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SCHOOL OF THE BIBLE

P.O. Box 635, Bromhof, 2154 Cnr Kelly & Sylvan Rds, Boskruin
tel: (011) 792-1340 fax: (011) 792-8624

The changing patterns of baptism in the early church

Dr. Kevin Roy

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In the apostolic church baptism was an act of commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. It was given immediately to those who accepted the good news preached to them and who desired to be enrolled as followers of Jesus. On the day of Pentecost those who accepted the message of Peter were baptised on the same day, all 3000 of them. Clearly it was administered with great liberality with a bare minimum of examination or instruction of those desiring it. The same pattern continues throughout the Book of Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch who heard the good news from Philip was baptised right away, in the middle of his journey, as soon as available water was seen. Paul was baptised by Ananias immediately after he was prayed for. Cornelius and all his family and friends (a large gathering of people) were baptised in the same meeting that they heard and believed the gospel. Lydia and all the members of her household, possibly children and servants, were baptised on the same day that they responded positively to Paul's message. The Philippian jailer and all his family were baptised in the middle of the night, in the very hour that they believed the gospel.

Because baptism was linked so closely to the experience of coming to faith, in the mind of the early Christians baptism, salvation, regeneration, repentance and forgiveness were all closely linked. In answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" the answers 'repent'; 'be baptised', and 'believe in the Lord Jesus' would have been seen as synonyms. In the apostolic teaching, the saving ingredient of baptism was always faith, not water. But this fine distinction was not always appreciated by the early Christians.

In the post apostolic period, as early as the second century, the immediate baptism of the NT had been replaced by a delayed baptism. Those wishing to become Christians would be enrolled as catechumens in the catechumenate. There they would receive instruction for about three years before being admitted to baptism and full church membership. Because the gifts of regeneration, the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit were believed to be received through baptism, there was always anxiety about those who became dangerously ill before their baptism. If in danger of death, they would be given an emergency baptism, so that they could depart this life as believers.

The delay of baptism meant that careful preparation could be made for the baptismal event and a great elaboration of the ceremony resulted. Baptism was often administered by the bishop on Easter Sunday morning. After three years of instruction, the catechumens approached the day with awe. On the preceding Thursday they would wash and cleanse themselves. They would fast on the Friday and Saturday. On the Saturday, the bishop would exorcise them, breathe on their faces and seal their foreheads and ears and noses. Before dawn on the Sunday morning, the water would be prayed for. The candidates would remove all their clothes. Each candidate would formally renounce Satan and all his works, while being exorcised with the oil of exorcism. The little children would be baptised first, their parents answering for them if they were not able. Each candidate would be baptised three times after confessing faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then they would be anointed by the presbyter with the oil of thanksgiving, dry themselves and put on their clothes. Then the bishop would pour the oil of consecration over their heads, sealing them on the forehead. Then for the first time they would be

admitted to the Holy Communion. Sometimes milk and honey and salt would also be given to the newly baptised.

From as early as the second century, perhaps earlier, a major point of discussion was whether sins committed after baptism could be forgiven. Many quoted Hebrews 6 to prove that it was impossible for those once enlightened (baptised), if they fall away in sin, to be brought back to repentance since they crucify the Son of God all over again. All sins committed before baptism, it was believed, no matter how serious, could be washed away in water of baptism. But for those who sinned after receiving the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins was left, only a fearful expectation of judgement (Heb 10:26). This conviction put pressure on people to delay their baptism as long as possible, even to the point just before death to make sure that they would die in the purity of baptismal forgiveness. As a result many converts in the third and fourth centuries (e.g. Constantine) received 'death-bed baptism.' The same issue caused many schisms in the church when the apostates who had denied their faith during times of persecution wanted to be received back into the church later. Eventually a system of repentance and penance for fallen Christians was worked out and accepted, and the occurrence of deathbed baptisms fell away. By the 6th century, most citizens of the Roman Empire professed Christianity and infant baptism was the norm.