

TERTULLION, His “Little Fistles”
AND
Those Who Rejected Water Baptism For This Church Age,
In the Days of The Ante-Nicene Fathers—
approx. 200 A.D.

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Introduction

A certain Campbellite preacher once sent me extensive quotations from certain so-called "Early Church Fathers" on the subject of the necessity of water baptism for salvation. He did this to demonstrate that many who lived a few generations from the Apostles believed in water baptism and even baptismal regeneration, whereas my particular view that water baptism was not for salvation and not even for this church dispensation was "new, novel, isolated, odd, peculiar, strange and fly-by-night." He believed that most of these quotations from men like Tertullion proved his doctrine was "time honored and venerable."

Needless to say, his attempt to overwhelm me with these quotations only served to prove something I didn't even contest—namely, that ritual water works, which have supernatural properties for spiritual cleansing and salvation, have not only been a vital part of early Romanish Christendom, but also of natural man's religion from the very beginning of Babylonish confusion. Job mocked the idea of a watery justification in his day (Job 9:30,31). He said that though a person would wash himself in “snow water” to make himself righteous, God would “plunge him into the ditch” (in the literal Hebrew, the “ditch” in this very early book is said to refer to the septic drainage ditch). Jeremiah also rebuked the belief of ritual cleansing of sins by means of a physical washing in his day (Jer. 2:22). Jeremiah said that even if one added cleansers to the water they could not wash away iniquity. Jesus Christ exposed the same prevalent idea during His public ministry (Mk. 7:1-23; Matt. 23:26; Lk. 11:37-40). He said that if the Pharisees would “cleanse themselves on the inside,” the outside would take care of itself. Most certainly, everyone recognizes that Christ and these prophets were in the minority in their days and their views seemed to the religious world as "new and novel."

However, there was one quote from a certain so-called "Father" named Tertullion that provoked my interest. It was obvious that his statements were an argument directed against those of his day who did not believe in the necessity of water baptism at all. In fact, Tertullion seemed to be actually quoting one of their arguments against the use of a rite of water baptism for this age. So, I thought I would like to read the whole of Tertullion's dissertation on this subject to see if he gave more about those "odd" people of his day who did not even believe in water baptism. When I read the whole of his particular treatise on this subject, I was very pleasantly surprised to find saints who believed just like I do today. They rejected water baptism totally and vigorously opposed the false teaching about water baptismal regeneration. Thus, I want to share this finding with you.

So that you might better understand the *time* and *setting* for this material I will give some preliminary information—

The emperor Constantine called for the first ecumenical council in the history of the institutional "Imperial Church" in the year 325 A.D. at Nicea in Bithynia of Asia (modern Turkey). The so-called "Early Church Fathers" are grouped according to this council of Nicea. Those who lived *before* it are referred to as *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Those who lived *at the time* of that council are referred to as *Nicene Fathers* and those who lived *afterward* are referred to as *Post-Nicene Fathers*.

Now you must understand that the Roman Catholic Church, and others as well, relies very heavily upon the teachings of these early "Fathers." In fact, they rely more upon these men than they do the Bible.

Tertullion was very prominent among the "Ante-Nicene Fathers" as being outspoken on the subject of baptismal regeneration. He was born in approx. 145 A.D., converted to "Christianity" in approx. 185 A.D., became a presbyter in 190 A.D. and died sometime between 220 and 240 A.D. Thus his writings will fall approximately 150 years after the death of the Apostle Paul in 68 A.D.

Tertullion was noted as the one most responsible for ultimately making water baptism a "holy sacrament" in "the Church." He postulated that water baptism was the means whereby individuals had their sins washed away, were born again and were baptized into Christ and His church. Thus, he gave many of the original arguments advocating the doctrine of baptismal regeneration as held by the Roman Catholic Church and many of her daughters. At the very same time Tertullion took specific aim at those people in his days who did not believe in the necessity of water baptism for this dispensation. He regarded them in the most abusive language, briefly quoted their arguments and then gave a rebuttal to them.

We want to take special note of those in this time period who did not believe in water baptism because we shall find that they understood and used certain Scriptures in opposing the teaching of water regeneration just as some of us do today. Consequently, it is good to realize that from the very beginning of the false teaching on this subject there were those who strongly opposed it and we sometimes echo their very same arguments from our perspective at the very end of this church dispensation. In fact, since I personally have had many public joint discussions with those who advocate the doctrine of water baptismal regeneration today, I rejoiced greatly to see that sincere believers were combating this false doctrine from the very beginning of its propagation, using some of the very same Scriptural and spiritual arguments that I also use today.

Tertullion's Introduction

Tertullion began by referring to one (apparently a certain woman) who had repudiated water baptism as being for this age saying, "a viper of the Cainite heresy, lately conversant in this quarter, (who) has carried away a great number with her most venomous doctrine, making it her first aim to destroy baptism. Which is quite in accordance with nature; for vipers and asps *and* basilisks themselves generally do affect arid and waterless places." You can see by the nature of this statement how strong was the antipathy of Tertullion against those who opposed his beliefs. The expression "Cainite heresy," of course, has reference to Cain who murdered his brother.

Tertullion went on to make a classic statement about the Roman form of Christianity by saying, "But we, **little fishes**, after the example of our IXOYS Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water; so that most monstrous creature, who had no right to teach even sound doctrine, knew full well how to kill the little fishes, by taking them away from the water!" Yes indeed, this is quite a frank and revealing statement! In fact, most preachers today won't dare be so straight forward as was Tertullion.

First of all, it is interesting to understand that the Greek word "IXOYS" means "fish." It is believed to have been used by those of Tertullion's persuasion as the name of the Lord Jesus Christ because the initials of the words *J*esus *C*hrist the *S*on of *G*od, the *S*aviour, in Greek, make up that word IXOYS. Thus, some of the early Roman Catholic Church teachers used this word meaning "fish" to identify their "christ." Many in Catholicism still do it till this day. This reminds me of the ancient Philistines who worshiped Dagon the Fish god.

Archaeologists tell us that the idol of Dagon consisted of the head and arms of a man on the body of a fish. You may remember that when the ark of the covenant was placed in the Temple of Dagon and directly before the idol, that the image fell over and broke up leaving only its stump or fishy part intact (I Sam. 5:1-5). So it is with the early form of Catholicism—they actually created "another Jesus" (II Cor.11:4), who is in reality similar to the old fish god and all his adherents are simply "**little fish** born of water" that worship him. Like in the story in I Samual, when the truth of God's Word is placed in the temple of this modern watery idol, the superstitious doctrine collapses and only the fishy part remains. When we use the word "fishy" today we mean something that stinks or isn't right. And so it is with the false doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

I distinctly remember what an older minister of Christ, Maurice Johnson, used to say to those who believed you were born again in the waters of a baptistery- "the Scripture says in Col. 2:6, 'As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him.' Now, if you have received Christ in the water then you are obligated to conduct your life there, but who wants to be a submarine the rest of his life?" Yet this Tertullion uses that very language to describe his brand of Christianity—"little fishes...abiding in the water."

This type of Christianity is properly described by Alexander Hislop in his book "The Two Babylons" as actually descending from the ancient Babylonian tradition of water baptismal regeneration—see pages 129-144. And this is born out by Tertullian, himself, as he admits to the fact that the pagans have long practiced water baptismal rites for remission of sins.

Arguments Against Water Baptism

I am going to list these arguments that some early Christians made against the sacrament of water baptism which were quoted by Tertullion under six headings and make some comments about each. (Taken from, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, Pages 669-679.)

No. 1 Salvation by water baptism is illogical to the spiritual mind and to reality.

Tertullion quotes these Christians who opposed water baptism as saying, "**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 a dignity?**"

I like the way these Christians frankly stated their position and the truth about the matter. They indicated that they had clear spiritual perception. In response to them Tertullian launches into a lengthy and eloquent dissertation on how the Holy Spirit originally brooded over the waters at the beginning of creation, and also how God ordered the waters to bring forth the living creatures (fish). Then he concludes his eloquence by teaching that today the waters have also received a new privilege of attaining sacramental power to sanctify and generate people spiritually. Very few people, especially Catholic priests or even Campbelite preachers, have ever matched Tertullian's eloquence.

Actually what God first said while the Holy Spirit was brooding over the waters was "Let there be light!" And this is what Mr. Tertullian really needed in place of his eloquence. Of course, he forgot all about the fact that eloquence is no substitute for the Light of Scriptural revelation. That Divine revelation plainly tells us what kind of water is needed in order for people to get eternal life spiritually. It is the antitypical water—"the Water of Life," even Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit of God—see the "Living Water" of John 4:10-14; 7:37-39, and the new birth "of the Spirit" in John 3:6,8, and the "washing of the Spirit" in I Cor. 6:11, and the "baptism of the Spirit" of I Cor. 12:13.

No. 2 Water Baptismal Regeneration originated from pagan mythology and practice.

"Well, but the nations, who are strangers to all understanding of spiritual powers, ascribe to their idols the imbuing of waters with the self-same efficacy," said the objectors to Tertullian's doctrine.

Tertullian agreed that the pagans practiced it greatly and even cited the numerous occasions and different parts where baptismal regeneration and cleansing is routinely performed by them. Apparently it was just as common among the pagans of that age as it is among the different brands of Christendom today. However, Tertullian concluded by arguing, "What religion is more effectual than that of the living God?" And he further argued that the Devil was simply rivaling the true religion by practicing the same thing in the pagan religious world. Tertullian did not live long enough to hear one of our modern Popes (Paul the VI) admit, that in reality today, most Roman Catholics are nothing but "baptized Pagans." In reality, "Christendom" only came to adopt and imitate the lifeless rituals of the pagan world.

Thus, Tertullian was absolutely blind to the fact that Biblical Christianity is not another ritualistic religion but, rather, the worship of God in spiritual reality and not in fleshly rituals—see John 4:21-24; Philip. 3:3; Rom. 14:17 & Heb. 9:14.

No. 3 Though Christ personally saved thousands, yet the Scriptures tell us He never water baptized anybody.

"But 'behold,' say some, 'the Lord came, and baptized not; for we read, 'and yet He used not to baptize, but His disciples!'" (John 4:2). In responding to this Biblical observation made by these Christians, Tertullian used the argument that is still used today, namely, that Christ authorized the practice of water baptism and therefore it is the same as if He did it. This response totally ignores Tertullian's own argument. Tertullian is arguing that water baptism is for soul salvation. If he admits that Christ did not water baptize anyone, then he would also have

to admit that Christ did not save anyone. The Biblical purpose of water baptism was not for salvation. It was for ceremonial cleansing only. Certainly Christ authorized His disciples to practice water baptism. The probable reason Christ chose not to water baptize anyone Himself was because He was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit in the near future and He did not want the two confused. However, if this water baptism was for saving people, then Christ personally never saved anybody—though the Scriptures plainly say he saved thousands who came personally to Him without a drop of water being used. Those who would argue against the implications of this fact must say that there two different ways of saving people: one, by the method of the disciples water baptizing people; and two, by the normal method of Christ administering salvation without any use of water baptism. This argument "holds no water," to use an appropriate cliché, because the Scriptures are emphatic that there is but ONE plan of salvation and Christ was the one to illustrate it for this dispensation—see Hebrews 2:3. The Scriptures also plainly say that the baptism Christ would directly administer was spiritual and not water (Matt. 3:11, etc.).

Some modern Roman Catholic scholars are a whole lot more objective in commenting on this verse about Christ not water baptizing (John 4:2). One notable leader among them has recently made some very interesting admissions—

"To a certain extent, however, it is unexpected that baptism appears in Christian circles as a baptism in water, for a close reading of the NT suggests that there were indications that might have led Christians to reject a baptism in water for a less material baptism which would have been understood as a baptism in the Spirit... The Synoptics omit any mention of Jesus' days as baptizer, and the Johannine editor in 4:2 qualifies what was said in 3:22. Indeed Christian tradition built up a principle for contrasting the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus, namely, that John the Baptist baptized in water, but Jesus would baptize in a Holy Spirit." (Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue II, pg 11,12.)

No. 4 If John 3:5 was a promised water baptism for the new birth, then the Apostles were not born again, for the Scriptures indicate that they never received such a baptism!

Tertullion said, "When, however, the prescript is laid down that 'without baptism, salvation is attainable by none' (chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, 'Unless one be born of water, he hath not life,') there arises immediately scrupulous, nay rather audacious, doubts on the part of some, (saying) **'how, in accordance with that prescript, is salvation attainable by the apostles, whom we do not find baptized in the Lord? Nay, either the peril of all the others who lack the water of Christ is prejudged, that the prescript may be maintained, or else the prescript is rescinded if salvation has been ordained even for the unbaptized.'**"

This argument caused Tertullion no little agitation. His doctrinal teaching was that the new birth baptism of John 3:5, being the same as the "Great Commission" baptism of Matthew 28:19, was not implemented until the Apostles preached it on the day of Pentecost. It is evident from reading the second chapter of the book of Acts that when the church began on the day of Pentecost the disciples and Apostles, who had been saved at prior times, never received another water baptism for themselves that would put them into Christ and the church and give them the new birth. **They simply received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and immediately spoke to others**

the gospel of salvation and told them about being baptized for the remission of sins. This embarrassing fact has left the water baptismal regenerationist scrambling for generations over some plausible explanation.

Tertullian scrambled to find some explanation as to how the Apostles could get the same effect (the New Birth) without the ritual baptism which he taught was in John 3:5. Naturally, he fell back upon the fact that the Apostles had received John's baptism. However, John's baptism was clearly not the new birth "baptism" that he thought Christ spoke of. Furthermore, if John's baptism gave the Apostles and all the other pre-Pentecostal disciples the new birth, then it would be the same as the "Great Commission" or John 3:5 baptism and there would be no need for another water baptism. Therefore, in light of the obvious fundamental problems inherent in this doctrine Tertullian, himself, will also cite other of his cohorts who suggested alternate explanations. One of Tertullian's friends suggested that when the apostles were in the storm at sea and they were sprayed by the waters in the sinking vessel it was acceptable for them as this greater baptism that gives the new birth. Needless to say, it is obvious that their false doctrinal position has placed them in "stormy waters" and, quite frankly, there is no savior in their boat to bring deliverance.

To this very day, false teachers who are still teaching the same doctrine are still struggling, and are at a loss to properly explain how the very "foundation" of the church (the Apostles) were saved and born again without this supposed greater water baptism. This remains a great embarrassment to their false doctrine and I have used this very same argument many times against them very effectively. There is no doubt that these first apostles and disciples were born again. But not by water!

No. 5 The principle of "Justification by Faith without works" repudiates a water works salvation.

Tertullian quotes another of their arguments, "**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.**" (And I say, Amen!).

This principle of salvation by faith without works is stated over and over again in the Scriptures—Eph. 2:8-10; II Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5; Rom. 4:1-6; Rom. 11:6; Gal. 2:21; 3:1-3, etc. It was later the very dynamite of the Protestant Reformation, and it guided millions of people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ apart from Rome's poisonous doctrine of water regeneration. Salvation, fundamentally, is "by faith without works." Water baptism is a good work! Therefore salvation could not possibly be by water baptism! Tertullian admits that "in days gone by, there was salvation by means of bare faith, before the passion and resurrection of the Lord." But now, he argues "there has been added the sealing act of baptism." This argument has been parroted by so-called "Church of Christ" preachers today.

Herein, Tertullian, and his modern followers as well, makes another fatal admission. They forget all about the fact that today's salvation is "according to the Hebrew Scriptures," in practice and prospect. Just read the following Scriptures and see for yourself—II Tim. 3:15 & I Cor. 15:1-5 & Acts 10:43; Rom. 10:11-13; 4:1-7, etc. In addition, the "So great Salvation" that we preach today was first preached by Jesus Christ for this generation, and was "confirmed to us by those who heard Him" (Hebrews 2:3). Consequently the plan of salvation has not changed.

No. 6 *The Apostle to the nations (Paul) was not sent to baptize in water.*

"But they roll back an objection from that apostle himself, in that he said, 'For Christ sent me not to baptize' as if by this argument baptism was done away!"

Tertullion in response to this Biblical fact by launching into the original argument that became traditional through the succeeding years of this church age, namely that Paul was simply too busy in preaching to stop and water baptize, himself. "He left that for others to do," they argue. The stupidity of thinking that Paul or anyone else could ever justifiably be too busy to obey the command of Christ is absurd. If Paul was too busy, or didn't want to be mistaken as a leader of a new sect, then so could every other preacher of the gospel be motivated to not practice water baptism on the very same premises. However, any reader of Paul's epistles or the book of Acts knows that this splendid apostle was never too busy to obey the commandments of his Saviour, especially a commandment which would pertain to the salvation of souls.

Furthermore, this argument only serves to divert the attention from the embarrassment of exactly what Paul does say in regard to water baptism, namely, that he "Thanks God that he only (water) baptized a few (Jews), BECAUSE Christ sent me NOT to (water) baptize, BUT to preach the Gospel" (I Cor.1:14 & 17). In other words Paul was sent to do the one and not the other. When the Scripture says that John the Baptist "was sent to baptize" no one objects or has to explain anything. However, because of human religious presumptions, when Paul says that He was "NOT sent to baptize," the false teachers, like Tertullion, gag and choke in trying to find some satisfying explanation, other than accepting the bold fact that water baptism is simply not for the nations of Christianity—whereas, the real inward baptism of the Holy Spirit, is—see I Cor. 6:11 & 12:13.

Not surprising is the fact that those who practice water baptismal rituals today turn out to be the very ones who cause continuous divisions in Christendom simply because they don't follow Paul's example.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that when water baptism was first proposed as a "sacrament" and the means of regeneration, there were faithful saints who repudiated that poisonous doctrine and taught the truth about the subject. I am proud to be identified with them.