

Here are the two sentences in the edition I found online:

“proinde nos faceret aqua vocatos sanguine electos hos duos baptismos de vulnere percussi lateris emisit, quia qui in sanguinem eius crederent aqua lavarentur, qui aqua lavissent et sanguine **oportere**nt. hic est baptismus qui lavacrum et non acceptum repraesentat et perditum reddit.”

(http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_bapt/evans_bapt_text_trans.htm)

I don't know how your Latin is, but basically there is no word for “drink” in there. The word I highlighted apparently has variations in different edition:

[o]portere = they would need [to be washed with]

portere = they would bear

potere = they would drink

Perhaps it is supposed to be the last, but either of the first two makes more sense to me with the last line. That last line speaks about another **baptism**, and one that **stands in lieu of** the normal sort, and even **restores it when lost**. Nowhere is the Eucharist described as a baptism of any sort, nor as standing in lieu of it—it seems universal that no Christian would receive Eucharist before Baptism. For these reasons, I can't think Tertullian is referring to anything but what we refer to as baptism by blood—the sufficiency of martyrdom for the taking away of sins.

Reply

1. **Craig Truglia says:**

May 8, 2016 at 12:40 am

I'm writing by memory, but he is speaking of a baptism after water baptism. Baptism-by-martyrdom would not make sense in this context. However, now reading it you appear right: “This is the baptism which both stands in lieu of the fontal bathing when that has not been received, and restores it when lost.” Clearly, it is employed either in lieu in baptism, or penance for sin.

Reply

3. **Edgar Abai says:**

July 10, 2016 at 10:15 pm

The apostles were baptized by Jesus himself as recorded in John 3:22. Then continues into verses 23-3. Peter preached baptism in Acts 2:38. He commanded the household of Cornelius to be baptized in water after the latter received the gift of the Holy Ghost in Acts 10:44-48. It is hard to imagine someone like Peter preaching and teaching baptism with water in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins not to have been baptized at all.

Reply

1. **Craig Truglia says:**

July 10, 2016 at 10:50 pm

Well, John 3:22 says He was baptizing with them (and we know elsewhere this does not mean He was literally baptizing) but Tertullian was reacting to some people's views on the matter and answering them, conceding to some of those views.

Reply

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