

Infant Dedication in the Early Church: Texts, Commentary, and Present-Day Application

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Abstract:

This article argues that, in addition to infant baptism, the early Church practised infant dedication and subsequent enrolment into the catechumenate as a way of incorporating children who were born to Christian parents into the church. The first section presents cases of children who were born to Christian parents and yet who were not baptised as infants. The second section provides texts and commentary regarding infant dedication and/or enrolment into the catechumenate. The third section discusses how this evidence might be applied to our current church setting.

Keywords:

Infant dedication; catechumenate; baptism; paedobaptism; credobaptism; ecumenism

Introduction

Beginning with Balthasar Hübmaier in the early sixteenth century, and stretching down to the present with Everett Ferguson, credobaptists have been keen to show that their view of the correct recipients of baptism — believers as opposed to babies — can be justified on historical grounds by early church practice and theology.¹ What has received much less attention, however, is what the early church did regarding their unbaptised infants. In fact, aside from David Wright's brief chapter on the topic, I can find no other work that has addressed the issue straightforwardly.² The purpose of this article, therefore, is to

¹ Balthasar Hübmaier, 'Old and New Teachers on Believers Baptism', in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. and trans. by H. Wayne Pipkin and John Yoder (Walden, NY: Plough, 2019), pp. 245–274; from Everett Ferguson's many works on the topic, see e.g., *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 362–379.

² David Wright, 'Infant Dedication in the Early Church', in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, ed. by Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999),

show how unbaptised children born to Christian parents were incorporated into the church during the patristic era through infant dedication and subsequent enrolment into the catechumenate. To achieve this, I will first provide evidence of babies born to Christian parents who were not baptised at birth but rather later in life, then evidence of Christian parents who dedicated their children and/or enrolled them into the catechumenate, and finally I will indicate how this historical study may be applied to the church's current situation and ecumenical dialogue.

Before proceeding, a few clarifications are in order. First, regarding terminology, I will use 'infant baptism' (which I will treat as synonymous with paedobaptism) to refer to the baptism of a newly born infant (usually a few days or weeks old); 'emergency baptism' to refer to the baptism of an individual, normally an infant or small child, due to the threat or reality of imminent death; 'toddler baptism' to refer to the baptism of small children (usually a few years old) who are brought forward by their parents; and 'believer's baptism' (which I will treat as synonymous with credobaptism) to refer to the baptism of a child or adult who believes the gospel and presents themselves for baptism. Second, this article is dedicated primarily to a historical discussion of baptism and infant dedication during the patristic period, and only at the end do I attempt to apply this precedent to the modern church. Thus, readers should not conflate my description of patristic practice and theology with Reformation and modern practice and theology. Third, in the second major section of this article, I discuss infant dedication and enrolment into the catechumenate. Although they are distinct, early Christians seem to have understood the former to naturally lead to the latter, although it is not clear how much time elapsed between the two.

pp. 352–378. Wright himself states, 'no one to my knowledge has addressed the question what if anything was done during at least half a century to the offspring of Christian parents who were not given baptism. [...] I have found no more than the occasional footnote or paragraph' ('Infant Dedication', p. 352). Brian Najapfour's book on infant dedication only treats the phenomenon from the seventeenth century onward and within the Baptist tradition (Najapfour, *Child Dedication: Considered Historically, Theologically, and Pastorally* (Calcedonia, MI: Biblical Spirituality Press, 2014), esp. ch. 2).

Specific Cases in Which Babies Born to Christian Parents Were Not Baptised at Birth

Although Joachim Jeremias, David Wright, and Everett Ferguson list the names of individuals who were born to Christian parents and yet were not baptised until much later in life, they do not provide documentation to support their claims.³ This section provides the information regarding these individuals' dates of birth and baptism, and the footnotes provide primary and secondary literature in support.⁴ Previous treatments have mixed together clear examples of the phenomenon with merely possible ones, but I have placed them in separate categories below. Additionally, previous treatments have also incorrectly listed examples of this phenomenon, which I have corrected in a third and final category.

Certain and Probable Cases of Babies Born to Christian Parents Who Were Not Baptised at Birth

Novatian (200–258). According to a letter written by Cornelius, bishop of Rome, to Fabius, of the church of Antioch, Novatian was raised in a Christian home and brought up in the church, but not baptised until later in life when he thought he was going to die from a certain sickness (emergency baptism).⁵

Children born in Tertullian's church in Carthage (early third century).

Tertullian counselled parents regarding their children in the following way: 'deferment of baptism is more profitable, [...] especially so as

³ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 88; Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 627 (Ferguson says he is dependent on Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, p. 88, but his list is more extensive); Wright, 'Infant Dedication', pp. 361–362 (Wright cites Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years*, trans. by Vincent Cronin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 303, but this must be combined with p. 306); David Wright, 'At What Ages were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?' *Studia Patristica*, 30 (1997), 389–394 (esp. p. 393; Wright is dependent on Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, and Dölger, 'Die Taufe Konstantins und ihre Probleme', in *Konstantin der Grosse und seine Zeit*, ed. by Franz Joseph Dölger (Freiburg: Herder'sche Verlagshandlung, 1913), pp. 377–447).

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article come from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1 and 2 (NPNF¹ and NPNF²).

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 6.43.13–17.

regards children?⁶ It seems safe to assume that at least one family followed his advice.⁷

Ephraem the Syrian (306–373). The few scattered autobiographical references that Ephraem has left in his writings suggest that he was born in a Christian home, but according to Sebastian Brock he ‘was probably baptised as a young man’.⁸

Boys in the church of Alexandria (c. early fourth century). According to Rufinus, several boys were baptised by Athanasius while playing in the sea, which was considered valid by the bishop, Alexander.⁹ Although their parental background is unknown, they are referred to as ‘catechumens’, which means that all of the boys were actively involved in the church. It seems safe to assume that at least one of their parents were Christians when they were born.¹⁰

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390). Gregory was born to Christian parents, but he was not baptised until he was around thirty years old, that is, circa 359/360.¹¹ Gregory’s father, Gregory the Elder, was bishop of Nazianzus (328–374),¹² and thus it is possible — even likely — that

⁶ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18. For Latin text and English translation, see Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), pp. 38–39.

⁷ Ferguson writes, ‘His opposition [to infant baptism] is an indication that the practice was neither long established nor generally accepted. Tertullian, however, never states that he is opposing a novel practice; rather, it was unnecessary (the innocence of children) and carried risks of the child later developing an evil disposition’ (*Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 366). If true, this would place the phenomenon of Christian parents not baptising their children at least back into second-century Carthage.

⁸ *Hymns against Heresies* 3.13 and 26.10; *Hymns on Virginity* 37.10; *Carmina Nisibena* 16:16–22; Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Poems of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, 2013), p. 8; St. Ephrem the Syrian, *The Hymns on Faith*, trans. by Jeffrey Wickes (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), p. 8.

⁹ Rufinus, *Church History* 10.15 (see below for text and discussion).

¹⁰ After all, does it seem likely that all of the boys were born to non-Christian parents who converted sometime shortly after their births and then enrolled them as catechumens? This may have been the case with some, but surely not all.

¹¹ John McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), p. 55; Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3, 8.

¹² Volker Menze, ‘Episcopal Nepotism in the Later Roman Empire’, in *Episcopal Networks in Late Antiquity: Connection and Communication Across Boundaries*, ed. by Carmen Angela Cvetković and Peter Gemeinhardt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 19–43 (p. 26).

of Nazianzus (328–374),¹³ and thus it is possible — even likely — that this practice extended throughout his diocese as well.

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) and Gregory of Nyssa (335–395). Basil and Gregory were brothers born to Christian parents, but Basil was not baptised until approximately 357, that is, when he was about twenty-seven years old,¹⁴ and Gregory was not baptised until around 358–363, that is, when he was somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-eight years old.¹⁵

Ambrose (340–397). Ambrose was born to Christian parents, but he was not baptised until after his name was put forward for the bishopric in 374, that is, when he was about thirty-four years old.¹⁶

Rufinus of Aquileia (345–411). Rufinus was born to Christian parents, but he was not baptised until circa 369–370, that is, when he was about twenty-four to twenty-five years old.¹⁷

John Chrysostom (347–407). John was born to Christian parents (at least his mother), but according to J. N. D. Kelly he was not baptised until he was a ‘young man approaching twenty’, that is, circa 368 (Easter day).¹⁸

¹³ Volker Menze, ‘Episcopal Nepotism in the Later Roman Empire’, in *Episcopal Networks in Late Antiquity: Connection and Communication Across Boundaries*, ed. by Carmen Angela Cvetković and Peter Gemeinhardt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 19–43 (p. 26).

¹⁴ Stephen Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), pp. 2, 9.

¹⁵ Anna Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 9.

¹⁶ Paulinus of Milan, *Life of Ambrose*, §7–8; Rufinus, *Church History* 11.11; cf. Mary Simplicia Kaniecka, *The Life of Saint Ambrose: A Translation of the Vita Sancti Ambrosii by Paulinus of Milan* (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution, 2019); Philip Amidon, trans., *The Church History of Rufinus Aquileia, Books 10 and 11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 74. In addition, it appears that Ambrose’s brother Satyrus and sister Marcellina shared a similar story (Wright, ‘At What Ages’, p. 393).

¹⁷ Francis Xavier Murphy, *Rufinus of Aquileia (345–451): His Life and Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1945), pp. 6, 23; J. N. D. Kelly, trans., *Rufinus: A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed* (New York: Newman Press, 1978), p. 3.

¹⁸ Palladius, *Dialogue*, 5; Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. 1, trans. by M. Gonzaga (London: Sants, 1959), p. 85; J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom — Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 5, 17.

Jerome (347–420). Jerome was born to Christian parents in Stridon, but he was not baptised until 366 in Rome, that is, when he was nineteen years old.¹⁹

Augustine (354–430). According to Augustine himself, his mother Monica was a devout Christian, but she did not have him baptised as an infant, and only considered baptising him in his youth when she thought he was about to die due to sickness (emergency baptism).²⁰ Augustine was baptised by Ambrose of Milan on Easter day 387, that is, when he was about thirty-three years old.²¹

Children born in Gregory of Nazianzus’s church (c. 380). While preaching from his pulpit in Constantinople in about 380, Gregory advised parents that they should ‘wait for the third year, or a little more or a little less’ before bringing their children forward for baptism.²² It seems safe to assume that at least one family followed his advice.²³

Some children born in Tarragona (385). In Siricius of Rome’s letter to Himerius, bishop of Tarragona (Spain), he says that ‘anyone who has vowed himself to the service of the church from infancy must be baptised before the years of puberty and join the ministry of the lectors’ (*Ep.* 1.9.13, written in 385).²⁴ Their involvement in the church from

¹⁹ Jerome, *Ep.* 16.2.1; Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.11.17.

²¹ Apparently, unbaptised children in the church were a common phenomenon in Augustine’s experience. When relating his own experience of baptism, he writes, ‘After all, why is it that even now, the words resound in our ears concerning someone or other, “Leave him be, let him do it — he’s not yet been baptized!”’ (*Confessions* 1.11.18; for translation, see Augustine, *Confessions: Books 1–8*, ed. and trans. by Carolyn Hammond, Loeb Classical Library 26 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 33). While this may apply to a baptised person of any age, the surrounding context is of the ‘delay’ of baptism for infants (although it is important to note that, in light of this and other studies, the phrase ‘delayed baptism’ already prejudices the discussion in favour of paedobaptism, as much as the phrase ‘anticipated baptism’ would prejudice the discussion in favour of credobaptism).

²² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 40.28; for translation, see St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Festal Orations*, trans. by Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), p. 124.

²³ Ferguson writes of Nazianzus’s posture, ‘Gregory’s proposal of baptism after three years of age makes more sense as a response to a recent practice of infant baptism in nonemergency situations than as an effort to modify a long-established custom’ (*Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 596). If true, then toddler baptism in Constantinople would have predated Nazianzus’s sermon on the topic in 380.

²⁴ Cited in Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, pp. 374–375.

‘infancy’ (*infantia*) means that their parents were Christian at the time of their birth (or shortly thereafter). The fact that the bishop of Rome did not rebuke the bishop of Tarragona implies that he did not oppose such a practice, and possibly that he even approved of it. This would certainly fit with the fourth-century setting in which this letter was written.

Some children born in Cyril of Alexandria’s church (c. 425–428). In his commentary on John, Cyril wrote that a newborn infant can be brought ‘either to receive the chrism of the catechumenate or the [chrism] at the consummation of holy baptism’.²⁵ Cyril discusses two possibilities for infants born to Christian parents. Although it is unclear whether, in the second option, Cyril is saying that the parents who are presenting their children for baptism are doing so for the purposes of infant or emergency baptism, the first option assumes that not all parents are presenting their infants for baptism of any kind.²⁶ It seems likely that at least one family opted for the first option.

Uncertain Cases of Babies Born to Christian Parents Who Were Not Baptised at Birth

Perpetua’s son (c. 203). Although Perpetua was baptised in prison just days before her martyrdom, there is no mention of her infant son being baptised. Nevertheless, there are too few details to know if his lack of mention was intentional or unintentional.²⁷

Anthony the Monk (c. 251–356). Although he was raised in a Christian home, no mention is made of his baptism.²⁸ However, it is uncertain whether this lacuna is significant or not.

Athanasius (c. 295–373). Athanasius did not discuss his childhood, and the only two ancient sources — Rufinus, *Church History* 10.15 and the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* — give conflicting stories: the former

²⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. John* on 11:26; for translation, see Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, trans. by David Maxwell, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), p. 88; also cf. Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, p. 375.

²⁶ In *Sermo Dolbeau* 14, Augustine says that catechumens are ‘marked by some sacrament of faith’ (*aliquo sacramento fidei signarentur*). This may help explain Cyril’s allusion to a ‘chrism’ of the catechumenate.

²⁷ See *Passion of Perpetua* §2–3. Neither is there mention of Felicity’s infant being baptised in prison, but again, many details are lacking (*Passion*, §15).

²⁸ See Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 1.

implies that he was raised in the church (baptism not mentioned) and the latter states that he was born to a pagan mother (and baptised as a boy).²⁹ The first account may imply that he was not baptised as an infant, while the second would invalidate him for consideration for such an option.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428). Theodore was baptised in his late teenage years, but it is not known if he was born into a Christian family.³⁰

Other uncertain cases. David Wright says that ‘quite possibly’ others such as Ulfilas and John Cassian were born to Christian parents but not baptised until later in life, but does not cite primary sources to substantiate his claim.³¹ Additionally, it may be that John Cassian claims that Nestorius had been born to Christian parents, catechised, and subsequently baptised in the church of Antioch, but the text is too ambiguous to allow for certainty.³²

Mistaken Cases of Babies Born to Christian Parents Who Were Not Baptised at Birth

Paulinus of Nola (354–341). Joachim Jeremias and David Wright include Paulinus in their list of babies born to Christian parents who

²⁹ See David Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 1–3; John Tyson, *The Great Athanasius: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), p. 5. Rufinus continues his account by saying that after Athanasius baptised the other boys in the sea, he was educated by a scribe and received instruction from a teacher of literature, and then his parents gave him back to the church where he was later ordained into the clergy. Thus, it appears that Athanasius was relatively young when he baptised the others. In order for the bishop to consider Athanasius’s baptism as valid, it seems necessary for him to have been baptised first, thus suggesting that Athanasius was baptised at an early age. Unfortunately, the evidence does not allow us to be more precise than this.

³⁰ L. Patterson, *Theodore of Mopsuestia and Modern Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1926), pp. 1–2. Dimitri Zaharopoulos says that ‘probably his parents were Christians’, but apparently is relying on circumstantial, as opposed to concrete, evidence (*Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible: A Study of His Old Testament Exegesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 9).

³¹ Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, 362, and ‘At What Age’, p. 393.

³² John Cassian, *Against Nestorius* 6.5: ‘And what then if I were to deal with you in this way? What would you say? What would you answer? Would it not, I adjure you, be this: viz., that you had not been trained up and taught in this way: that something different had been delivered to you by your parents, and masters, and teachers. That you did not hear this in the meeting place of your father’s teaching, nor in the Church of your Baptism: finally that the text and words of the Creed delivered and taught to you contained something different. That in it you were baptized and regenerated.’

were not baptised at birth.³³ However, although according to Dennis Trout he was baptised ‘probably not long before his departure for Spain in 389’, that is, when he was around thirty-five years old, it does not appear that his parents were Christian when he was born, but rather became so later.³⁴

Some Conclusions

If we take into account only the certain examples of babies born to Christian parents who were not baptised as infants, then there are fourteen documented examples of this phenomenon in the early church. While this number may appear small, some observations help us see its significance. First, the number is much greater than fourteen when we include these individuals’ brothers and sisters, the families who followed their pastors’ advice to not baptise their babies, and the funeral inscriptions (not discussed here) which attest to babies who, at least in some cases, were born to Christian parents but who were only baptised shortly before death (emergency baptisms).³⁵ Second, the phenomenon is not isolated to the preference of individual families, but rather was preached and/or practised by bishops and church leaders at some of Christendom’s most important centres: Carthage (Tertullian), Tarragona (Himerius), Alexandria (Alexander and Cyril), Nazianzus (Gregory the Elder³⁶), and Constantinople (Gregory of Nazianzus). This would have had the effect of increasing the phenomenon’s number, visibility, and legitimacy.³⁷ Additionally, despite the many biographies and

³³ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, p. 88; Wright, ‘At What Age’, p. 393.

³⁴ Dennis Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 31, 65–66.

³⁵ For a list of names of brothers, sisters, and friends, see Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 627. For the evidence from funeral inscriptions, see Ferguson, ‘Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 30 (1979), 37–46; and *Baptism in the Early Church*, pp. 372–377. However, in the case of the inscriptions, it is nearly impossible to know if the parents were Christians at the time of the birth of their (now deceased) children.

³⁶ Gregory the Elder was bishop of Nazianzus (328–374) when his son Gregory was born (329), and thus those under his care would have seen the bishop not baptise his infant son. Surely this would have influenced others to do the same.

³⁷ Although they did not know it at the time, today we can see that of the original eight doctors of the early church — Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Athanasius, Gregory of Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom — six (possibly seven) were not baptised as babies. Many of them praised their parents for their upbringing, which at least implied issues relating to baptism.

autobiographies that we have of early church figures, the first person known by name to have been born to Christian parents and baptised as a baby in a non-emergency situation is Emperor Julian in around 331.³⁸ Third, the time frame of this phenomenon is not isolated to the period between the years 329 and 354 as Joachim Jeremias claimed,³⁹ but rather begins at least as early as Novatian and Tertullian in the opening years of the third century and extends at least to approximately 425–428 with Cyril of Alexandria’s commentary on John. This is a time frame not of some 25 years, but rather of some 225 years.⁴⁰ Fourth, the geographic diversity must be appreciated, since it extends throughout the Roman Empire and beyond: Rome, Carthage, Syria, Alexandria, Cappadocia, Milan, Stridon, and Constantinople.

In summary, Christian parents not baptising their babies was not a momentary crisis of the mid-fourth century,⁴¹ nor was it a fringe movement led by unknown or otherwise insignificant leaders and laymen, but rather was a well-established practice throughout Christendom during at least the early third through early fifth centuries and involved some of the most important figures of the church during that time period. Whatever the framers of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed may have meant by the phrase ‘We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins’, they certainly did not mean exclusively paedobaptism.

Infant Dedication and the Catechumenate

The previous section demonstrated that not all children who were born to Christian parents were baptised as infants and concluded by

³⁸ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 628 (if he had not been baptised as an infant, perhaps he would not have been known as an ‘apostate’). Also notable is the silence regarding paedobaptism in treatises dedicated to how Christian parents ought to raise their children; for example, John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up their Children*.

³⁹ Jeremias, *Infant baptism*, p. 89.

⁴⁰ Similarly, Jeremias’s assertion that ‘the earliest case known to me in which Christian parents postponed the baptism of their children is in the year 329/30 (Gregory of Nazianzus)’ can no longer be sustained (*Infant Baptism*, p. 89; italics original). The examples mentioned above, combined with the funeral inscriptions, demonstrate earlier examples.

⁴¹ For an articulation of the ‘crisis interpretation’ of the phenomenon, see Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, pp. 87–91; Daniélou and Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years*, p. 161.

suggesting that this phenomenon was more widespread than the documented examples could confirm. This leads to an important question: What, if anything, did these parents and churches do regarding their unbaptised infants? The answer is that some churches at least had a well-developed theology and practice for incorporating children into the church through infant dedication, enrolment into the catechumenate, and toddler/believer's baptism. Thus, for those such as the individuals mentioned above, baptism was but the last step in a comprehensive process of Christian initiation for children born to Christian parents. Since the early church's theology and practice of infant dedication and enrolment into the catechumenate is relatively unknown, in what follows I have provided extended quotations of the pertinent texts, italicised important phrases, commented on important words and issues, and provided the evaluation of other scholars. Some of the following texts refer either only to infant dedication or early enrolment into the catechumenate, while others refer to both.

Tertullian

It follows that *deferment of baptism is more profitable*, in accordance with each person's character and attitude, and even age: and especially so as regards *children*. For what need is there, if there really is no need, for even their *sponsors* to be brought into peril, seeing they may possibly themselves fail of their promises by death, or be deceived by the subsequent development of an evil disposition? It is true our Lord says, 'Forbid them not to come to me.' *So let them come, when they are growing up, when they are learning, when they are being taught what they are coming to: let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ*. Why should innocent infancy come with haste to the remission of sins? Shall we take less cautious action in this than we take in worldly matters? Shall one who is not trusted with earthly property be entrusted with heavenly? *Let them first learn how to ask for salvation, so that you may be seen to have given to one that asketh.* (*On Baptism* 18)⁴²

Tertullian thinks that 'children' (*parvulos*) of Christian parents should be taught about Christ before being baptised: he counsels that they be baptised after 'growing up' (*adolescunt*), 'learning' (*discunt*), and 'being taught' (*docentur*), and they must 'have become competent to know Christ' (*cum Christum nosse potuerint*), all of which implies some kind of intentional teaching process. Perhaps the 'sponsors' (*sponsors*) were

⁴² Evans, *Tertullian's Homily*, p. 39.

somehow involved in the process, but the point is clear: pre-baptismal teaching was involved.

Tertullian's remarks that the little children themselves are the ones who are to 'ask' (*petere*) for salvation implies that he is arguing for believer's baptism, as opposed to toddler baptism, and says that this kind of baptism is 'more profitable' (*utilior*). Thus, while he does not prefer infant baptism, neither does he see it as invalid, an important point which I will revisit in the final section.

Loren Kerns concludes regarding Tertullian and the catechumenate, 'When we encounter the catechumenate in third century North Africa, we discover an institution that was deeply enmeshed in the matrix of ecclesiastical life. Its existence was taken for granted, and its utilization was already standard. [...] Tertullian opted for a delay in baptism, and the development of the catechumenate.'⁴³

It seems safe to conclude that at least some children born to Christian parents in Tertullian's church were not baptised as infants, but rather enrolled into the catechumenate from an early age and later baptised when they asked for this.

The Youth at Alexandria (Early Fourth Century)

Here we turn to Rufinus, *Church History* 10.15,⁴⁴ noting that the author is speaking about Athanasius and other boys in the church at Alexandria.

Once when Bishop Alexander was celebrating the day of Peter Martyr in Alexandria, he was waiting in a place by the sea after the ceremonies were over for his clergy to gather for a banquet. There he saw from a distance some boys on the seashore playing a game in which, as they often do, *they were mimicking a bishop and the things customarily done in church*. Now when he had gazed intently for a while at the boys, he saw that they were *performing some of the more secret and sacramental things*. He was disturbed and immediately ordered the clergy to be called to him and showed them what he was watching from a distance. Then he commanded them to go and get all the boys and bring

⁴³ Loren Kerns, 'Tertullian and the Catechumenate: An Inquiry into Tertullian's Justification for the North African Catechumenate in the Early Third Century' (Master of Arts in Theological Studies thesis, George Fox University, 2000), p. 83.

⁴⁴ Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia*, pp. 26–27. Latin text: Eduard Schwartz and Theodor Mommsen, *Eusebius Werke: Zweiter Band: Die Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 2, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908), p. 981.

them to him. When they arrived, he asked them what game they were playing and what they had done and how. At first they were afraid, as is usual at that age, and refused, but then *they disclosed in due order what they had done, admitting that some catechumens had been baptized by them at the hand of Athanasius*, who had played the part of bishop in their childish game. Then he carefully inquired of those who were said to have been baptized *what they had been asked and what they had answered, and the same of him who had put the questions, and when he saw that everything was according to the manner of our religion*, he conferred with a council of clerics and then ruled, so it is reported, that *those on whom water had been poured after the questions had been asked and answered correctly need not repeat the baptism*, but those things should be completed which are customarily done by priests.

While it is possible that some boys had been born to non-Christian parents who became Christians shortly thereafter and then enrolled the children into the catechumenate, surely this could not have been the case with all of them. Rather, it seems more likely that at least some of them had been born to Christian parents.⁴⁵

Although they had not been ‘baptised’ (*baptizati*), the boys were part of the Christian community and had been enrolled as ‘catechumens’ (*catechumenos*). Their knowledge of ‘some of the more secret and sacramental things’ (*quaedam etiam secretiora et mystica*) and of things ‘according to the manner of our religion’ (*secundum religionis nostrae ritum*) suggests that they had been instructed in at least the basics of the Christian faith.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390)

That which concerns myself is perhaps undeserving of mention, since I have proved unworthy of the hope cherished in regard to me: yet it was on her part [Gregory’s mother] a great undertaking to promise me to God before my birth, with no fear of the future, and *to dedicate me immediately after I was born*. (*Oration 18.11*)⁴⁶

So be it, some will say, for those seeking baptism. But what would you say about those who are still infants and perceive neither the damage nor the grace? *Should we baptize them also? Absolutely, if indeed there is some immediate danger*. For it is better to be sanctified without perceiving it than to depart unsealed

⁴⁵ From this passage, there were at least three boys playing this game: Athanasius and ‘those’ (*quibus*) on whom the water was poured. However, the text implies that there were more: the bishop just happened to see the boys playing this game, and it is unlikely that he would have seen, understood, and stopped the whole process during the window of time it takes to baptise two people.

⁴⁶ Greek text: *PG 35:997*.

and uninitiated. [...] But as for the rest *I give my recommendation to wait for the third year, or a little more or a little less, when they can also hear something of the mystery and respond, so even if they do not understand completely, at any rate they are imprinted.* (Oration 40.28)⁴⁷

In *Oration* 18.11, Gregory states that he was ‘dedicated’ (ἀνέθηκε) immediately after birth. Even though the Greek word may have a spectrum of meanings, it does indicate something other than baptism. As noted above, Gregory of Nazianzus was baptised when he was around thirty years old, and thus this must refer to some kind of infant dedication, in whatever form it appeared.

In *Oration* 40.28, although Gregory affirms emergency baptism ‘if indeed there is some immediate danger’, in normal cases he advises that the toddler’s baptism should take place when they are about three years old.⁴⁸ The reason given, that ‘they can also hear something of the mystery and respond’, implies some level of previous catechetical instruction.

Gregory seems to favour toddler baptism, which goes against his own experience as a child, since he was not baptised until he was about thirty years old. Thus, it may be that Gregory is making a concession to the current state of the church in Constantinople, rather than voicing his true beliefs on the matter.⁴⁹

Basil of Caesarea (330–379)

Gregory of Nazianzus, in *Oration* 43.73, speaks of Basil the Great thus:

Further, to run over the Judges, or the most illustrious of the Judges, there is ‘Samuel among those that call upon His Name’, who was given to God before his birth, and sanctified immediately after his birth, and the anointer with his horn of kings and priests. *But was not Basil as an infant consecrated to God from the womb, and offered with a coat at the altar, and was he not a seer of heavenly*

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Festal Orations*, pp. 123–124.

⁴⁸ Interestingly, earlier in the *Oration*, Gregory says that parents should bring their children forward for baptism: ‘Have you an infant child? Do not let sin get any opportunity, but let him be sanctified from his childhood; from his very tenderest age let him be consecrated by the Spirit’ (§17).

⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the fact that Gregory says toddlers should ‘know the outlines’ of baptism suggests that the line between toddler and believer’s baptism is not always a clear one.

things, and anointed of the Lord, and the anointer of those who are perfected by the Spirit?⁵⁰

Basil himself makes this declaration in *Homily* 13.1:

On this account the Church with a loud voice calls from afar *her catechumens, that as she already has conceived them, she may at length usher them into life*, and weaning them from the milk of catechetical instruction, give them to taste of the solid food of her dogmas. [...] you, I say, tarry, and hesitate, and put off. Although *instructed in the divine word from your infancy*, have you still not yet yielded to truth? always learning, have you not yet attained to knowledge? through life an inquirer, a seeker even to old age, when will you become a Christian? when shall we recognize you as our own? Last year you awaited the present time, and now again you put off to a future season. Take care that your promises extend not beyond the term of your life. You know not what the morrow will bring forth. Do not make promises concerning things not subject to your control. We call you, O man, to life: why do you shun the call? We invite you to partake of blessings: why do you disregard the gift? The kingdom of heaven lies open to you: he that invites you cannot deceive: the path is easy: there is no need of length of time, of expense, of toil: why do you delay? why do you refuse? why do you fear the yoke, as a heifer that never has borne it? It is sweet: it is light: it does not hurt the neck; but it ornaments it: *it is not a yoke put on forcibly: it must be cheerfully assumed.*⁵¹

In *Oration* 43.73, Gregory of Nazianzus is drawing several parallels between the prophet Samuel and his friend, Basil. He makes a parallel between Samuel, ‘who was given (δοτός) to God before his birth, and sanctified (ιερός) immediately after his birth’ and Basil who was ‘as an infant consecrated (καθιερωμένος) to God from the womb, and offered (ἐπιδεδομένος) with a coat at the altar’ (cf. 1 Sam 2:18–19). As was seen above, Basil was baptised when he was about twenty-seven years old, and thus this likely refers to some other liturgical event, such as an infant dedication. The use of language such as ‘consecration’ and ‘offering’ suggests that the dedication was one of consecration, and not merely thanksgiving (see below).⁵²

⁵⁰ Greek text: *PG* 36:596.

⁵¹ Basil, *Exhortation to Baptism*; for an English translation, see The Tertullian Project, <https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/basil_sermon_13_baptism_02_trans.htm> [accessed 6 September 2021]; Greek text: *PG* 31:425.

⁵² Unless Gregory understands Samuel’s sanctification to refer to his being named Samuel (‘I have asked for him from the LORD’), it must refer to his being given to the temple after he was weaned (cf. 1 Sam 1:21–28), perhaps at the age of two or three years old (cf. 2 Macc 7:27). Was there any connection between weaning and enrolment in the catechumenate (cf. *Oration* 40.28)?

In *Homily* 13.1, Basil is speaking to people who had been ‘instructed’ (ματηχοῦμενος) in the Scriptures from ‘infancy’ (νηπιου), but who still had not been baptised. Thus, they must have been enrolled in the catechumenate from birth, or shortly thereafter. He uses the imagery of catechumens being ‘conceived’ (πάλαι ᾠδινεν), but not yet ‘ushered into life’ (ἀποκωήση) to refer to infant dedication and baptism, respectively (Augustine uses the same metaphor; see below).⁵³ At the end of the quotation, he says that baptism must be ‘assumed’ (ἐπιζητεῖ), and not ‘put on forcibly’ (δεσμεῖται), which implies credobaptism.

In her work on Basil’s ecclesiology, after studying the pertinent passages related to infants and children, Olga Druzhinina concludes as follows:

On the basis of discussed arguments, we can come to several conclusions concerning infants and children in the church: First, St. Basil considers children and infants worthy to be present during the liturgy; second, they were part of the communal life and received ‘the word’ or instructions from an early age; third, St. Basil does insist on early baptism and on this ground children could be allowed to receive baptism at the age when they are able to follow the ceremony; fourth, since baptism on death-bed was an accepted practice, the same could be provided for a very sick infant.⁵⁴

Ambrose (340–397)

In the context of the appointment of the next bishop of Milan, Rufinus in *Ecclesiastical History* 11.11,⁵⁵ makes the following remark concerning Ambrose:

[T]here suddenly arose from the people fighting and quarrelling with each other a single voice which shouted that it would have Ambrose as bishop; *they cried that he should be baptizēd forthwith, for he was a catechumen*, and given to them as bishop, nor could there be one people and one faith otherwise, unless Ambrose was given to them as priest.

⁵³ Although not discussed here, Gregory Nazianzus has a similar two-part process in mind when he wrote, ‘As long as you are a catechumen, you are on the front porch of piety. You must come inside, cross the court, observe the Holy Things, look into the Holy of Holies, be with the Trinity’ (*Oration* 40.16; cf. *Festal Orations*, p. 111). As did Augustine when he evoked the imagery of the household: ‘And as the catechumens have the sign of the cross on their forehead, they are already of the great house; but from servants let them become sons’ (*Tract. John* 11.4).

⁵⁴ Olga Druzhinina, *The Ecclesiology of St. Basil the Great: A Trinitarian Approach to the Life of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), p. 105.

⁵⁵ Translation: Amidon, *Church History of Rufinus Aquileia*, p. 74.

As observed above, Ambrose was born into a Christian family, but not baptised until this event, when he was about thirty-four years old. While it is possible that his parents did not enrol him into the catechumenate but Ambrose did so himself sometime after leaving his parents' authority and before being chosen to be the bishop,⁵⁶ in light of the well-established fourth-century practice it seems more likely that he was enrolled in the catechumenate sometime while under his parents' authority, perhaps while in Trier.⁵⁷

Jerome (347–420)

I, a Christian, born of Christian parents, and who *carry the standard of the cross on my brow*. (*Preface to Job*)

From my very cradle, I may say, I have been reared on Catholic milk. (*Epistle 82.2*)

As noted above, Jerome was not baptised as an infant but rather when he was around nineteen years old. Signing with the cross was performed during baptisms, infant dedications, and the catechumenate. Thus, the reference to carrying the standard of the cross on his brow (which he states immediately after referring to his Christian birth) appears to refer to infant dedication (or the catechumenate), and his having been 'reared on Catholic milk' appears to refer to the catechumenate.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

Even when I was just a boy I had heard how we are promised eternal life through the lowliness of our Lord God descending to the level of our human pride; and I was signed with the sign of his cross, and seasoned with his salt from the moment I left my mother's womb. My mother trusted in you completely. You saw, Lord, when I was still a boy and developed a sudden fever one day, and stomach pain, and was almost at death's door; you saw, my God (for you were my protector), with what anxiety and what faith I pleaded for baptism into your Christ, my Lord

⁵⁶ Actually, it is more likely that he would have done so two or three years prior, since it was normal for someone to be part of the catechumenate for at least two or three years before receiving baptism.

⁵⁷ His experience could have been similar to Augustine's: enrolled in the catechumenate as a child, then left the church, then returned to the church and re-enrolled in the catechumenate with the intent of seeking baptism (*Confessions* 5.14.25; see below). Otherwise, it may have been that growing up in a political family, and himself becoming governor in 372 (two years before his unexpected baptism), he would have been expected to sentence people to death, and thus it would have been better to wait until his retirement to be baptised. In the first case, his baptism would not have been 'delayed'; in the second case, it would have been, but not necessarily delayed from any expected infant baptism.

and my God, and pleaded that it was the duty of my mother and of your Church, which is the mother of us all. My earthly mother was in great distress. By the purity of her heart's faith in you, she was giving birth — at an even higher cost — to my eternal salvation. *Now she was in a hurry to ensure that I was initiated into the life-giving sacraments, and was baptized, declaring belief in you, Lord Jesus, for the forgiveness of my sins — but then I suddenly recovered.* So my baptismal cleansing was postponed, because it was inevitable that I would go on being defiled by sin if I survived — and it is certain that after that baptismal washing the guilt attached to the stain of sins would be more serious and dangerous than before. [...] *My mother was active in ensuring that you were a father to me, O my God, rather than he* [Augustine's earthly father]. (*Confessions* 1.11.17)⁵⁸

At long last, therefore, *I decided to be a catechumen in the Catholic Church, which my parents had commended to me*, for as long as it took until something clarified for sure in which direction I should make my way. (*Confessions* 5.14.25)⁵⁹

[B]ecause the one Church, the body of our only-begotten Son, *in which the name of Christ had been set upon me in my infancy.* (*Confessions* 6.4.5; speaking of a time when he was at church.)

But when or in what manner were they *conceived in the womb of mother church* if they were not *marked by some sacrament of faith?* (*Sermo Dolbeau* 14)⁶⁰

In *Confessions* 1.11.17, Augustine relates that his mother had no intention of baptising him as an infant, and only considered doing so when she feared his imminent death (emergency baptism). Nevertheless, she was 'active' in teaching him about God. Additionally, he says he was 'signed' (*signabar*) with the cross and 'seasoned' (*condiebar*) with salt.⁶¹ According to David Wright, the imperfect verb tense suggests that these were repeated actions, and thus formed a regular part of the catechumenate process.⁶²

In *Confessions* 5.14.25, Augustine relates that his parents (most likely his mother particularly) had enrolled him into the catechumenate, to which he returned later in life.

⁵⁸ Translation: Hammond, *Confessions: Books 1–8*, p. 31–33 (subsequent translations found on pp. 233 and 247). Written c. 397.

⁵⁹ Cf. Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing* 20.

⁶⁰ Wright, 'Infant Dedication', p. 359. For the Latin phrase, see below. Sermon delivered c. 397.

⁶¹ Being seasoned with salt was an African variant of the initiation liturgy; see Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, trans. by Edward Haas (New York: Sadier, 1979), p. 92.

⁶² Wright, 'Infant Dedication', p. 354.

In *Confessions* 6.4.5, Augustine states that the name of Christ had been ‘set upon’ (*est inditum*) him during his ‘infancy’ (*infanti*). As he was not baptised as an infant, this appears to be an allusion to infant dedication.

In *Sermo Dolbeau* 14, Augustine says that people are ‘conceived’ in the church by being ‘marked by some sacrament of faith’ (*aliquo sacramento fidei signarentur*). This imagery is similar to that which Basil the Great uses to speak of a similar phenomenon (see above).⁶³

Putting the evidence together, Christ’s name was ‘set upon’ Augustine shortly after birth, after which he would have been ‘conceived’ in the church (but not yet born) and enrolled in the catechumenate. During his childhood, he would have been repeatedly signed with the cross and seasoned with salt, and his mother would have been active in teaching him about God. Later, at around thirty-three years old, he would have been baptised.

Cyril of Alexandria (376–444)

We should also note that when Lazarus was lying dead, *he asks the woman for the assent of faith on his behalf*, as it were, so that this type may have force in the churches as well. What I mean is this: *when a newborn infant is brought either to receive the chrism of the catechumenate or the [chrism] at the consummation of holy baptism, the one who brings the child says ‘amen’ on its behalf.* (*Comm. John* on 11:26)⁶⁴

Cyril refers to two distinct ‘chrisms’ (χρῖσμα) that a ‘newborn infant’ (ἀοριγενές βρέφος) may receive: one for enrolment into the ‘catechumenate’ (κατηχῆσεως) and one for ‘holy baptism’ (ἁγίω βαπτισματι). This could be evidence of either dual practice baptism, in which parents are given the choice between infant and toddler/believer’s baptism, or emergency baptism, in which case parents would bring a healthy baby for the chrism of the catechumenate and those of a sick one for the chrism of baptism. Whatever the correct interpretation may be, Cyril’s church had an established system for

⁶³ Although not given here, Augustine uses this same imagery elsewhere in his writings (see, for example, *On diverse questions to Simplicianus* 1.2.2); Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, p. 359.

⁶⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 88; see also Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, p. 375. Greek text: *PG* 74:49. Written c. 425–428.

incorporating chrismated, but non-baptised, infants into the catechumenate.

The reference to faith on behalf of another and the saying of ‘amen’ suggest that this is speaking of a consecration/dedication, and not (merely) a thanksgiving.

Uncertain Examples

The first of these is Aristides, *Apology* 1.15 (Syriac version).⁶⁵

And when a child is born to any one of them, they praise God; and if again it chanced to die in its infancy, they praise God mightily, as for one who has passed through the world without sins.

The term ‘praise’ (ܦܪܝܫܘܢ) may refer to a liturgical act, but baptism is not the most natural referent, since it would render non-sensical the subsequent ‘praise [...] mightily’ (ܕܠܦܪܝܫܘܢ[...]) upon the child’s death. More likely, this refers to infant dedication,⁶⁶ though admittedly this is a short text, and one should not demand too much from it.

It is worth noting that the use of ‘give thanks’ is different from the fourth-century emphasis on consecration. Perhaps both acts — thanksgiving and consecration — existed side-by-side, or perhaps the former evolved into, or was set aside in favour of, the latter.

Next, is Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures* 15.18,⁶⁷ where the context is the antichrist.

If thou hast a child according to the flesh, admonish him of this now; if thou hast begotten one through catechizing, put him also on his guard, lest he receive the false one as the True.

Cyril taught extensively in his *Catechetical Lectures*, *Procatechesis* (c. 350s), and *Lectures on the Mysteries* (c. 382 or later), and there is no indication that infants were in view for baptism. On the contrary, the catechumens

⁶⁵ J. Rendel Harris, *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians from a Syriac MS. preserved on Mount Sinai ed. with an introduction and translation. With an appendix containing the main portion of the original Greek text by J. Armitage Robinson*, 2nd edn, Texts and Studies (Cambridge University Press, 1893), p. 50; Syriac on p. 25. Aristides’ *Apology* was written mid-second century.

⁶⁶ For text and discussion, including a summary of the Jeremias–Aland debate on this text, see Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, p. 363.

⁶⁷ Delivered c. 350s.

could hear, understand, and participate in the ceremonies. Nevertheless, this specific text is too brief to know if Cyril is referring to unbaptised children born to Christian parents. What is clear is that at least some mature Christians in the congregation were to teach those being catechised.

Finally, we have John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 12.14, speaking against the pagan practice of smearing mud on a baby's head to protect it from evil.

For how, I want to know, can he bring it to the hands of the priest? *How canst thou require that on that forehead the seal should be placed by the hand of the presbyter, where thou hast been smearing the mud?* Nay, my brethren, do not these things, but *from earliest life encompass them with spiritual armor and instruct them to seal the forehead with the hand and before they are able to do this with their own hand, do you imprint upon them the Cross.*

There is no mention of infant baptism, but rather of the signing of the cross (which Jerome also mentions; see above). However, doubt remains as to the exact referent of Chrysostom's words here. What is clear is that the parents are instructed to 'encompass' their children with 'spiritual armour' and to 'instruct them' to sign themselves with the cross. Thus, if this were a reference to infant dedication, then part of the subsequent period in the infant's life would be intentional discipleship at home.

According to Everett Ferguson, there are very few clear passages — perhaps only three or four — in the entire Chrysostom corpus that refer to 'infant baptism', and in these passages, it is not certain if he is referring to infant baptism, toddler baptism, believer's baptism (of young children), or emergency baptism.⁶⁸ In fact, there does not appear to be a clear reason to exclude a non-paedobaptist reading of Chrysostom's baptismal theology and practice. Two arguments may be mentioned. First, although only a presbyter at the time, Chrysostom preached through 1 Corinthians in Constantinople from about 392 to 393,⁶⁹ just over a decade after Gregory of Nazianzus had delivered his

⁶⁸ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, pp. 544–545; Wright, 'Infant Dedication', p. 358. The passages are *Hom. on Gen.* 40.4; *Hom. Acts* 23.3; *Hom. Eph* 8.5; *Bapt. Catech.* 3.5–6.

⁶⁹ Wendy Mayer, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom: Provenance: Reshaping the Foundations* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2005), pp. 181–182.

Oration 40 from the same city, at which time Gregory voiced his preference for toddler and emergency baptism. Would he have contradicted his predecessor? Second, it should be remembered that Chrysostom himself, although born to Christian parents, was not baptised until he was nearly twenty years old, and thus it would be natural for him to have preached to others what he himself experienced growing up.

Examples of ‘Special’ Infant Dedication

In addition to the phenomenon of ‘normal’ infant dedication, the early church also knew of ‘special’ infant dedication, in which parents dedicated their children to be clergy or lifelong virgins. Unfortunately, in many cases we are uncertain if the dedication was accompanied by baptism,⁷⁰ but in at least one case it is clear that it was not:

Anyone who has vowed himself to the service of the church from his infancy must be baptised before the years of puberty and join the ministry of the lectors. (Siricius, Ep. 1.9.13)⁷¹

Siricius, bishop of Rome, is writing this letter to Himerius, bishop of Tarragona (Spain). Thus, this phenomenon — unbaptised infants born in the church who were dedicated to service in the church from infancy — was present in Tarragona, and it is notable that the bishop of Rome did not oppose it, nor even voice any surprise at its existence. Rather, he speaks of it as if he knew what it was, and as if he approved this practice.⁷² The fact that this letter was written in the late fourth century makes Rome’s approval more probable, since the fourth century was, by all accounts, the time when non-paedobaptist practice was most widespread in Christendom.

Summary

If we only take into account the certain examples of infant dedication from the early third to the early fifth centuries, at least eight different

⁷⁰ Cf. Ambrose, *Exhortation to Virginity* 6.30; Jerome, *Ep.* 24.2; 107.3, 6; 128.2; Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 1. For discussion of these and other texts, see Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, pp. 366–72.

⁷¹ Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, pp. 374–375. Written in 385.

⁷² Wright states, ‘This glimpse of infant vows to enter the church’s clerical hierarchy [...] powerfully confirms how unfamiliar infant baptism must have been at this time in the church at Rome’ (‘Infant Dedication’, p. 375).

church fathers — Tertullian, Rufinus (speaking of the practice at Alexandria and of Ambrose), Gregory of Nazianzus (speaking of himself and Basil of Caesarea), Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Cyril of Alexandria — speak of some form of infant dedication and/or enrolment into the catechumenate.⁷³ In addition, these examples come from all around the Roman Empire: Carthage, Trier, Constantinople, Caesarea, Milan, Stridon, Tagaste, and Alexandria.⁷⁴ Finally, although the phenomenon is most strongly attested to in the fourth century, its presence in Tertullian (early third century) and Athanasius (very early fourth century) firmly places it in the third century, and Cyril of Alexandria's preaching carries it into the early fifth century.⁷⁵

The evidence for infant dedication increases when we take into account the uncertain and 'special' examples. If Aristides did refer to infant dedication, then it would be the earliest documented evidence we have of the phenomenon, pushing its presence back into the mid-second century. The other uncertain examples could expand the presence of the practice to Jerusalem (Cyril of Jerusalem). The 'special' infant dedication testimony reinforces the presence of the phenomenon, although apparently different to the normal dedication and subsequent enrolment into the catechumenate, and would extend the practice to Tarragona and maybe Rome (Siricius). The uncertain and 'special' examples do not offer further information regarding subsequent enrolment into the catechumenate, but in light of the documented examples, neither would it be unreasonable to suppose that it happened.

⁷³ Again, of the original eight doctors of the church, five are connected with infant dedication and/or enrolment into the catechumenate. What is more, of the three eastern hierarchs — Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom — at least two preached non-paedobaptism while they were bishops (and perhaps all three, depending on how one understands John Chrysostom's testimony).

⁷⁴ To be added to this list are the childhood places of Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea.

⁷⁵ The *Didache*, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria attest to some form of the catechumenate in the late first to early third centuries in Syria, Rome, and Alexandria, respectively (for Justin and Clement, see Annewies van den Hoek, 'The "Catechetical" School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic Heritage', *Harvard Theological Review*, 90, no 1 (1997), 59–87). If toddler and/or believer's baptism were being practised in these places (and the first two are 'strangely' silent on infant baptism), then these would be even earlier examples of the phenomenon.

Several scholars agree that infant dedication followed by enrolment into the catechumenate was common in the early church. J. N. D. Kelly, writing on John Chrysostom but also broadening it to include others, comments that ‘while a two-year catechumenate was normally required of converts from paganism, the children of Christian parents were treated as catechumens from birth’.⁷⁶ Similarly, David Wright observes, ‘During most of the fourth century, if not longer, most children of Christian parents would have shared Augustine’s experience of infant dedication as catechumens with no parental intention of baptism while they remained under parental responsibility.’⁷⁷ Speaking of the time period 350–420, Michel Dujarier affirms that ‘it was customary for parents to present their children to the priest so they could become catechumens’.⁷⁸ Finally, after citing evidence from Jerome, Siricius, Basil of Caesarea, and Augustine that parents enrolled their children as catechumens, Everett Ferguson states, ‘This may have been the norm.’⁷⁹

Before finishing this section, it would be instructive to ask the question, At what age would such people have completed the catechumenate and been baptised? This can be answered from two perspectives: phenomenologically and in terms of the pastoral ideal. If we answer the question from a phenomenological perspective — excluding emergency baptisms — it is interesting to note how many people were baptised during the decade-and-a-half or so between their late teenage years and their early thirties:⁸⁰ Ephraem the Syrian was probably a young man; Gregory of Nazianzus was thirty; Basil of Caesarea was twenty-seven; Gregory of Nyssa was somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-eight; Ambrose was thirty-four; Rufinus of Aquileia was about twenty-four or twenty-five; John Chrysostom was approaching twenty; Jerome was nineteen; and Augustine was thirty-

⁷⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, p. 17.

⁷⁷ Wright, ‘Infant Dedication’, p. 355.

⁷⁸ Dujarier, *History of the Catechumenate*, p. 92.

⁷⁹ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 628.

⁸⁰ Daniélou and Marrou note the convergence of fourth-century baptisms of influential Christians ‘often about the age of thirty’ (*The First Six Hundred Years*, p. 306). Also commenting on fourth-century figures, Wright notes that ‘they range from the late teens (Chrysostom eighteen, perhaps younger) to the mid-thirties (Ambrose thirty-four), with most falling in the twenties’ (‘At What Ages’, p. 393).

three. This age-range may not be coincidental, but could reflect a desire to wait until the youthful passions had passed before getting baptised, or even to be baptised at the same age Jesus was when he was baptised.⁸¹

However, if we answer the question from the pastoral ideal perspective, the answer would be that baptism was conducted sometime during childhood. Tertullian had his doubt about ‘little children’ but is fine with them being baptised if they ‘ask’ for this. Gregory of Nazianzus counselled that children should be baptised around the age of three. The boys in Alexandria were children when Athanasius baptised them, and although irregular, the bishop recognised their baptism as valid. As David Wright has noted, seven years old marked a major milestone in the development — both physical and moral — of the child, and thus made it a fitting age for baptism.⁸² What appears to be most fundamental within this view of baptism is that the individual can understand the basics of the Christian faith and answer for themselves.

Although it goes beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed discussion of the contents of early church catechetical instruction, a brief sketch can be given.⁸³ Based on texts such as the *Didache* and *Apostolic Constitutions*, the earliest stages of the catechumenate — at least as early as the second century — appear to have had a more ethical emphasis, although not without doctrinal instruction too. Later, in the third and fourth centuries, a two-phase catechumenate comprised of ‘hearers’ and ‘seekers’ became the norm, in which the first had more of an ethical emphasis and the second more of a doctrinal one. The first stage could last for several years, and apparently did so in the case of non-baptised children of Christian parents, while the second stage usually lasted only a few months, usually over the period of Lent, but was much more intense: daily lessons,

⁸¹ See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.29–30 (although it is important to note that he preached against this).

⁸² Wright, ‘At What Ages’, p. 392.

⁸³ See Dujarier, *History of the Catechumenate*; Lawrence Folkemer, ‘A Study of the Catechumenate’, *Church History* 15, no. 4 (1946), 286–307; A. Turck, ‘Aux origines du catéchuménat’, *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 48, no. 1 (1964), 20–31. Folkemer notes that ‘the only formal collection of catechetical instructions in existence is that of Cyril of Jerusalem’ (‘A Study of the Catechumenate’, p. 291). Similarly, Wright warns, ‘our sources reveal little of what bishops and their clergy attempted in instruction of children and youth within the ministry of the congregation’ (‘Infant Dedication’, p. 360).

fasting, exorcisms, and so forth. Not much is known of the contents of the first stage of instruction, but on Sunday mornings the catechumens would have participated in the Liturgy of the Word (the reading and preaching of Scripture) before being dismissed before the Liturgy of the Table (the kiss of peace and the Eucharist). As for the second stage, instruction centred on certain key passages from Scripture, doctrinal texts such as the Apostles' and/or Nicene Creed (which they had to memorise), ethical and spiritual discipline texts such as the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.⁸⁴

Infant dedication, enrolment into the catechumenate, and toddler/believer's baptism were well known during the patristic era; infant baptism gradually became the norm in the fifth and sixth centuries, after which it became the universal practice, leading to the virtual disappearance of both the catechumenate and believer's baptism until the Reformation and post-Reformation times.⁸⁵ David Wright's judgement on the matter is compelling: 'Although babies — some babies, especially dying babies — were baptized certainly from about the middle of the second century onwards, there is not too much in common between the baptism of the first four centuries or so — basically, a rite of conversion — and the universalized pedobaptism of the post-Augustinian era.'⁸⁶

Conclusion and Application

The purpose of this article has not been to argue that the universal, or even majority, practice of the early Church was infant dedication, enrolment into the catechumenate, and baptism. My intent, however, was to show that this phenomenon was much more widespread, established, and developed than is usually supposed today: it enjoyed wide geographic distribution, spanned multiple centuries, was preached and practised at several important churches, and claimed the names of

⁸⁴ See *Didache* and the catechetical instructions given by Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan.

⁸⁵ Dujarier, *History of the Catechumenate*, pp. 133–135; Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 857.

⁸⁶ Wright, 'At What Age', p. 394.

some of Christianity's most influential pastors and theologians from the early church period. Additionally, during the fourth century — arguably one of the most formative centuries in all of church history — it appears to have been the majority practice.

While the article's primary focus has been on historical reconstruction, it would be naive to think that such a study would not have current application for those interested in ecumenical dialogue, especially as it relates to appropriating patristic theology and practice for today's church. Toddler and emergency baptism play a minor role in the contemporary discussion, leaving believer's and infant baptism as the two majority positions in the church. These are the two that will be discussed below.

Regarding credobaptists, the most influential ecumenical document written on baptism is the World Council of Churches' Lima statement from 1982 entitled 'Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry' (BEM), and I would like to show how the current study could apply to a credobaptist approach to that document.⁸⁷

First, BEM states, 'While the possibility that infant baptism was also practised in the apostolic age cannot be excluded, baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents' (§11). In light of this study, 'baptism upon personal profession of faith' (and toddler baptism) must also be seen as 'clearly attested' in the early church. This is not to say that it was the majority practice (although it was at some times and in some places), but rather that it was widely practised in the first centuries of the Church.

Second, BEM states that 'wherever possible, mutual recognition should be expressed explicitly by the churches' (§15), which implies the recognition of infant baptism by churches that practise believer's baptism. As this study has shown, authors such as Tertullian and Gregory of Nazianzus, although they preferred toddler or believer's baptism, nevertheless accepted infant baptism, since they never requested that infants be re-baptised at a later age. Thus, the patristic

⁸⁷ World Council of Churches, 'Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry' (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

testimony presented here could be a model for credobaptist churches to follow.

Third, BEM states that churches in the tradition of believer's baptism 'may seek to express more visibly the fact that children are placed under the protection of God's grace' (§16). The example of the Fathers studied here is quite helpful, since it shows how this could be done: an infant dedication of thanksgiving and/or consecration at which time the infant is seen as having been 'conceived', followed by enrolment into the catechumenate (which today might be called Sunday school, baptismal classes, etc.), followed by consistent calls for them to place their faith in Christ, at which time the individual (whatever age they may be) would be 'born again'.⁸⁸

Regarding paedobaptism in the Protestant tradition, it is represented primarily by three historical churches: Anglicanism, Lutheranism, and Reformed. In addition to appealing to Scripture, in the sixteenth century these traditions appealed to a return to the teaching of the patristic church of the first approximately five centuries. They endorsed the Apostles', Nicene-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds, as well as the first four ecumenical councils. They also often supported their theological argument with noteworthy Fathers such as Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Cyril of Alexandria. However, these Creeds, Councils, and Fathers were not uniformly paedobaptist, and during the crucial fourth century, toddler and credobaptism seem to have been the majority practice.

Thus, there seems to be a paradox: one the one hand, these Protestant traditions sought to return to the theology and practice of the early church, yet on the other hand, they excluded an important part of it regarding infant dedication, the catechumenate, and subsequent

⁸⁸ Infant dedication services are not foreign to the credobaptist tradition. For example, see Balthasar Hübmaier, 'Letter to Oecolampadius' (16 Jan, 1525), which can be found in *Balthasar Hübmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. and trans. by H. Wayne Pipkin and John Yoder (Walden, NY: Plough, 2019), pp. 62–72 (especially p. 72); Michael Walker, 'The Relation of Infants to the Church, Baptist and Gospel in Seventeenth Century Baptist Theology', *Baptist Quarterly* 21, no. 6 (1966), 242–262 (p. 250); T. L. Underwood, 'Child Dedication Services among British Baptists in the Seventeenth Century', *Baptist Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1969), 164–169 (and the works cited there).

baptism. Perhaps they did this because the historical sources they had available to them at the time favoured infant baptism, and they relied on theological reasons such as the doctrine of original sin, but in light of the present study, it would seem inconsistent to continue to deny that the pattern of infant dedication was a legitimate patristic practice.⁸⁹

Credobaptists typically have undervalued the historic tradition of the church, and subsequently have invested most of their energies into developing a biblical defence for their position. Whether one ultimately agrees with them or not, it is fair to say that they have developed a coherent, nuanced, Bible-driven defence of their position. Now that credobaptists have begun in earnest to rediscover the patristic evidence in favour of credobaptism, and now that this study has complemented this testimony with evidence in favour of infant dedication and enrolment into the catechumenate, how much longer will these historic Protestant traditions continue to exclude an important part of the patristic tradition?⁹⁰

In summary, if the early church knew of both practices — infant and believer’s baptism — and if they were able to come together and confess ‘one baptism for the forgiveness of sins’ and that they all belonged to the ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church’, why should we Protestants not be able to do the same?

⁸⁹ John Calvin, in responding to his critics’ attacks that Protestant doctrine was novel, wrote, ‘That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man’s impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God’s goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery.’ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), p. 16. Granted, in the case of infant dedication it has not remained unknown due to ‘the fault of man’s impiety’, but there does seem to be a parallel: if it can be demonstrated that the early Church believed or practised something, it should matter to our present situation.

⁹⁰ The recovery of the female diaconate offers an interesting parallel as to how credobaptism might be recovered in today’s churches: just as the female diaconate was present during the Patristic period, vanished during the Middle Ages, Reformation, and Modern periods, and is being recovered in many traditions today, so, too, might it be said that non-paedobaptism was present during the Patristic period, vanished during the Middle Ages, Reformation, and Modern periods, and could be recovered in many traditions today.

