

THE (IN)SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BAPTIZER IN THE EARLY CHURCH: THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM AND UNIMPORTANCE OF THE ONE WHO BAPTIZED

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Abstract: *This essay considers the role of the administrator of baptism during the first four centuries of the church. While there were disagreements over baptisms performed among heretical or schismatic groups, the church consistently refused to consider the personal character of the baptizer, focusing instead on ecclesial authority and the beliefs of the baptizand. Though East and West parted ways over whether baptisms performed outside the church could be accepted, they agreed that the baptizer played an insignificant role in rite, as long as the Trinitarian formula was used. The East went the route of Cyprian of Carthage, who required rebaptism for schismatics and heretics. The West followed the counsel of Stephen, who was willing to allow baptisms performed outside the auspices of the church. Both East and West accepted that any baptism performed with the Trinitarian formula by a presbyter or bishop, regardless of the baptizer's character, was acceptable.*

Key words: *baptizer, baptism, rebaptism, economy, Lapsi*

The first Christian baptisms, which are described in the book of Acts, occur after Peter's Pentecost speech in Jerusalem in Acts 2. However, assuming that Paul's writings predate the writing of Luke-Acts, the earliest mention of the baptizer (the one who performs the baptism) is found in 1 Cor 1:10–17.¹ There, Paul addresses the “quarrels” that have arisen in Corinth, with divisions along denominational (i.e. based on names) lines: “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”² The context suggests that these parties developed based on the one who performed the baptism of the party members. Thus, Paul baptized some, Apollos others, and Peter (Cephas) others. Those who refused to join a party simply claimed Christ. That the baptizer is in view is seen in Paul's succeeding statements:

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't recall if I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.³

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¹ Though John the Baptist is obviously the first baptizer mentioned in the NT, his baptism was not properly a Christian one. Cf. Acts 19:1–7.

² 1 Cor 1:12. All scriptural quotations are taken from The Christian Standard Bible.

³ 1 Cor 1:14–17.

Here, Paul shifts the emphasis from his role as baptizer to Christ's death and name. Christ, not Paul, died on the cross, and it was into Christ's name, not Paul's, that people were baptized. Paul, who undoubtedly baptized multitudes during his years of ministry, admits that he did not remember exactly who his baptizands were. Some he remembered, but others he did not. His indifference to his role as baptizer can help inform the general attitude of the NT and the early church with regard to the importance of the baptizer in the sacred rite. In fact, in all other Pauline writings where baptism is mentioned, there is no reference to a baptizer.

Luke's language in Acts likewise demonstrates little concern for the baptizer but great interest in the baptizands. Thus, in Acts 2:41, around 3,000 of those who responded to Peter's message "were baptized." This passive language, reflected in the English and in the Greek (ἐβαπτίσθησαν, aorist indicative passive) is the standard way in which Luke describes baptism. Usually, the identity of the baptizer(s) is not revealed, whether many people or an individual is baptized. The exception to this is the case of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, and since there are only two characters in the narrative, it is not surprising that the baptizer and baptizand are clearly delineated!

Thus, while the NT indicates that Paul and Philip personally baptized believers in Christ (and hints that Peter and Apollos did), the identities of the other baptizers, who performed thousands of baptisms, are not specified. This practical indifference toward the baptizer continued throughout the early centuries of the Christian church, with notable exceptions discussed below.

The Didache, which served as a type of minister's handbook as early as AD 100, outlines a baptismal ceremony:

Baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.⁴

Emphasis is placed on the rite itself and the attitude of the baptizand, but there are no requirements for the baptizer. Likewise, in the middle of the second century AD, Justin Martyr described a Christian baptism ceremony in his *First Apology*, without making any reference to the baptizer:

Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are born again in the same manner of rebirth by which we ourselves were born again, for then they receive washing in water in the name of God the Father and Master of all, and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.⁵

⁴ *Did.* 7. Slightly modified from ANF 7:379.

⁵ *1 Apol.* 61. Trans. Leslie W. Barnard, *The First and Second Apologies* (ACW 56; New York: Paulist, 1997), 66.

I. THE ROLE OF THE BISHOP

However, this should not be taken to mean that the early church took no interest in the baptizer's role. While the identity was seldom mentioned, the source of the baptizer's authority to baptize was a concern by the early second century. Ignatius of Antioch, the famed bishop of early-second-century martyrdom, commanded that all communions, love feasts, and baptisms take place with the bishop's permission:

Let no one do anything touching the Church, apart from the bishop. Let that celebration of the Eucharist be considered valid which is held under the bishop or anyone to whom he has committed it. Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not permitted without authorization from the bishop either to baptize or to hold an agape; but whatever he approves is also pleasing to God. Thus everything you do will be proof against danger and valid.⁶

Several items are noteworthy with regard to Ignatius's remarks. First, Ignatius represents the first clear reference to a monepiscopacy system, or that of congregations (cities?) having single bishops. The fact that he refers to a single bishop in several of his letters to churches in Asia Minor has led some scholars to conclude that the monepiscopacy arose first in the East, but gradually spread west.⁷ However, it should be noted that, in his letter to the Romans, Ignatius twice refers to himself as the "bishop of Syria," which is at least an indication that he did not expect that the Western (Roman) Christians to have been surprised at his role.⁸ Second, Ignatius's concern is not with the character of the baptizer, but with the bishop as the authorized representative of orthodox Christianity. Even in Ignatius's day, there were the twin threats of danger from within (i.e. schism) and invalidity from without (i.e. heresy). Demanding the approval of a recognized bishop allowed Ignatius to ensure that all meetings of the churches were likely to avoid those dangers. Third, while Ignatius requires that a bishop give consent to the matters "touching the Church," he does not explicitly require that the bishop be present. In fact, it is likely that he would have approved of baptisms by non-bishops, given that he approved of Eucharists celebrated "under the bishop or anyone to whom he has committed it." Again, the authority of the one presiding is in view, not the character of that person. Ignatius's concern that authorized representatives of the church give consent to baptismal ceremonies to guard against heresy and schism would arise repeatedly throughout the first four centuries as will be seen below.

⁶ Ign. *Smyrn.* 8. Trans. James A. Kleist, *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch* (ACW 1; Westminster, MD: Newman Bookshop, 1946), 93.

⁷ See Thomas Robinson, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways: Early Jewish-Christian Relations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 99–102.

⁸ So Thomas J. Herron, *Clement and the Early Church of Rome: On the Dating of Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2008), 75–76.

II. CONTROVERSIES OVER REBAPTISM

Matters became complex within the next century, as can be seen in the writings of Tertullian. First, Tertullian's well-known rigorist position requiring the (re)baptism of heretics must be acknowledged. He writes,

It is observed and held by us, that all who are converted from any heresy whatever to the Church must be baptized by the only and lawful baptism of the Church, with the exception of those who had previously been baptized in the Church, and so had passed over to the heretics.⁹

Tertullian's reasoning was that, in order for baptism to be effective, it must be followed by the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit. Since only the true church possesses the Holy Spirit, only those within it can pass on this gift. Without the Holy Spirit, no baptism is effective.¹⁰ Thus, it was impossible for a heretic or schismatic to perform a Christian baptism, since they were outside the church. In his treatise *On Baptism*, he explains:

What rules are to be observed with regard to heretics? ... Heretics, however, have no fellowship in our discipline, whom the mere fact of their excommunication testifies to be outsiders. I am not bound to recognize in them a thing which is enjoined on me, because they and we have not the same God, nor one—that is, the same—Christ. And therefore their baptism is not one with ours either, because it is not the same; a baptism which, since they have it not duly, doubtless they have not at all; nor is that capable of being counted which is not had. Thus they cannot receive it either, because they have it not.¹¹

Again, there are important observations to be made about Tertullian's views. First, like Ignatius, Tertullian was concerned with the authority of the church, not the character of the baptizer. The reference from *On Baptism* above deals with the beliefs of the baptizand, not the baptizer. Tertullian assumed that it is impossible to learn about God and Christ outside of the church. Any catechumens of a schismatic or heretical group must not have learned of the gospel of Christ. Third, even with his extreme rigorist position, Tertullian was willing to allow non-clergy to baptize. He writes later in *On Baptism*:

For concluding our brief subject, it remains to put you in mind also of the due observance of giving and receiving baptism. Of giving it, the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority, on account of the honor of the Church, which being preserved, peace is preserved. Beside these, even laymen have the right; for what is equally received can be equally given. Unless bishops, or priests, or deacons, be on the spot, other disciples are called. The word of the Lord ought

⁹ *Ep.* 73.12 (*ANF* 5:389–90).

¹⁰ "Those who have been dipped abroad outside the Church, and have been stained among heretics and schismatics with the taint of profane water, when they come to us and to the Church which is one, ought to be baptized, for the reason that it is a small matter to 'lay hands on them that they may receive the Holy Ghost,' unless they receive also the baptism of the Church." *Ep.* 71.1 (*ANF* 5:378).

¹¹ *Bapt.* 15 (*ANF* 3:676).

not to be hidden by any: in like manner, too, baptism, which is equally God's property, can be administered by all.¹²

These remarks show that, far from assuming that the baptizer must have attained to a certain level of spiritual maturity or church leadership, Tertullian insisted that all (male) disciples of Jesus may baptize. If a clergyman were present, he should perform the baptism as the representative of the church. A clergyman is not essential, however, because baptism is the work of God, not the baptizer. Tertullian did balk at the idea that women could baptize, but even though he objected to the practice, he did not declare invalid the baptism of those who had been baptized by a woman of the true church.¹³

III. CRISES IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES.

By Tertullian's time, the intense persecution of Christians by various Roman authorities had helped create schisms in the church. The question for church leaders was, "What should we do with lapsed Christians (*Lapsi*) who denied the faith to avoid persecution and death?" After the Decian persecution in the early 250s, Novatian, who vied for the bishopric of Rome with Cornelius, took a rigorist position concerning the *Lapsi*, and argued that they could not be readmitted to the church. Thus, to Novatian, sacraments performed by many bishops (and the churches under them) were invalidated, and only those who held to his strict position concerning the lapses made up the true church.¹⁴

Cyprian of Carthage, a contemporary of Novatian, also endorsed a rigorist position that rejected heretic and schismatic baptism. However, against the Novatianists, Cyprian argued that lapsed Christians should be readmitted to the church provided that they go through extreme penance. He also demanded that bishops who denied the faith could be accepted back into the church, but that they should be deposed and disqualified from future leadership. This position was, of course, too moderate for the Novatianists, who were making inroads throughout the North African Church. Cyprian was faced the dilemma of not only trying to properly handle the *Lapsi*, but also dealing with the schismatic Novatianists. Since they had separated themselves from the true church, and had been baptized by schismatics, was their baptism valid? The Council of Carthage in 256, led by Cyprian, proclaimed that all heretics and schismatics must be (re)baptized, but again based this necessity

¹² *Bapt.* 17 (*ANF* 3:676–677).

¹³ *Bapt.* 17. Women are likewise forbidden to baptize in the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.9: "Now, as to women's baptizing, we let you know that there is no small peril to those that undertake it. Therefore we do not advise you to it; for it is dangerous, or rather wicked and impious. . . . For if baptism were to be administered by women, certainly our Lord would have been baptized by His own mother, and not by John; or when He sent us to baptize, He would have sent along with us women also for this purpose. But now He has nowhere, either by constitution or by writing, delivered to us any such thing; as knowing the order of nature, and the decency of the action; as being the Creator of nature, and the Legislator of the constitution" (*ANF* 14:100). However, there was no explicit command that one baptized by a woman be rebaptized.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.43.

on the false beliefs of the baptizand and the fact that only the true church could bestow salvation.

Cyprian's position was a direct rebuttal of the position taken by Stephen, bishop of Rome, who had taken a laxer view of readmittance of the *Lapsi*. One of Stephen's contemporary opponents, Firmilian, described the view of Stephen and his followers in this manner in a letter to Cyprian:

They do not think it is to be inquired who was the person that baptized, for the reason that he who has been baptized may have obtained grace by the invocation of the Trinity, of the names of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. . . . [Stephen] says the name of Christ is of great advantage to faith and the sanctification of baptism; so that whosoever is anywhere so-ever baptized in the name of Christ, immediately obtains the grace of Christ.¹⁵

An anonymous author of the treatise *On Rebaptism*, which is normally considered to have been written by a North African bishop sympathetic to Stephen, argued that the baptizer is irrelevant for conversion and admission into the church:

What will say of those who are in many cases baptized by bishops of very bad character, who yet at length, when God so wills it, convicted of their crimes, are even deprived of their office itself, or absolutely of communion? Or what will you decide of those who may have been baptized by bishops, whose opinions are unsound, or who are very ignorant—when they may not have spoken clearly and honestly, or even have spoken otherwise than is fit in the tradition of the sacrament, or at least may have asked anything, or asking, have heard from those who answered what ought by no means to be so asked or answered? And still this does not greatly injure that true faith of ours, although, moreover, these more simple men may deliver the mystery of the faith without the elegance and order that you would use.¹⁶

Thus, Cyprian and his North African allies were upset with what seemed to be Rome's lax position with regard to readmitting schismatics. Stephen said that all who had received baptism with the Trinitarian formula were Christians, regardless of the state of their baptizers. Ironically, this placed Cyprian in a Novatian-like position, refusing to allow that baptism could be effective outside the true church. For Novatian, anyone who had been baptized by a lapsed bishop had not received Christian baptism and must be rebaptized. For Cyprian, anyone who had been baptized as a schismatic, or had left the true church to join a schism, must be rebaptized. So, for both Novatian and Cyprian, both the baptizand and the baptizer mattered for the rite to be effective, while for Stephen and his allies, baptism could be effective with a defective administrator of the rite.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ep.* 74.9 (*ANF* 5:392).

¹⁶ *On Rebaptism*, 10. Slightly modified from *ANF* 5:672–73.

¹⁷ As J. Patout Burnes (“On Rebaptism: Social Organization in the Third Century Church,” *J ECS* 1 [1993]: 367–403) shows, both Cyprian and Stephen were striving for unity, but in different ways. Cyprian saw unity as defined in one communion, while Stephen urged the authority of the bishop to provide unity. For greater detail on the nature of the divisions over rebaptism, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in*

The difficulties presented by the rebaptism crisis can be seen over the next two centuries in the opinions of later church fathers and councils. For example, the nineteenth canon of the Council of Nicea in 325 said of heretical “Paulinists”: “let them be rebaptized (ἀναβαπτισθέντες, *rebaptizati*).”¹⁸ No consideration was given for the baptizer because it was assumed that the baptizand had not truly believed in Christ. On the other hand, the eighth canon of the Council of Nicaea required that Novatianists declare allegiance to the “Catholic and Apostolic Church,” but not their rebaptism.

The seventh canon of the Council of Constantinople in 381 offered an even more complicated ruling. For those schismatics who had been baptized with the Trinitarian formula (Arians,¹⁹ Macedonians, Sabbatians, Novatians, etc.) and who wanted to return to the true church, no rebaptism was required. Instead, they were required to renounce their false teachings and to be anointed with oil to receive the Holy Spirit. For others who did not baptize correctly (Eunomians, Montanists, and Sabellians), if they wished to be admitted into the universal church, they had to renounce their error, receive exorcism and instruction, and then be baptized. They were considered pagans (Ἕλληνας, *Graecos*) until that point.²⁰ Again, even though there were occasions in which a person would be rebaptized to enter the universal church, the concern was not with the baptizer’s faith or character. All emphasis is placed on the faith of the baptized, whether he or she had been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit under the authority of the church.

IV. DIVISIONS EAST AND WEST

However, a difference of opinion between East and West can be detected by the fourth century. Western churches (and eventually those of North Africa) tended to allow that all Trinitarian baptisms were valid (so Stephen), whereas those in the East tended to side with Cyprian and require that all who wished to enter the universal church be baptized, whether or not they had already received the rite elsewhere. Their reasoning can be seen in the Basil of Caesarea’s *Letter to Amphilo-chius*, which explicitly, in dealing with Arians, endorses the views of Cyprian and the aforementioned Firmilian:

For those who separated first had ordination from the Fathers, and through the imposition of their hands possessed the spiritual gift; but those who had been

the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 380–98.

¹⁸ Canon 19. Greek and Latin text taken from PL 67:47–48.

¹⁹ Arians, while teaching a heretical Christology, still used the Trinitarian formula at baptism (perhaps shown in their practice of triple immersion in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in a way that was ultimately accepted. Of course, there were those who had their doubts about Arian baptism, among them Athanasius, Basil, and Ephrem the Syrian. However, the Eunomians were extremist Arians, and the Council rejected their baptism. See Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 456, 669, and John A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 275.

²⁰ For the English of the canons of the Council, see *NPNF*² 14:185–86. For the Latin and Greek, see PL 67:81–82.

cut off, becoming laymen, possessed the power neither of baptizing nor of ordaining, being able no longer to impart to others the grace of the Holy Spirit from which they themselves had fallen away. Therefore they commanded those who had been baptized by them, as baptized by laymen, to come to the Church and be purified by the true baptism of the Church. But since on the whole it has seemed best to some of those in Asia that, by economy for the sake of the many (*Οικονομία τῶν πολλῶν*), their baptism be accepted, let it be accepted.²¹

Here we see the requirement that the baptizer be a recognized official of the church (bishop, presbyter, or deacon), though the emphasis is again on the authority of the church rather than the character of the administrator of baptism. Basil did allow that some churches in the East had allowed a special dispensation, or economy, which could accept certain baptisms done outside those parameters. The tradition developed that such a determination (whether a person once baptized apart from the Orthodox Church should be rebaptized to enter the church) could be made only by a bishop. Basil also held, against Tertullian, that a layperson could not baptize, and any baptism performed by a layperson was invalid and ineffective.²²

This should not be taken to mean that the Eastern churches expected that their all their baptizers were saintly. For example, Gregory Nazianzen knew that potential baptizands were wont to wait for baptism until they could receive the rite from someone special, either a bishop from a major city (preferably Jerusalem), or a presbyter known for his extreme holiness and devotion. In a sermon delivered in Constantinople in the year 381, Gregory cautioned against this concern for the one performing the act:

Do not ask for credentials of the preacher or the baptizer. For another is his judge, and the examiner of what you cannot see. For man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. But to you let every one be trustworthy for purification.²³

Gregory did insist that the baptizer not be a heretic or “a stranger to the Church.” His emphasis is on the unimportance of the baptizer, provided that he met minimal standards of church approval as a priest. He used the analogy of a

²¹ *Ep.* 188 (trans. Deferrari, alt.; *LCL* 243:16–17); I have altered the translation by substituting “by economy for the sake of the many” for the original “for the sake of the discipline of the majority.” See also J. Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 104–5.

²² The Orthodox Church tends to avoid discussion of the “validity” of baptism, preferring to point to the fact that, since ancient times, the practices of baptism, chrism (anointing), and Eucharist are all part of a natural process of initiation into the church. William C. Mills, *Church, World, and Kingdom: The Eucharistic Foundation of Alexander Schmemmann’s Pastoral Theology* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2013), 54–55: “These three rites—Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist—are the foundation of the Christian life, and they form the beginning point for entry into the Church. . . . In the Eastern Church, each liturgical rite flows organically and naturally into the next: the child or catechumen first enters into holy Baptism through the font, then he or she is given the gift of the Holy Spirit through the anointing with chrism, and finally he or she receives Holy Communion, which is the culmination and fulfillment of the rites of entrance into the Church.” See also J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 192–93.

²³ *Oration on Holy Baptism* 40.26 (NPNF² 7:369).

gold ring and an iron ring, both impressed on wax to make a seal. Though both were made of different materials, the impression they left on the wax would be the same. He continued:

The difference is in the material and not in the seal. And so anyone can be your baptizer; for though one may excel another in his life, yet the grace of baptism is the same, and *any one may be your consecrator who is formed in the same faith.*²⁴

A generation later, likewise in the East, John Chrysostom continued to deemphasize the role of the one who baptized. He also required that the baptizer be a presbyter, but argued that it is the teacher of the baptizand that does the hard work, not the one who administers baptism. His preferred analogy was that of a wrestling trainer and a master of ceremonies at an athletic contest:

For as to teach the wrestlers in the games is the part of a spirited and skillful trainer, but to place the crown on the conqueror's head may be that of one who cannot even wrestle, (although it be the crown which adds splendor to the conqueror,) so also in Baptism. It is impossible to be saved without it, yet it is no great thing which the baptizer does, finding the will ready prepared.²⁵

So, while the churches of the East tended to follow the lead of Cyprian, Western churches of the fourth and fifth centuries, in dealing with the Donatist controversy in North Africa, generally followed the opinion of Stephen by allowing that all Trinitarian baptisms were valid. Like the Novatianists, the Donatists were rigorists, upset with the lax policies of the church regarding the *Lapsi*. In particular, the Donatists held that anyone who had been baptized by a bishop who had lapsed from the faith in times of persecution must be rebaptized. The Council of Arles in 314, the first formal council in the Western Roman empire, condemned Donatism and stated:

Concerning the Africans who use their own special law in that they practice rebaptism, it is resolved that if any come to the church from heresy, they question him on the creed (used at his baptism), and if they consider him to have been baptized into the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, let him only receive the laying on of hands so that he receive the Holy Spirit; but if when questioned he does not solemnly confess this Trinity, let him be baptized.²⁶

In many ways, the sentiments expressed at Arles continued to dominate in the West. If one had been baptized in the name of the Trinity, he or she could be accepted into the Catholic Church, regardless of the identity of the baptizer. The greatest example of the Western approach is that of Augustine, who rejected the Novatian practice of rebaptism. He argued that the character of the baptizer was unimportant because it is God who acts in baptism, not the administrator. In his treatise, *On Baptism Against the Donatists*, he confronted Cyprian's writings head on.

²⁴ Ibid. (emphasis added).

²⁵ *Hom. 1 Cor. 3.6* (NPNF³ 12:13).

²⁶ Canon 8. See J. J. Gavigan, "The Canons of the First Council of Arles, 314 A. D.," *Aug 3* (1963): 175.

He pointed out that, though the Novatianists did not accept Catholic baptisms, the church would gladly accept any baptism if the circumstances required it:

For if any one were compelled by urgent necessity, being unable to find a Catholic from whom to receive baptism, and so, while preserving Catholic peace in his heart, should receive from one without the pale of Catholic unity the sacrament which he was intending to receive within its pale, this man, should he immediately depart this life, we deem to be none other than a Catholic. But if he should be delivered from the death of the body, on his restoring himself in bodily presence to that Catholic congregation from which in heart he had never departed, so far from blaming his conduct, we should praise it with the greatest truth and confidence; because he trusted that God was present to his heart, while he was striving to preserve unity, and was unwilling to depart this life without the sacrament of holy baptism, which he knew to be of God, and not of men; wherever he might find it.²⁷

If the orthodoxy of the baptizer were required, Augustine argued, then who could be pure enough to actually administer it? If a heretic were incapable of performing a valid baptism, then surely a murderer would also be? And, since Christ states that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer (in his heart), would not baptism by an orthodox presbyter be rejected as well if the baptizer harbored any hate in his heart? However, Cyprian's reasoning is unconvincing because it presupposes that God cannot act when sinners are involved. Augustine argued that an evil man (inside or outside of the true church) could administer the rite because "it is God ... that gives the Holy Spirit even when a man of this kind is baptizing."²⁸

He was willing to entertain a circumstance in which someone had been baptized by an unbeliever, or as a joke.²⁹ Even then, if the Trinitarian formula were used, he considered such a baptism to be valid. Augustine recognized that no ecumenical council had ever ruled definitively on the subject, and he ventured to offer what he would advise were he to ever sit on such a council:

Nevertheless, if anyone were to press me—supposing I were duly seated in a Council in which a question were raised on points like these—to declare what my own opinion was ... I should have no hesitation in saying that all men possess baptism who have received it in any place, *from any sort of men*, provided that it were consecrated in the words of the gospel, and received without deceit on their part with some degree of faith; although it would be of no profit to them for the salvation of their souls if they were without charity, by which they might be grafted into the Catholic Church.³⁰

So, by the fifth century there were some clear expectations regarding baptizers. The Eastern and Western churches agreed that the one who administered should be an official of the orthodox church. As long as he operated as a repre-

²⁷ *Bapt.* 1.2 (NPNF¹ 4:413).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.20.28 (NPNF¹ 4:473).

²⁹ See *Bapt.* 7.53.101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.53.102, emphasis added.

sentative of the true church, he could baptize. Western Christians adopted Augustine's position, which is more or less the Roman Catholic position today, that any baptism "consecrated in the words of the gospel" (i.e. "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," Matt 28:19) is valid regardless of the character of the baptizer.³¹ The Eastern churches were more circumspect with regard to what they considered valid baptism, as Orthodox churches of today continue to be. Even so, the concern was not and is not with the individual holiness of the baptizer, but with the importance of the church in its ability to pass on the Spirit. Lastly, in the East, there was and continues to be a tradition of economy, in which a bishop may ultimately decide whether or not to accept a previous baptism outside the Church as valid.

V. CONCLUSION

One can summarize the developments of the first four centuries of Christian thinking on the role of the baptizer as follows.

(1) In the NT, no specific credentials are stated for baptizers, and there is a lack of interest in who administers the rite. While only Paul and Philip are specifically named as having baptized, it is natural to assume that Apollos, Peter (and the other Twelve), and likely the 120 disciples of Acts 2 also administered baptism. Though it is not stated in the NT, those who baptized appear to have been commissioned by the church, and presumably all were male. The last statement, however, is not necessitated by the biblical text itself.

(2) As early as the late first century, some church leaders restricted the role of baptizer to either a bishop or one in whom he entrusted the administration of the rite. The concern was over the unity and authority of the church. While there are references to women administering baptism, the extant sources reflect negatively on the practice.

(3) From the third until the fifth centuries, there were major disagreements over whether baptisms outside the church were considered valid. This brought the role of baptizer to the forefront, because some (Novatianists, Donatists) were concerned that the greater church was too lax in recognizing the validity of baptism at the hands of those with suspicious pedigrees. Two centuries of disputes over rebaptism followed. Ultimately, the Western church, following Stephen (and later, Augustine), grew to accept all baptisms in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as valid. It was preferred that a clergyman perform the rite, but as long as a presbyter later accepted the baptism, it was valid.³² The Eastern churches continued to require rebaptism for all baptized outside of the universal church, except in cases

³¹ See the Catechism of the Catholic Church ¶1256, which states, "The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop and priest and, in the Latin Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity, anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize, by using the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The intention required is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation" (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a1.htm).

³² However, the *Apostolic Constitutions* (3.10–11) forbid baptism by anyone other than a bishop or a presbyter. They do not, however, state that one baptized by a layperson or deacon should be rebaptized.

where the bishop grants economy to an outside baptism. For the first five centuries, in the East and West, as long as the baptizer was a presbyter in the church, all baptisms he performed with the Trinitarian formula were deemed valid.