

“Present the various theologies of Baptism or Eucharist that can be found in these documents.”

The early Christian community grew out of Judaism, and initially the community was led by Christian Jews. The life of this community, therefore, was punctuated by a number of Judaistic events, such as meeting together and listening as the leaders told and retold the story of their prophet and leader. Two of the most poignant acts the church did that was both a harmonization and distinction from Judaism itself were baptism and the Eucharist. Jews also baptised converts and participants as part of their cultic rituals; and the Jewish calendar was punctuated by meals and feasts that were distinct in the religious and political life, such as Passover. The early church, therefore, had to develop an understanding of these events in light of their own beliefs in order to make them unique to the Christian faith. They argued that these particular acts were followed because the community believed that Jesus commanded they be observed. However, understanding what they meant, how they functioned in the life of the local, and wider, Christian communities was not explained by Jesus, and so various leaders began to present their own understanding of the function these events had in the church life and theology.

It is, therefore, the objective of this essay to work through the texts of the Apostolic Fathers, as presented in Michael Holmes' work, and discern the various theological interpretation of baptism presented in the texts. This will involve assessing the points in each document where baptism is mentioned, considering what each author allowed as appropriate before assessing the thrust of the author's understanding of the act of baptism. Finally, this essay will then seek to comprehend how that theological perspective would be of significance to the local Christian community.

To begin, however, it will be useful to briefly explore baptism in the works of the Apostles. This is important because Paul and the Apostles planted these churches, so their perspective on baptism would be important to each community. The contextual knowledge gained by doing so will aid understanding of the theology of baptism given by the Apostolic Fathers, as the early Christian communities had access to documents from the Apostles. Because these were written by the Apostles, they would be expected to contain what the community held to be the most authoritative commands of Jesus.

The first mention of baptism in the New Testament is in *Matthew 3*, where Jesus' cousin, John, is known as 'the Baptist.' Such was the magnetic teaching of John that people flocked from the cities to hear him preach. When John understood that the people thought him to be the Messiah, he responded by saying,

I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹

John was, therefore, baptising people in the Jewish custom – as a symbol of cleansing, through faith in God's acceptance of repentance.

As to the mode of John's baptism, Matthew records that John's followers were, 'baptised by him in the river Jordan,'² implying, therefore, that they were immersed fully. In this account, Matthew notes that they were baptised after confessing their sins.³ Then both Luke and Matthew record that Jesus came to be baptised by John. John tried to refuse baptising Jesus, but eventually proceeded to do so, whereupon Jesus received His *bat qol*.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, the resurrected Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples, with the words,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.⁴

What Jesus experienced Himself, by way of baptism, he made an explicit command for the Apostles and the church. A mark of being a 'Christian' was to be baptised in the name of the Trinity.

In *Acts* Peter commands that his listeners, 'repent, and be baptised.'⁵ The act of baptism was administered after repentance. Peter also explains, however, that they will do so in order that, 'your sins may be forgiven.'⁶ The significance of the act, therefore is the fundamental question for the Christian and therefore

¹ *Luke 3:16*, NRSV Holy Bible. All subsequent Bible verses will be from the NRSV, unless stated otherwise.

² *Matthew 3:6*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28:19-20. It is this statement that ensured the act of baptism would become an intrinsic event in the life of the individual Christian with the aim of publicly identifying with the Christian community.

⁵ *Acts 2:38*

⁶ *Ibid.*

the church. Peter's statement could be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation suggests that repentance requires baptism to be fully inaugurated: only repentance coupled with baptism leads to salvation. The second interpretation suggests that repentance is the act of faith by which salvation comes, and baptism is the outward, symbolic expression of that.

Thus, in the gospels, and in *Acts*, there is strong evidence that baptism was part of the formula a convert went through to become part of the Christian community. First, repentance of sins through belief in Jesus, followed by the public event of their baptism. Curiously, in *1 Corinthians* Paul the Apostle argues that he was not sent to baptise but to preach the gospel.⁷ By this, he means that faith in the gospel is the salvation 'ingredient' for an individual, not baptism.

Thus, having set out the early Apostolic statements regarding baptism this essay will now assess the texts of the Apostolic Fathers that mention baptism. This is not to say that the importance of the texts now held to be 'canonical' are necessarily more correct in their presentation of the event of baptism, but rather is simply an acknowledgement that the texts written by the Apostles were known to the majority of the churches because of who the authors were: those taught by Jesus Himself. This gave them a distinct authority in the life and hierarchy of the communities.

The first text in the assessed collection to mention baptism is Ignatius' *Epistle to the Ephesians*. In this epistle, Ignatius mentions Jesus' own baptism, where he argues that, 'He [Jesus] was born and was baptised in order that by his suffering he *might cleanse the water*.'⁸ This rather unusual term given by Ignatius seems to suggest that Jesus' own baptism by John the Baptist was to cleanse the water of baptism for His followers. This may make sense if Ignatius suggests elsewhere that he believes baptism is intrinsic to the salvation of the individual. However, it seems to be an inaccurate rendition of the passage in *Matthew* 3 where Jesus convinces John to baptise Him by saying, 'Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.'⁹ Commenting on this, the ESV Study Bible notes suggest this verse means the following:

⁷ *1 Corinthians* 1:17

⁸ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 18.2, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Baker Academic, Michigan, 2009), Third Edition, p. 197 (emphasis mine)

⁹ *Matthew* 3:15

Jesus' baptism inaugurates his ministry and fulfils God's saving activity prophesied throughout the Old Testament, culminating with his death on the cross...although he needed no repentance or cleansing, Jesus identifies with the sinful people he came to save...¹⁰

The suggestion given by Ignatius in this epistle, that Christ's own baptism might cleanse the water, somehow relies upon His suffering. Insofar as suggesting that Ignatius means the Passion of Christ as giving the act of baptism itself some part in the act of salvation, this text is too brief. Nevertheless, the significance of Ignatius' statement is that he is presenting the act of baptism as one in which Jesus' suffering cleansed the water. This therefore makes it 'clean' for the followers of Jesus to be baptised in obedience to Jesus. Baptism is a significant event because Jesus Himself was baptised to prepare the water for His followers.

In the *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, therefore, it is interesting that Ignatius mentions the very same passage as quoted before, but this time as Matthew wrote it. He writes that Jesus was, 'baptised by John in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him.'¹¹ This demonstrates that Ignatius was aware of the Matthean passage. The significance Ignatius is placing on baptism here is different because by using this statement he is presenting Jesus as the Jewish Messiah: 'fulfilling all righteousness' is distinctively Messianic language. The community underwent baptism because their leader was the one promised by God.

Further into this epistle Ignatius decrees that, 'It is not permissible either to baptise or to hold a love feast without the bishop.'¹² This is not only applicable to the act of baptism but actually involves church life as a whole: 'Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop.'¹³ In fact, he takes this so far as to suggest that, 'only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop...is to be considered valid.'¹⁴ This argument that the bishop must actively participate in the act of administering the sacred rituals is significant. In the early church it would have been the Apostles who baptised new converts,¹⁵ although this is primarily because the church was still very small. The significance, therefore, of Ignatius' 'guarding' the

¹⁰ *Matthew 3:15, The English Standard Version Study Bible*, study notes by Michael J. Wilkins, p. 1825

¹¹ Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 1.1, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 249

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.2, p. 257

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.1, p. 255

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Consider Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8, Peter in Acts 2 and Paul with the jailor's family as some examples.

act of baptism demonstrates the seriousness of it. A basic believer could not administer or oversee baptism because it was too important in the life of the community. It required respect and controlled observance to ensure that it was not misused or misapplied.

The theological development visible in this epistle is that the bishop is required either to participate in each church activity, or explicitly designate someone to stand in his stead, as Ignatius says: ‘Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (*or whomever he himself designates*)...’¹⁶ Ignatius clearly sees the role of the bishop as ‘apostolic’ with regards to the hierarchy of the church. The act of baptism (it can be inferred) is only ‘valid’ if the bishop or his representative is involved. This means that the bishop must administer the baptism. One could therefore surmise that the conclusion of such control is that Ignatius believes baptism is indeed required if the individual is to receive the gift of salvation. The bishop, in effect, stands over the baptism ‘guaranteeing’ its authenticity and effectiveness for the individual, assuring them that their salvation is now granted by repentance and baptism. So strong is Ignatius on this point of Bishopric authority, he then suggests that, ‘The one who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; the one who does anything without the bishop’s knowledge serves the devil.’¹⁷ This, therefore, proves just how significant the act of baptism was to Ignatius. By presenting this structure to the event of baptism, he is demonstrating his belief that baptism is a vital act within community life, and therefore the individual must be accepted by the highest spiritual authority in the community. The act itself also must be done by that authority, due to the significance it represents. This takes power away from the community itself, giving it to the bishop.

This overall theme is reiterated in a number of his epistles. In writing to the *Magnesians* he argued that as, ‘The Lord did nothing without the Father, either by himself or through the apostles...so you must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters.’¹⁸ In his *Epistle to the Philadelphians* Ignatius similarly argued that the bishop is required. He said that the Holy Spirit Himself preached through him, commanding that the church, ‘Do nothing without the bishop.’¹⁹ Baptism, therefore, is an event in the life of the church

¹⁶ Ibid., emphasis mine

¹⁷ Ibid., 9, p. 257

¹⁸ Ignatius, *Magnesians*, 7.1, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 207

¹⁹ Ignatius, *Philadelphians*, 7.2, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 243

that is of great significance. Theologically, it is important because of what it represents, and this importance is demonstrated by his concern that it be properly administered and properly authorised.

Again, in his *Epistle to the Trallians*, Ignatius makes a similar remark, whereby the church is expected to, ‘Continue your current practice and do nothing without the bishop, but be subject also to the council of presbyters as to the apostles.’²⁰ Here he further emphasizes the authority structures within the church. First the bishop (from whom authority to participate in baptism flows) followed by the elders who must be obeyed as if they were the Apostles. He then argues that, ‘Without these no group can be called a church.’²¹ If there cannot be a church without the bishop, the implication surely is that there cannot be a church without baptism and the Eucharist, because the bishop controls their employment. Without the authority of the bishop, one cannot receive baptism. And, if his stance is indeed that salvation requires both repentance and baptism, it therefore follows that the bishop actually has the power to withhold salvation based upon his control of the act of baptism. This can be understood by his contention that, ‘The one who is within the sanctuary is clean, but the one who is outside the sanctuary is unclean.’²² The imagery of the ‘sanctuary’ refers to salvation: the one who has salvation is ‘clean’. Here, therefore, the significance of the act of baptism in the life of the Christian is vast. Baptism is presented as the act by which the individual is finally converted and a recipient of salvation. Thus baptism has become one of the most important acts in the life of the Christian, as it seals their salvation. This explains the concern Ignatius has expressed regarding the authority of administration. Because baptism is so important it must be properly guarded by the Bishop to ensure that its function is properly employed.

Concluding therefore on the Ignatian epistles, a case can be made that Ignatius believed baptism to be part of the process of receiving salvation, which although ultimately comes from Christ through faith (Ignatius doesn’t deny this doctrine), practically comes through the bishop’s administration. When the bishop refuses to administer baptism for an individual, any baptism given by a third party to the same individual is invalid,

²⁰ Ignatius, *Trallians*, 2.2, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p.p. 215-217

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.1, p. 217

²² Ignatius, *Trallians*, 7.2, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 219

and therefore he remains outside the sanctuary of the salvation community. Baptism, therefore, was performed by the bishop, underscoring the importance of the act, and assuring the community that it was valid.

The *Didache* is a document claiming to be written by the Twelve Apostles that explains the fundamental Christian teachings simply, and devotes a paragraph to baptism. It starts by suggesting that the one being baptised ought to have read the previous material in the *Didache* before committing to being baptised.²³ This is because the first six ‘sections’ spell out the expectations placed upon the initiate, and thus it would be improper for him to be baptised if he were not willing to live by the rule of the community and the gospel. This suggests that baptism signifies an acceptance of the beliefs of the community.

The Apostles then order that the baptism commence in the name of the Trinity (as per Jesus’ instructions in the Great Commission), using ‘running water’.²⁴ This command was not specifically mentioned in the epistles of Ignatius. A number of causes could account for this. Perhaps it was more common and expected than we understand today. More likely, however, is that running water was simply more freely available as cities and towns (and therefore the Christian community’s ‘hub’) tended to exist near running water for survival and trade. (Although this doesn’t account for lakes, such as Lake Gennesaret, which are not running waters, but still.) This command could, however, also be the Apostles’ way of ensuring baptism was primarily administered publicly, by immersion.

It is this final suggestion that makes the most sense, particularly if combined with the second. Immersion was clearly preferable, and running water was usually available, thus specifically commanding the use of running water implies the Apostles wished to protect the mode of baptism. Perhaps the use of running water precludes baptisms being private or hidden. By running water the Apostles surely mean a river, a stream or the ocean – something public and outdoors. In essence, somewhere where the activity would make a statement to any viewers because of the public visibility of the act. (Although lakes would have as many viewers, presumably.) What this tells us about how the community was to practise baptism is significant: public baptism by immersion was to be the norm.

²³ *Didache*, 7.1, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (BakerAcademic, Michigan, 2009), Third Edition, p. 355

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Being aware, however, that this may not always be practicable, the Apostles allow for alternatives. This can be further seen in the subsequent list of clauses to perform baptism. The first clause comes into effect if there is no nearby available running water, whereby the command is to, ‘baptise in some other water.’²⁵ If there happens to be warm water only, that will suffice, but evidently cold, natural water is preferable: ‘If you are not able to baptise in cold water, then do so in warm.’²⁶ These are the instructions for baptism by immersion. How this impacted the community would be clear: the initiate had to be public about their conversion. Baptism was an act that ought to make a public statement about religious loyalty and affiliation.

The Apostles do allow for another mode of baptism, but it is clearly less preferred: ‘But if you have neither [the previous examples], then pour water on the head three times in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.’²⁷ This compromise still maintains the link with the Trinity. It is a practical solution to a potential problem.²⁸ However, the text is clear that this is not the preferred *modus operandi* for the community.

The theological focus on immersion in the *Didache* is clear when considered with the Pauline context.²⁹ The imagery of immersion in baptism mirrors the death of Christ by the descent below the water, and then His resurrection by coming up from the water. By being publicly immersed, an individual is making a distinct statement about what he believes, and proclaiming a deliberate desire to be connected with the crucified criminal from Judea and the local Christian community. If that is indeed the case, then the theological significance of immersion is primarily to identify with Christ’s death and resurrection, but also to publicly identify with the local community and become part of the Christian *ekklesia*.

Nevertheless, even when allowing an alternative mode of baptism, the Apostles sought to retain the link of identification with the Godhead, thus the three distinct times of pouring water on the head in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A command given by the Apostles in this text has not been mentioned either by the other Apostolic documents or by Ignatius: the importance of fasting before baptism. The reason for this fast is not given. However, the importance of fasting in Judaism and early Christianity suggests that the act of fasting before

²⁵ Ibid., 7.2

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 7.3

²⁸ Philip baptises the Ethiopian in some water by the road in Acts 8.

²⁹ Consider Colossians 2, where Paul explains his theology of baptism.

baptism highlights the significance of the event. Again, this can be assumed by the reinforcement offered by the Apostles, ‘Also, you must instruct the one who is to be baptised to fast for one or two days beforehand.’³⁰ Clearly the significance of baptism is highlighted by this additional rule. Fasting demonstrates humility and piety; therefore fasting before baptism prepares the soul for the culmination of the spiritual conversion.

A factor poignantly missing from the *Didache* that is inherent among the epistles of Ignatius is any suggestion of who should be administering the baptism. Ignatius was adamant that only a bishop or representative of the bishop ought to be allowed to do so, but here the lack of a specific baptiser is surely significant. After all, these are the Apostles. They cannot be speaking to themselves (who thus far presumably did administer the majority of baptisms), but are in fact laying down the rules of the ordinance for future generations. Ergo, were they to be as protective of the role of bishops or elders as their deliberate successors, this surely would have been the time for it. Instead, their purpose is to ensure the mode is preferably immersion and that due reverence for the act is shown by both the baptiser and the one being baptised.

The importance of this text is not about the life of the corporate community but how it affects the individual initiate. Whereas Ignatius was concerned with the community’s correct administration for the individual, this text highlights the expectation placed upon the individual by the community. In fact, seemingly *contra* Ignatius, the Apostles stipulate later, regarding admission to the Eucharist, that only those baptised are allowed to partake:³¹ ‘But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised into the name of the Lord...’³² What, therefore, is the main requirement before receiving the Eucharist? The Apostles say it is that the individual has been identified as a Christian by profession and as part of the community by publicly undergoing baptism. The significance of baptism, therefore, for the individual is that it permits him to sit with the believers at the sacred meal. As for the community, the

³⁰ *Didache*, 7.4, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 355

³¹ This is all the more curious when compared with Ignatius’ command in his *Epistle to the Romans*, where he expects Christians to, ‘Participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup that leads to unity through his blood...just as there is one bishop...) in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God.’ Ignatius, *Romans*, 4, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 239. Clearly the ecclesiological structure is more important to Ignatius than the boundaries of the Eucharist.

³² *Didache*, 9.5, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 359

requirement of baptism before being allowed to participate in the Eucharist ensures that this act is guarded and protected from an unbeliever, because the individual must have previously publicly been baptised.

In summation, the *Didache* contains no suggestion that baptism is itself part of the salvation gift, but in fact the opposite is implied. It mentions no command stipulating that only a presiding bishop or his representative can administer the baptism, although it is used to protect the act of the Eucharist. Simply expected is an understanding of the responsibility being part of the community involves and the correct mode of administration used. This solidifies the communal perception that baptism is a public act that identifies an individual with the Christian community, and allows him to belong to it.

In the *Epistle of Barnabas* the author highlights some Old Testament prophecies that foreshadow baptism in the New Covenant community. The author argues that Israel, ‘would never accept the baptism that brings forgiveness of sins, but would create a substitute for themselves.’³³ It seems that the author is suggesting that because Israel deviated from their covenant commitments and deserted God; they dug for themselves a pit of death, rather than remain in close community with the ‘the fountain of life.’³⁴

When the author quotes *Isaiah* 45, he is distinctly doing so with a Christological view:

And again the prophet says, “I will go before you and level mountains and shatter brass gates and break iron bars in pieces, and I will give you treasures that lie in darkness, hidden, unseen, in order that they may know that I am the Lord God.”³⁵

Jesus is the One who gives treasures that lie in darkness to His followers. And it is through His victory at the cross that His people come to receive these gifts. Furthermore, the link is drawn again with baptism when the author quotes *Isaiah* 33: ““You shall dwell in a lofty cave of solid rock.” And: “His water will never fail; you will see the King in glory, and your soul will meditate on the fear of the Lord.””³⁶ As Israel would reject God and so not accept the baptism that gives life, the True King of Israel (as the author contends) would be the One whose water would never fail, clearly speaking of baptism. This interpretation is typical of how the Christian community used the Old Testament scriptures to validate their own theology. In this text, the author

³³ *Epistle of Barnabas*, 11.1, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Baker Academic, Michigan, 2009), Third Edition, p. 415

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.2

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.4, quoting *Isaiah* 45:2-3

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.5, quoting *Isaiah* 33:16-18

is giving value to the Christian act of baptism by showing how the Jews had failed to properly understand and apply it. He is making baptism distinctively Christian, and is significantly using the Old Testament prophet to give theological credence to the act Jesus introduced by suggesting that He alone is the fulfilment of the prophecy. This impacts the community by reaffirming their belief that it is they, not the national Israel, that are now the chosen people of God, through faith and baptism.

The author then goes on to explain the link between faith in the cross with repentance and baptism:

Notice how he pointed out the water and the cross together. For this is what he means:

blessed are those who, having set their hope on the cross, *descended into the water...*³⁷

The author is arguing that faith in the cross is required before baptism can be administered, but that by descending into the water, it is the baptism itself that cleanses the soul from sin. Indeed, the author effectively says this by the end of the paragraph:

While we descended into the water laden with sins and dirt, we rise up bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus in our spirits.³⁸

Theologically, therefore, Barnabas presents a rather difficult understanding of baptism. Firstly, he argues that baptism is given to the Christ because of Israel's rejection of the Fountain of Life, meaning God.³⁹ And thus baptism is mentioned by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah as actually referring to the practice that the Christ would institute. He draws the parallel to the tomb of Jesus by speaking of the lofty cave in solid rock,⁴⁰ before then saying that the Christ (whom he calls the King) will share the water that will never fail⁴¹ (clearly referring to the Fountain of Life mentioned above). The significance is that the Christ would institute the act of baptism in such a way that Israel never practised. Thus the community reiterated its belief of sovereignty and ownership over the Old Testament, and the act of baptism, as distinctly 'theirs'.

The author then makes the theological assertion that those who trust in the cross for their salvation ought to undergo baptism by water (the imagery points to immersion, as with the *Didache*) through which their sins shall be washed and they are filled with fear and hope in Jesus upon rising from the water. The

³⁷ Ibid., 11:8, p. 417, emphasis mine

³⁸ Ibid., 11:11

³⁹ Ibid., 11.2, p. 415

⁴⁰ Ibid. 11.5

⁴¹ Ibid.

question, then, is whether the author is suggesting that faith in the cross *requires* baptism to be complete, or whether baptism is the natural public expression of faith in the cross having resulted in salvation. In asking this question, the community was seeking to understand the role baptism had on the individual Christian life. The argument presented in this text seems to be saying that baptism is the act in which sins are washed away. This is the simplest, and most logical, understanding of the passage.

However, the final line suggests that faith is what is required: ‘Whoever, he says, hears these things spoken and believes them will live forever.’⁴² This could refer to the Apostolic gospel, which involves baptism as a sign of identification only, although an argument could be made that this sentence is suggesting that the one who believes in the explanation of these things participated in will live forever. As no further explanation is given by the author, it seems most likely that the intention of the passage is to suggest that faith and hope in the cross leads to baptism as a sign of identification with Christ who, in His death and resurrection, bore the punishment for sin, and those who place their trust in Him place their sin on Him, and receive His righteousness instead. This explains the image of ‘descending into the water laden with sins and dirt’⁴³ and rising ‘bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus.’⁴⁴ When one comes to faith, and repents, that transaction occurs immediately, but is only publicly declared through baptism. It is through the public declaration of faith in baptism that faith in the cross is demonstrated and thus, although salvation is granted at profession, the world may not know or see it until baptism is performed publicly. The impact of this theology on the community would be staggering, because it reminded them that they were to be bold in their religion because of the completion of their salvation. They were to seek converts through evangelism, and to be courageous for their God despite potential persecution. The public nature of the act of baptism effectively ensured the Christian understood the ongoing publicity this religion would require.

The penultimate text within this collection to mention and present a theology of baptism is the *Shepherd of Hermas*. This book contains a number of visions received by Hermas about the Christian life. They are very parabolic in their nature, although the explanations are provided as part of the visions. The

⁴² Ibid., 11.11

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

visions cover a wide range of topics, and are complicated in nature, form and structure. The *Shepherd* would have deep significance for the community of believers because it presented a much more rigid and legalistic understanding of baptism.

The first mention of baptism is in a vision of the church, presented as a tower. Hermas asks the lady who is giving him the vision (symbolising the church⁴⁵) why the tower (again the church) is built upon water. Her response is quite convoluted, for she first says, ‘It is because your life was saved and will be saved through water.’⁴⁶ By this, she means that baptism is the method through which Hermas received salvation. As to the past and future tense used, there is no explanation. For the community, this would make baptism an act of entrance not simply to the community and the Eucharist, but to the religion itself. It is important to note that these visions do not explain any mode of baptism, but presents a theological interpretation of what actually happens by the act.

The second confusing thing about this vision is the explanation that the tower, although built upon the water, is ‘set on a foundation by the word of the almighty and glorious Name.’⁴⁷ How this fits together is unclear. Presumably, the tower, representing the church, is established by the Word⁴⁸ and is built, or increases in number, through the work of the baptismal, meaning that the membership of the church grows with each who is truly and correctly baptised. Theologically, this vision appears to suggest that salvation requires baptism, and that baptism can even then end up not being enough. After much berating, the lady in the vision explains that, ‘The other stones that you saw thrown far from the tower...are those who have believed but because of their double-mindedness abandon their true road.’⁴⁹ Even having true faith and belief is not enough to guarantee safety through life and into eternity, according to this vision. Instead, they end up, ‘falling into the fire’⁵⁰ having ‘completely rebelled against the living God,’⁵¹ and the ‘thought no longer enters their heart to repent.’⁵²

⁴⁵ *Shepherd of Hermas*, 11.3, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (BakerAcademic, Michigan, 2009), Third Edition, p. 475

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.5, p. 477

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 11.5, p. 477

⁴⁸ C.f. *John* 1

⁴⁹ *Shepherd of Hermas*, 15.1, p. 483

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.2

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

There are, however, some who ‘fall near the waters but are not able to roll into the water.’⁵³ These stones represent people who, ‘Heard the word and want to be baptised in the name of the Lord. Then, when they remember the purity of the truth, they change their mind.’⁵⁴ This vision interprets baptism to be part of the process to receive salvation, but that salvation is not guaranteed even after baptism. Rather, it is implied that a life ought to be sinless to reflect the new state of existence as a Christian. For a community of believers this would be daunting. Being sinless would not be an easy expectation to live up to. If, therefore, baptism is not guaranteed due to future sin, it would be expected that the age of baptism would eventually increase so as to nullify the fear of sinning before death.

This fear regarding repentance is addressed when Hermas asks the shepherd (one who explains the subsequent visions to Hermas) about repentance:

I have heard from certain teachers that there is no repentance beyond what occurred when we descended into the water and received forgiveness of our previous sins.⁵⁵

Hermas is asking whether repentance is a full pardon, or simply dealing with the sins of the past. The answer given by the shepherd is unequivocal: ‘You have heard correctly, for so it is. For the one who has received forgiveness of sins ought never to sin again.’⁵⁶ The shepherd then continues to elaborate and explain what he means. ‘Those who have just now believed, or those who are about to believe do not have repentance for sins, but they do have forgiveness of their previous sins.’⁵⁷ So far, then, the shepherd has qualified his initial answer to say that repentance only includes forgiveness of previous sins. Therefore, any sins committed after that act of repentance are still weighed against the individual.

However, the shepherd does offer one further opportunity to repent of subsequent sins, for he says, ‘But I am warning you...if, after this great and holy call, anyone is tempted by the devil and sins, that person has one opportunity for repentance.’⁵⁸ The great and holy call mentioned refers to the act of baptism. And the penalty is very real for continued sinfulness after baptism: ‘But if that one sins repeatedly and repents, it

⁵³ Ibid., 16.3

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 31.1, p. 513

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31.2

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31.3

⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.6, p. 515

is of no use for such a person, for that person will scarcely live.’⁵⁹ Thus, if one continues to sin after baptism, that sin is counted against him and repenting continually for committed sin will not suffice to bring about forgiveness of sins. The act of baptism, therefore, appears to be more significant in this text than to Ignatius. For Ignatius, baptism needed protecting from outsiders, and the Apostles sought to ensure the convert was suitable and ready to undertake it. The *Shepherd*, however, presents baptism as an individual’s maturity in the Christian faith. It marks obedience, but also increases responsibility. Thus, in community life, baptism would have become an act for an older and more mature believer, as opposed to a newly-converted initiate.

The theology of baptism as presented by this text overall, so far, is quite difficult to systematise. On one side, the community is built by those who enter into salvation through faith and baptism, yet on the other, that salvation is not guaranteed but actually at risk if one continues to sin in life, thereby making community acceptance and participation uncertain. This differs greatly from Ignatius who argued that baptism correctly administered by a bishop effectively guaranteed salvation. It differs even further from the theology of the *Didache* where the Apostles taught that baptism was an individual’s identification with the Passion of Christ and the Christian community.

Further to this confusing mingling of ideas and theology is the seventh parable, where even those who have ‘repented with all their heart’⁶⁰ are not forgiven immediately. The shepherd rhetorically asks Hermas, ‘Do you think that the sins of those who repent are forgiven immediately?’⁶¹ His answer is forceful: ‘Certainly not! But those who repent must torment their own soul and be extremely humble in everything they do.’⁶² Indeed, this leads to an even more implausible religion of works, for if, and only if,

They endure the afflictions that come upon them, then assuredly the one who created all things and endowed them with power will be moved with compassion and will give some healing.⁶³

Why mention this when it is not directly concerning baptism? In a sense, it does directly concern baptism. Where once this text said baptism was an entrance into the Christian community, now it is a much

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66.4, p. 595

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

heavier burden to bear. Rather than offering hope in Jesus, assurance of faith, identification in and with the Christian community and perhaps salvation itself if correctly administered under the bishop, the theology of the shepherd presents baptism as something that offers limited salvation – something that must be done alongside faultless obedience. Such theology was not found presented in any of the previously assessed texts, and therefore is a unique interpretation of baptism for the community of believers, turning the command of Jesus to follow Him into an act that may in fact end up damning the Christian!

The next puzzle given in this text occurs when Hermas asks for another explanation of a similar kind of vision to the first. Baptism, in this vision, is presented as required for salvation: ‘It was necessary...for them to come up through water in order to be made alive.’⁶⁴ In fact, without baptism they couldn’t actually enter the Kingdom of God and thus be saved.⁶⁵ The vision then goes on to suggest that, ‘Even those who had fallen asleep received the seal of the Son of God and entered the kingdom of God.’⁶⁶ This is referring to believers in the Old Testament, who died under the previous covenantal seal, circumcision. The shepherd explains that people are dead before they receive the seal, but upon receiving it, they are made alive. But the seal is, ‘...the water, so they go down into the water dead and come up alive.’⁶⁷ There were ritual cleansing baptisms in the Old Testament, but they did not have this theological understanding that the New Testament church did. So when the shepherd says that, ‘the seal was proclaimed to them as well,’⁶⁸ there seems to be some continuity. Now, this is a very new theological concept, perhaps sharing language with *1 Peter* 3:18-20. The shepherd elaborates on this by explaining that,

When these apostles and teachers...fell asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, they preached also to those who had previously fallen asleep, and they themselves gave them the seal of the preaching.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Ibid., 93.2, p. 653

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 93.4

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93.5

The shepherd is suggesting that those who died in faith under the Old Covenant required the seal of baptism to be admitted into the New Covenant. And thus the Apostles did so after they died, baptising the dead believers in their death, but raising them up alive:

Therefore they went down with them into the water and came up again. But these went down alive and came up alive, whereas those who had previously fallen asleep went down dead and came up alive.⁷⁰

This is another example of how the early church commandeered the Old Testament for themselves, in order to claim authenticity for their religion, and yet explain their deviation from traditional Judaism. Theologically, this interpretation of the covenants suggest that baptism is certainly required for salvation, and not just post-Christ, but actually for all who believe. This explains how the believers under the Old Covenant could still be honoured by the New Covenant community. Theologically, therefore, this view of baptism presupposes that salvation requires baptism. The act of baptism is key to the process of salvation, and without it the dead, even dead “believers”, remain dead.

The *Shepherd of Hermas*, therefore offers a very convoluted and mixed theology of baptism. The main feature presented throughout, however, seems to be that baptism is a required act for a believer before they are granted forgiveness of sins. How this works in practice is difficult to understand because it is also taught that baptism does not guarantee forgiveness of future sins, but is part of a wider theology of a works-based religion. In particular, and unique to this document, is the assumption that even the dead believers in the covenant God require baptism to be made alive spiritually, resulting in the teaching that the Apostles baptised dead believers in death itself.

The final text to mention baptism in this collection is the *Fragments of Papias*, where it is recorded that Jesus tells His disciples that they, “...will drink my cup and will be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised.”⁷¹ There are two interpretations of this that are plausible. The first is that they will be baptised with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was after His physical baptism. Whilst this did occur at Pentecost, according

⁷⁰ Ibid., 93.6

⁷¹ *Fragments of Papias*, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (BakerAcademic, Michigan, 2009), Third Edition, p. 745

Source: George the Sinner (9th Cent.), *Chronicle*. Text: H. Nolte, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 44 (1862): 466-67

to *Acts 2*, it is unlikely that this is the correct meaning, although it is certainly plausible. More probable is that this means they would share in His suffering. The wider Biblical context of the passage strongly implies this.⁷²

Theologically then, this fragment says little about physical baptism, and is specifically referring to the disciples of Jesus. Nevertheless, it can be said that here baptism is entirely about identifying with Jesus in His suffering. For a Christian community frequently under assault, this interpretation would serve as an encouragement. By accepting baptism, the Christian declared an intent to share in the very real physical sufferings of their leader. This theology would have been an encouragement because suffering then meant they were being more like Christ. Suffering and persecution would actually confirm one was a genuine Christian because it was the formula that identified him as one sharing in Christ's suffering.

Finally, therefore, this essay will consider a text in which baptism is not mentioned where it could easily have been mentioned.

In the apologetic work, the *Epistle to Diognetus*, there is no mention of baptism. If, as has been argued in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and perhaps by Ignatius, baptism is required for the forgiveness of sins and thereby salvation, it is highly significant that an apologetic excludes any mention of baptism as a required act. One would not expect to find it included if it were simply a symbol or expression of a pre-existing faith, *per se*, but if the act itself held the final (most important even?) ingredient to the promise of eternal life, surely it would need to be mentioned alongside the death and resurrection of Jesus. Curiously, therefore, the lack of baptism in this treatise suggests that the act of baptism was not a key act in the communal life of the Christian church. Rather than being vital for the salvation of the individual, this text doesn't even mention it as part of the religious activity and doctrines.

To conclude, this essay has presented and discussed the theologies of baptism found in these documents and also considered the key instance where the issue of baptism is noticeably missing. This essay has found that the Christian community understood and interpreted the act of baptism differently. For Ignatius, the act of baptism was a deeply spiritual act that required very real protection. He sought to guard

⁷² The statement 'drink the cup' refers to the wrath of God poured out upon Christ and is a frequent image of judgement and suffering throughout the Old Testament prophets.

the act of baptism by restricting the administration of it to the bishop or his representative. For the community, this would serve as an assurance that those baptised were 'suitable' and truly converted. Conversely, the Apostles were more concerned with protecting the mode of baptism and the individual's preparation for it. In the *Didache* and the *Epistle to Barnabas*, they taught how baptism was to be administered (although not by whom), but the *Didache* added the holistic command to fast before the act. This would serve as a reminder to the community about the reverence and importance of the act, particularly as they then protected the community's sacred meal by only allowing those baptised to participate in it. In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, however, baptism is a much more convoluted act of obedience regarding salvation as being primarily rewarded through obeying the laws of God. Baptism fits into that schema by offering the forgiveness of sins at one time, but not guaranteeing salvation after the fact, particularly if the individual continues to sin, effectively ensuring assurance of salvation was impossible. Finally, by omitting any mention of baptism in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, the author implies that baptism is not a requisite for salvation, therefore suggesting that the Christian community did not hold baptism to be an essential doctrine to defend.

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