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Tertullian and the Catechumenate: An Inquiry into Tertullian's Justification for the North African Catechumenate in the Early Third Century

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Tertullian and the Catechumenate: An Inquiry into Tertullian's
Justification for the North African Catechumenate in the Early
Title: Third Century

Presented by: Loren Kerns

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

TERTULLIAN AND THE CATECHUMENATE:
AN INQUIRY INTO TERTULLIAN'S JUSTIFICATION
FOR THE NORTH AFRICAN CATECHUMENATE
IN THE EARLY THIRD CENTURY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF MINISTRY
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MASTER OF ARTS, THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

BY
LOREN KERNS

PORTLAND, OREGON

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To Tiffany and Elizabeth, my beloved wife and daughter

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world entirely different from that of the early Fathers. This immediately confronts the reader who encounters them for the first time. Their unfamiliar world may both annoy and intrigue the modern student. The culture in which these men and women lived has long since passed away. The Church that they knew and were devoted to has weathered trials that they could have neither foreseen nor imagined. Indeed, the modern reader does not even share their basic presuppositions about the nature of reality. So much is different, yet they experienced an integrity and wholeness virtually unknown today. The life of academia and Church, liturgical worship and private experience were all one piece. Perhaps it is this unitary vision, unique and whole, that finds its echo in the longings of a civilization that no longer knows how to cope with the very world that it helped create.

The catechumenate, an institution devoted to the preparation of new converts for baptism and its attendant obligations, provides a great example of the holistic feel of the early Church. Its origins are almost entirely unknown. When it finally does appear, it does so as a fully developed institution, completely integrated into of the life of the Church. It seemingly formed spontaneously out of the matrix of mission, conversion, discipleship, baptisms, theological tug-of-war, heresy, excommunications and Roman-Greco culture. When we ask why this institution came into existence, the Fathers are almost entirely silent. Its existence is simply accepted without further remark. Their experience is likely similar to our experience of growing up with electricity, automobiles and television. We seldom ask why they exist; we simply accept them as a part of the

fabric of modern life. They constituted a part of the implicit assumptions of our perception of reality. Similarly, the catechumenate depended on a particular vision of conversion that was deeply rooted in the wider patristic experience of baptism, repentance, and the Church, much of which remained theologically implicit. Tracing its roots will take the student into almost every branch of the life of the early Church. In summary, the ancient catechumenate confronts the modern student as an integrated part of a larger whole.

Tertullian is yet another example of the organic union of theologian, practical concerns of the laity, and worship of God. A fighter, utterly sincere and unrelentingly zealous, he is one of the first Fathers to write in Latin as well as one of its greater practitioners. The questions and issues that he and his colleagues faced every day gave way to a wide range of reflections and polemics. They included homilies meant for theological and moral formation, treatises addressing hotly debated questions within the Church and tracts attacking and exposing the heresy of the Church's chief foes. All came from the pen of the same man. Although, Tertullian could play the academic, he was never far removed from the sinew of routine life in the Church that he loved and lamented. When a person reads Tertullian, he not only encounters the man himself, but also the Church that stands behind him. His "imbeddedness" is such that one cannot easily discern where "Tertullian" leaves off and where the non-Tertullian characteristics of North African Christianity pick up. The two pieces almost meld into one. Once again, the underlying integrity that characterizes the early Church comes to the fore.

This paper will seek to enter the world of the Fathers, through the person of Tertullian. Specifically, it will seek to explore the catechumenate and its relation to the

life of the early Church, out of which it was formed and preserved. The underlying assumptions that informed the perpetuation of the catechumenate will be ferreted out in order to discern why it existed at all. In mapping out the foundation of the catechumenate, we will better grasp the overarching vision that created it.

Historical Research Concerning the Catechumenate

The catechumenate has received increasing attention in the last few decades. Some of the renewed interest resulted from the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in 1972 by the Roman Catholic Church. In part, it comes as an extension of the liturgical renewal begun over a century ago. A segment of it stems from a desire spark a renewal in Protestant denominations that find themselves increasingly irrelevant. Finally, the general resurgence of interest in Patristics characterizing the last decades of this century has contributed to the renewal in interest in the catechumenate.

Several anthologies of the ancient catechumenate are now available, including editions by Thomas Finn, E.C. Whitaker and Edward J. Yarnold.¹ Others have sought to reconstruct the liturgical structure of the rite, giving particular attention to the liturgical

¹ Thomas Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: North Africa, Italy and Egypt*, in *Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1992); Idem., *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: East and West Syria*, in *Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 5 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1992); E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1970); and Edward Yarnold, *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2d ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1994).

practices surrounding baptism.² William Harmless's recent investigation of the catechumenate under Augustine's pastorate represents a new direction in catechumenate studies, by paying particular attention to the pedagogical principles that the North African luminary employed.³ Michel Dujarier's a historical survey of the ancient catechumenate, produced several decades ago, is one of the earliest available in English. This work tends to minimize the diversity in practice, structure and theology that existed between particular localities in the early church.⁴ More recently Robert M. Grant sketched a brief history of the catechumenate up to the fourth century, but it less comprehensive than Dujarier's study.⁵ Various other fine foreign works have been produced, but are excluded because of the language barrier. Nevertheless, William Harmless points out that "there is nothing like a general critical history of the ancient catechumenate"⁶ written to date.

² Michel Dujarier, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Historical and Pastoral Reflections*, ed. and translated by Kevin Hart (New York: Sadlier, 1979); Cheslyn Jones, et al., *The Study of Liturgy*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); A. Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978); H. Riley, *Christian Initiation: A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of the Baptismal liturgy in the Mystagogical Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan*, in *The Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity*, ed. Johannes Quasten, 17 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1974); Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1997).

³ William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1995).

⁴ Michael Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, translated by Edward J. Haasl (New York: Sadlier, 1979).

⁵ Murphy Center for Liturgical Research, *Made, not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976).

⁶ Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 27.

Study of the catechumenate has centered primarily on the great fourth century figures, such as Augustine, Ambrose, Chrysostom and Cyril of Jerusalem. This has been the situation for several reasons. First, information about the Church after Constantine is more readily available. Second, we have more resources available to study the catechumenate during this period; mystagogical homilies abound, patristic homilies containing exhortations to the catechumens multiply, and liturgical handbooks appear. Finally, the fourth century was a theological golden age, boasting luminous ecclesiastical figures such as Augustine, Gregory Nazianzus or Chrysostom. On the other hand, third century Fathers, such as Tertullian and Origen, are less appealing. Sometimes, their orthodoxy is suspect, as with Origen. At other times, their position in the rosters of the Church is questioned, as with Tertullian. Whatever the reason may be, Tertullian has received less attention than many of those subsequent to him.

Michel Dujarier, Maxwell Johnson, Thomas Finn, and William Harmless do discuss Christian initiation and the catechumenate in third century North Africa. Of these four, Harmless only treats Tertullian by way of introduction. Dujarier, Finn, and Maxwell only address Tertullian as part of general presentations.⁷ Several translations of his treatises contain brief discussions of the catechumenate within their introductions and

⁷ Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*; Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999); Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: North Africa, Italy and*; Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*.

commentaries.⁸ To date, however, there has been no extended study of Tertullian in relation to the catechumenate.

One area of study in relation to the catechumenate that has not received sustained attention has been the theological and pastoral justifications for the catechumenate. Michel Dujarier addressed the question briefly, but he did not seek to relate the catechumenate to the general context in which the catechumenate was born and thrived. Other authors only speak to it in passing. No one has sought to place the catechumenate into the context of the specific theological perspective of its practitioners. For example, although Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, and Cyril of Jerusalem all knew of the catechumenate and had some part to play in the institution, each would have interpreted it from his distinct theological and pastoral outlook. So, the catechumenate likely received distinctive theological and pastoral emphasis in fathers as different as Augustine and Origen. An anthropology that construes human nature positively will view the catechumenate in a different light than one that does not. Likewise, a church that thrives in a hostile climate will emphasize different concerns than a church that does not. In other words, both Origen and Augustine received and participated in the catechumenate, but both may have justified its existence for different reasons and used it for divergent ends.

⁸ *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, ed. with introduction, translation, and commentary by Ernest Evens (London: SPCK, 1964); *Tertullian's Treatises Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism*, translated by A. Souter (London: SPCK, 1919.); *Treatises on Penance: On Penitence and On Purity*, no. 28, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, translated and annotated by William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman, 1959).

This study will look at the catechumenate in relation to Tertullian. He received the institution and interpreted its significance in the light of his own particular theological perspectives. This investigation will seek to discern the reasons for the existence of the catechumenate within the setting of the third century North African. It will focus specifically on the theological foundations that justified the existence of the catechumenate and the pastoral concerns that necessitated a sustained and intentional process for conversion and spiritual formation. Thus, the question that will be continually asked is “why?” As Michel Dujarier pointed out, a reading of the Acts of the Apostles will raise “a perennial objection.” “If the Christians of Pentecost and the Ethiopian eunuch were baptized so quickly, why should one want to be so exigent today?”⁹ In other words, if Christians were baptized so quickly in the apostolic era, *why* did the Christians in third century North Africa believe that it was important for converts to wait? This question will provide the controlling probe for the entire study. The question may be broken into two categories.

First, there are the theological questions. Although Tertullian was not a systematic theologian, he did have certain theological assumptions under which he (and to a degree the North African Church) operated. Thus, he had certain views concerning baptism, conversion, repentance, and the relation of the Church to culture that might be used to justify a catechumenate. What is the relation of the catechumenate to baptism? What does baptism mean? What is its relation to repentance? What does repentance mean? So, we will seek to lay bare those answers.

⁹ Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, 14-18.

Second, there are pastoral questions. The Church into which Tertullian was initiated and in which Tertullian served did not exist in a vacuum. There were other religions, heretical groups, cultural influences and public opinions with which the Church had to contend. Some things were considered harmless, others were deemed dangerous or unlawful. Given Tertullian's theological assumptions, certain pastoral practices were deemed necessary in response. If, for example, baptism was given once for the forgiveness of sins, and only one post-baptismal repentance was available, then the way catechumens lived before baptism gained importance. What pagan activities should catechumens forsake? How should they be prepared for baptism? What sort of dispositions should be displayed? What about those who are not progressing, what should be done with them? And the list could go on. Thus, we will note some of Tertullian's pastoral concerns in his addresses to the catechumens that offer pragmatic reasons for a catechumenate.

In conclusion, the answer to the thesis question, why did the Christians in third century North Africa believe that it was important for converts to wait, comes in several parts. This paper will seek to demonstrate that from Tertullian's viewpoint, the existence of the catechumenate was justified on the basis of a matrix of theological and pastoral concerns. First, his theological understanding of baptism as a bilateral covenant between God and humanity, and his view of repentance as necessary in order for baptism to be efficacious, required pre-baptismal preparation. Second, the implicit pastoral concerns arising out of a desire to ensure genuine repentance prompted Tertullian to counsel deferring baptism. Third, the post-baptismal commitments implied by his theology of baptism resulted in a desire to postpone baptism for the catechumens until they were

ready to live it out. Finally, the urgent and zealous flavor of his pastoral concerns for the catechumens were deeply shaped by the hostile environment facing North African Christians, bolstering a call to greater commitment.

Methodological Considerations

This study examines the catechumenate as it relates to the thought and practice of Tertullian. Several parameters have been fixed from the outset. These parameters may be grouped into two categories. Those considerations that arise out of the life of Tertullian himself—the chronology of his literary activity, his defection to the New Prophecy movement and his theological development—constitute the first set. The unavailability of literature contemporary to Tertullian, the resources utilized for this study, and the philosophical presuppositions adopted by the author compose the second group. We will look at each in turn.

Tertullian

We can only sketch the broad outlines of Tertullian's. Few other ecclesiastical writers mentioned him by name. Those who did quote him seldom acknowledged it. Jerome, Augustine and 'Praedestinatus' are the only Fathers who discuss his life, but Barnes has decisively discounted their witness. As a result, historians must determine his biography from his own literary activity, though he seldom shared autobiographical details.

Tertullian was active in Carthage, North Africa (near modern Tunis) from approximately 170 to 220. He wrote in both Greek and Latin, was well versed in Juvenal

and Cicero, and was familiar with Tacitus. He was raised in literary circles, probably those of Carthage.¹⁰ At some point in life, before marrying, he converted to Christianity. He first emerges as perhaps a lay catechist who defends Catholic doctrine against heretical accusations, the Christian Church against unjust treatment by pagan rulers, and exhorts his co-religionists to greater zeal and purity.¹¹ In writing style, he was dramatic and direct, gifted but uncontrolled, and thoroughly driven by passion. His outlook was generally “Roman”—realistic, practical, non-speculative, juristic, passionate and disciplined.¹² Somewhere in the middle of his career, he broke with the Catholic faction and aligned himself with the New Prophecy movement in Carthage that had accepted the new revelation of Montanus, Prisca and Maximilla.¹³ Finally, he disappears again into obscurity bitterly attacking the Catholic faction for rejecting the Spirit and religious laxity.

¹⁰ Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles: Christianity in the Second Century* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1994), 188.

¹¹ David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38-40.

¹² Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church*, translated by Manfred Hoffman (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964), 5-6.

¹³ Older scholarship generally believed that Tertullian completely broke with the Catholic Church, joined the Montanist Sect, and finally broke with them to form his own Sect, known as the “Tertullianists.” More recently scholars have questioned this. Rankin suggests that Tertullian never left the Church, but joined an “ecclesiala in ecclesia.” Bray asserted that Tertullian never even joined the New Prophecy movement at all, but instead saw them as “fellow spiritalis, whose thirst for holiness and concern for discipline equaled his own... Apart from that he was not interested.” Gerald Lewis Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian in New Foundations Theological Library* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 62; Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 31.

The chronology of Tertullian's writings has been a source of great debate among scholars and proposals for ordering his writings range widely. The criteria generally used for determining the chronological order of his writings include doctrinal development, stylistic variation, disciplinary rigor, attitudes towards the Catholic church and the New Prophecy movement, historical allusions and references to other writings.¹⁴ Of the many attempts to construct a reasonable order of his writings, those by Fredouille and Barnes offer the best starting points.¹⁵

Fredouille insists on dividing Tertullian's works following three distinct periods in his life: his Catholic period (197-206), the time when he was under the influence of Montanism (207-12), and the time following his rupture with the Catholic faction (213-). Barnes tends to discount the second period and places the rupture a bit earlier (208 or later). The dating of four of his writings vary widely between the two scholars: "On Idolatry," "Scorpiace," "On the Pallium," and "On the Flesh of Christ." Fredouille dates all of these works after Tertullian's break with the Catholics, whereas Barnes places them before. Of special importance for this study is "On Idolatry." Barnes places it very early in Tertullian's career, arguing that Tertullian's appeal to the power of the keys¹⁶ is more consistent with Tertullian as a Catholic. For the purposes of this study, the chronological

¹⁴ Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, xiv.

¹⁵ Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: a Historical and Literary Study*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 55; Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, xv-xvii.

¹⁶ Matthew 16:18.

ordering of Barnes will be used, because his theory appears to better account for the evidence in Tertullian's writings.¹⁷

This study will sketch the main lines of justification for the catechumenate from the standpoint of the "Catholic" Tertullian.¹⁸ Although it will refer to ideas espoused in his "New Prophecy" years, it will seek to do so in light of his earlier Catholic convictions. Thus, it will focus primarily on his "Catholic" treatises. Coincidentally, all of the treatises pertinent to the question of the catechumenate occur within his "Catholic" years.

Tertullian's thought shifted after he came under the influence of the New Prophecy movement. Doctrinally, Tertullian's theology remained relatively orthodox. Indeed, Tertullian rescued the North African church from the Monarchian heresy while he was a

¹⁷ Barnes places Tertullian's works in the following order: *before 206/207*—"Spectacles," "On Idolatry," "The Apparel of Women II," "Ad Nationes," "An answer to the Jews," "To the Martyrs," "Apology," "The Testimony of the Soul," "On Baptism," "Prayer," "On Penitence," "Patience," "To His Wife," "The Prescription Against Heretics," "Scorpiace," "Against Hermogenes," "On the Pallium," "The Apparel of Women I," "On the Flesh of Christ," "Against the Valentinians," "On the Soul," "On the Resurrection of the Flesh"—*after 208*—"Against Marcion," "The Chaplet," "An Exhortation to Chastity," "Flight in Time of Persecution," "On the Veiling of Virgins," "Against Praxeas," "Monogamy," "On Fasting," "On Purity," "To Scapula." Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, 55.

¹⁸ The key treatises for the study of the catechumenate in Tertullian include "Spectacles," "On Idolatry," "The Apparel of Women II," "On Baptism," "Prayer," "On Penitence," "Patience" and "The Prescription Against Heretics." Tertullian directly addressed the catechumens in "Spectacles," "On Baptism," "Prayer," "On Penitence" and "Patience," offering obvious evidence for study, and in "The Prescription Against Heretics" he made some valuable observations about the catechumens of both the orthodox and heretical Christian communities. Finally, Tertullian mentioned the catechumens in "The Chaplet," a Montanist document, but his comments here add little additional information to what can be ascertained from his "Catholic" treatises.

Montanist.¹⁹ Nonetheless, one may discern a change in his ecclesiology. In both periods, Tertullian saw the true Church as a historical, empirical reality, which is authenticated, at least in part, in this present age. In both periods, Tertullian considered the Catholic Church to be “apostolic.” The shift occurs in how apostolicity is to be demonstrated. As a Catholic, he pointed to conformity to apostolic doctrine and apostolic succession. As a Montanist, he continued to accept these criteria, but added one more—the witness of the Spirit in power.²⁰ The greatest shift takes place in the area of ethical discipline.²¹ After joining the New Prophecy, Tertullian rejected second marriage (after a spouse had passed away) as nothing more than legal fornication and advocated exclusion from the fellowship of the Church for all who married a second time. He advocated more frequent fasting, prolongation of Station days,²² xerophagies²³ and abstaining from bathing when fasting.²⁴ Further, he no longer condoned virgins remaining unveiled in the Church, a matter he once left to one’s own discretion. Finally, he became a strong advocate of

¹⁹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, 142.

²⁰ Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 77-78, 98-103

²¹ Francine Cardman, “Tertullian on Doctrine and the Development of Discipline,” *Studia Patristica*, Vol. 16, pt. 2, (1985), 138-141.

²² Every Wednesday and Friday were Station days. The Church set these days aside as times for corporate fasting and prayer. The fast usually ended with the reception of the Eucharist late in the afternoon.

²³ Xerophagy is the eating of dry food.

²⁴ Tertullian, *On Fasting*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, translated by S. Thelwall, (New York: Scribner’s, 1902), Chapters 1, 9. Every footnote entry with Tertullian as author will identify chapter numbers rather than page numbers. For the sake of brevity, the term “chapter” will be omitted hereafter.

ecstatic experiences, especially prophetic visions, as offering clear, definitive guide for Christian behavior. He believed that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church into greater moral discipline through authoritative prophetic utterance.²⁵ Right discipline became a sign of the true Church.

The main lines of his theological and pastoral concerns that I will focus on in this study remain unaffected by his shift in allegiance. In general, his theology of baptism did not change. Even if his ecclesiology expanded to include prophecy as a pillar of the Church, the essential meaning of initiation was the same. His theology of repentance shifted, especially with regard to the question of readmitting one of the faithful into the visible Church following excommunication. As a Catholic, Tertullian argued that any sinner could be readmitted into the Church after due repentance. Under the influence of the New Prophecy, he began to distinguish between sins forgivable by the Church (venial sin) and sins forgivable only by God (grave sin). Grave sinners had to remain outside of the Church for the rest of their lives. Notwithstanding this change, his basic theological outlook concerning *repentant pagans* remained the same. Baptism was available to any and all that repented. He held this view as a Catholic and continued to do so after his break with the church.²⁶ Lastly, Tertullian always advocated moral purity and zeal for Christ. As a Montanist, however, he became not more rigorous, because he was always rigorous, but more narrow and uncompromising in his moral, disciplinary and devotional

²⁵ Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 29-38, 41-50.

²⁶ Tertullian, *On Purity*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 28, *Tertullian: Treatises on Penance*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, translated by William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman, 1959), 9-10.

position. Thus, though he allowed for flight during a time of persecution as a Catholic, he refused it as a Montanist. Yet, even as a Catholic, he had preferred and advocated staying and undergoing martyrdom.²⁷ A similar tendency to *narrow* his moral outlook marks his pastoral counsel in other areas as well. Thus, although Tertullian's counsel to catechumens may have become narrower, the basic direction of his rigor remained largely the same as that which he espoused as a Catholic.

Limitations of This Project

This study faces several obstacles. First, little literature is available to corroborate claims Tertullian made regarding the catechumenate. For most details, Tertullian is our only witness to the catechumenate in North Africa at the turn of the third century. Without solid corroborative sources, we will never be able to distinguish with certainty between what actually *existed* and what Tertullian believed *ought* to exist. We do have a couple of surviving contemporary works: the "Octavius" of Minicius Felix and "The Martyrdom of Perpetua."²⁸ On the one hand, the "Octavius" offers little insight into the catechumenate in North Africa. "The Martyrdom of Perpetua," on the other hand,

²⁷ Tertullian, *To His Wife*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 13, *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, translated by William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman, 1951), I. 3.

²⁸ Minicius Felix, *Octavius*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 10, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minicius Felix: Octavius*, translated by Rudolph Arbesmann (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950. Reprint, 1977); See also *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*, in *Visionary Women*, introduction and commentary by Sara Maitland, translated by W. H. Shewring (Evesham, Worchestershire: Arthur James, 1996).

mentioned several catechumens.²⁹ This document portrays the relation of the Church to the catechumens, how they were established in their faith, and how they endured when faced with martyrdom. Unfortunately, it tells us nothing about the catechumenate itself or its justification.

Perhaps the best available work contemporary to Tertullian, but not of North African provenance, is the “The Apostolic Tradition” of Hippolytus of Rome.³⁰ This work may have some complementary value, but differences in locality, Hippolytus’ own standing as a schismatic in Rome and the myriad of textual uncertainties make it difficult to rely heavily upon him for help. Further, it is not known how closely the traditions of initiation between Rome and Carthage paralleled one another. For example, Tertullian argued that a baptism performed by heretics was not considered valid. Cyprian argued this again a few decades later with the Roman bishop, Stephen. In contrast, citing tradition in his defense, Stephan accepted the baptism of heretics, provided it was accomplished using the Trinitarian formula.³¹ Such differences militate against the assumption that both traditions were similar simply because of the relative proximity of Rome to Carthage.

Several North African witnesses following the time of Tertullian exist. They also are only of secondary value. Perhaps the best witness to confirm Tertullian’s statements is of Cyprian of Carthage, who wrote 30 or 40 years later. Many of his works survive and he

²⁹ *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*, 2.

³⁰ St. Hippolytus of Rome, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, ed. Gregory Dix, corrections, preface, and bibliography by Henry Chadwick, 2d ed. (London: Alban, 1968. Reprint, 1992).

does address or mention baptism and the catechumenate. Regardless, over the intervening years, theology and liturgical practices could have changed. The question of continuity and discontinuity lurks ever in the background, leading to uncertainty regarding how to treat Cyprian's confirmation of Tertullian or lack thereof. For example, what may appear to be a difference between Cyprian and Tertullian, if we take both accounts at face value, may be an innovation in the generation following Tertullian, or it may be an idiosyncrasy of either Tertullian or Cyprian. The same concerns associated with Cyprian may be said for recently discovered archeological findings and inscriptions. These are also dated later than the time of Tertullian.

A second limitation is the philosophical question of how to approach the study of the catechumenate in North Africa in relation to other regions throughout the empire such as Rome, Asia Minor, or Syria. Traditionally, historians tended to "universalize" the unique elements found in a certain locality or writer. Recent scholarship is forcing a reconsideration of this approach.³² Instead, *regional pluralism* is becoming the dominant assumption. No longer do historians try to find one archetypal baptismal liturgy or one common source for the structure and implementation of the catechumenate. Rather, it appears that local and regional standardization came about in the fourth century.³³ Thus,

³¹ Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 92-93; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 15.

³² Georg Kretschmar, "Recent Research on Christian Initiation," *Societas Liturgica* 12 (1977): 93.

³³ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 161-84.

for this study, I will make no effort to connect my conclusions to other localities or to suggest that the conclusions that I draw from Tertullian extend beyond Carthage.

Third, I assume that Tertullian represented the catechumenate as it really was rather than how he wished it to be. Undue questioning of the author's motives, unless the author himself gives the wary reader reason to doubt the truth of his claims, would not only bring this project to a halt, but also would be unjust. Communication in general depends on the assumption of truthfulness. If that is lost, we may as well cease to speak. Thus, this study assumes that Tertullian is innocent of the charge of duplicity unless there is significant evidence to cast a reasonable doubt.

Finally, English constitutes another significant boundary for this study. All of the works consulted for this project, both primary and secondary, are written in English. Tertullian wrote in Latin and much of the scholarly labor on Tertullian or the catechumenate has been done in German and French. An examination of these writings extends beyond the scope of this project.

The Catechumenate as Tertullian Viewed It

Before examining the theological and pastoral justifications for the catechumenate in Tertullian, this study will briefly describe the catechumenate, as he knew it. Tertullian offered glimpses of the catechumenate in the course of his writings, though he assumed that the reader was already familiar with most of the details. To these glimpses we will now turn.

Tertullian assumed that the pagans heard the gospel for the first time outside of the catechumenate. Although Tertullian's writings are unclear about all of the means that the

North African Church used to evangelize their homeland, he did furnish us a couple examples. A pagan watched the valiant death of the Christian martyrs. Moved by their witness, he sought out other Christians to discover the reason for their courage.

Sometimes, the transformation following the conversion of a spouse compelled the other spouse to become a “seeker after God.”³⁴ A Christian shared her faith with a pagan acquaintance and gained her interest. A son or daughter, father or mother converted and caught the attention of the rest of the family. Whatever the motive, the pagan, upon becoming interested in learning more about the Christian faith, was designated a “seeker.”

The “seeker” inquired about the faith for an interval of time and finally came to the conviction that he desired to convert to the Christian faith. He believed that the Christian God is the True God, her conscience was transfixed by the threat of God’s wrath and he turned to God in repentance. Entry into the catechumenate was closely linked to this initial conversion. Tertullian described those who had recently entered the catechumenate to be “like puppies newly born,” which “creep about uncertainly, with eyes as yet unopened. They say, indeed, that they renounce the past, and do begin to do penance”³⁵ Tertullian’s analogy of the catechumens to newborn puppies suggests that some sort of conversion had already taken place. Further, his description of them as ones who have

³⁴ Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 40, *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, translated by Edwin A. Quain (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959. Reprint, 1977), II.7.

³⁵ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, in *Ancient Christian Writers, Tertullian: Treatises on Penance*, no. 28, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, translated by William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman, 1959), 6.

“renounced the past” suggests an official rite of entry into the catechumenate. There the young convert made her intention public and committed to begin to make good her initial confession of faith by renouncing the past and doing penance. This “renouncing of the past” and “doing penance” was likely embraced in the form of a public promise since Tertullian pointed out that *they say* that they renounce the past. In summary, upon conversion, the seeker made known her desire to enroll in the catechumenate and was enlisted through a rite that included both an initial confession of faith as well as a promise to renounce the past and to begin do penance.

Once the “seeker” enlisted in the catechumenate and became a “catechumen,” he was counseled to forsake many of the activities that he had grown accustomed to as a pagan. He was asked to forsake participating in all pagan religious activities, ranging from frequenting a local temple dedicated to a deity to participating in the festivals that celebrated various parts of pagan religion. Further, he was exhorted not to attend the spectacles, which included the games, the theater, the gladiator shows and the circus. He was required to give up his vocation if he trafficked in pagan idolatry. Many of these expectations were clearly laid out prior to entry and were included under the initial renunciation. Other expectations became clear in the course of their participation in the catechumenate, which lasted months or years.

At the same time, the new recruit was confronted with an entirely new way of life that he was expected to learn to live. He was assigned a “sponsor” to guide and to help

monitor her progress.³⁶ He was taught the tenets of a new creed. He encountered strange religious customs and traditions that he needed to assimilate, such as signing the cross on her forehead. He was taught how to fast and pray, especially using the Lord's prayer. He joined the "faithful" in attending Mass, where he heard scripture read to the congregation and homilies preached. Although Tertullian only hinted at this, it is likely that the catechumen was dismissed prior to the celebration of the Eucharist during Mass.³⁷ Catechumens were not allowed to receive the Eucharist prior to baptism.³⁸ Occasionally, one of the faithful requested that he accompany them in visiting the sick, the imprisoned, or the needy. Finally, even her apparel came under scrutiny.

Eventually, the catechumen grew in faith, solidified his repentance and became established in his new life. Once appropriately prepared, he requested to be baptized. Tertullian did not disclose who received the request, whether it was a catechist, priest, or the bishop. If those who oversaw the affair felt that he was ready for baptism, he endured a short period of intensive preparation for the sacrament of grace. As part of the

³⁶ Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles*, 196. Although Wagner believes that the "sponsors" were assigned to all of the baptismal candidates, it is unclear, judging from Tertullian's "On Baptism," whether this was the case. "Sponsors" may have been assigned only to infants who answered the baptismal promises on behalf of the infant and were responsible to insure the child was appropriately molded in the Christian faith. See, Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18.

³⁷ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, translated by Peter Holmes (New York: Scribner's, 1903), 41, 43.

³⁸ Tertullian, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, ed., translation, and commentary by Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1964), 20.

preparation, he was asked to “pray, with frequent prayers, fastings, bendings of the knee, and all-night vigils, along with confession of all [his] former sin.”³⁹

An elaborate series of steps constituted baptismal initiation. The journey began with the catechumen officially renouncing “Satan and all his angels and all of his pomp” and pledging allegiance to Christ. Next, the catechumens were conducted to the baptismal font, where the water was “sanctified” with a prayer by one of the leaders, probably the bishop. Each candidate was then baptized three times, accompanied by a slightly expanded version of the Trinitarian formula.⁴⁰ Following immersion, the neophytes were anointed with “blessed unction” and made “christs.” After charismation, the bishop or an officiating presbyter imposed hands on the novice, inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit. The newly-baptized immediately joined the congregation of the faithful to receive the Eucharist for the first time as well as a mixture of milk and honey. Finally, at this special eucharistic assembly, the newborn spread out their hands with their “brethren” in their “mother’s house”⁴¹ and asked their Father that “special grants of grace and apportionments of spiritual gifts” be given to them.⁴²

To conclude, a few remarks concerning the effectiveness of the North African catechumenate are in order. In spite of its rigor, it did not always produce the desired effects. Tertullian complained that many of the catechumens were rather indifferent about

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ This “slightly expanded version of the Trinitarian formula” probably looked similar to what is now known as the Apostle’s Creed.

⁴¹ That is, the Church.

⁴² Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20.

the patterns of sin that still clung to their lives. Indeed, Tertullian expended considerable energy warning the catechumens about the dangers of presumption and exhorting them to quit sinning.⁴³ On other occasions, he indicated that not only certain catechumens, but also some of the faithful continued to participate in the pagan customs considered idolatrous, such as displaying the laurel-wreath or attending the spectacles.⁴⁴ He even mentioned the incident of an idol-maker that had been appointed to an ecclesiastical order.⁴⁵ Additionally, according to Tertullian, a few of the Catholic catechumens and faithful were occasionally lured away by heretical Christian communities such as the Marcionites or the Valentinians.⁴⁶ Finally, a small number became entangled again in serious sin, such as unabashed idolatry, murder, or adultery. Thus, even though the Church strove to be pure, it still had its sinners. No matter how much the newly converted were prepared for the life of the faithful, some were bound to fall through the cracks, and others obstinately choose their own way. No one was exempt. With laxity and corruption occasionally extending to the ranks of the priesthood, the North African catechumenate, for all of its zeal and severity, did not always produce “perfect” result.

⁴³ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

⁴⁴ Tertullian, *De Idololatria (On Idolatry)*, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 1, critical text, translation, and commentary by J.H. Waszink and J. C. M. Van Winden, ed. A.F.J. Klijn, Christine Mohrmann, G. Quispel, J.H. Waszink, J.C.M. Van Winden (New York: E.J. Brill, 1987), 14-15; Tertullian, *Spectacles*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 40, *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, translated by Rudolph Arbesmann (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959. Reprint, 1977), 3.

⁴⁵ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 7.

⁴⁶ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 3; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1.

CHAPTER 2

TERTULLIAN'S THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CATECHUMENATE

The catechumenate held pride of place for preparing new converts for incorporation into the North African Church. Its existence was already well established when Tertullian began his ecclesiastical career and he participated in its perpetuation, exhorting the catechumens in his homilies and mentioning them in his tracts. Yet, he never discussed the catechumenate itself. Apparently, his implicit assumptions concerning the organization of the Church included the catechumenate. Thus, Tertullian's justification for the catechumenate lay embedded in the larger context of his theological outlook.

Two pieces in the puzzle of Tertullian's theological perspective bear special significance for his justification of the catechumenate: his view of baptism, and his view of repentance. Tertullian's soteriological, ecclesiological, and ethical convictions hinged on of baptism. Conversely, baptism was predicated on genuine repentance, denoting the human contribution to the baptismal covenant. The catechumenate addressed the need to ensure that converts truly repented. Similarly, baptism obliged those who received it to live a holy life. The catechumenate responded by preparing the converts to shoulder this burden. Thus, the catechumenate bore both a penitential and probationary character. In order clearly to understand why Tertullian supported the use and continuation of the catechumenate, we must examine his theories of baptism and repentance, and then look at each in relation to the catechumenate.

Baptism

Tertullian's understanding of baptism reflected this double-sided view of redemption. On the one hand, Tertullian emphasized Adam's responsibility for his sin and rebellion against God. God had clearly announced a law that Adam was not to transgress, yet he willfully and voluntarily did so, rebelling against God. As a result, God declared him guilty of sin and cast him out of Paradise. Yet, God does not desire the death of a sinner. He opened the way for repentance, offering reconciliation as its reward. On the other hand, Tertullian emphasized the bondage of humanity. In this view, Adam and Eve were deceived by the Devil in the Garden, who thereby usurped their rightful dominion over the earth. Adam became a victim of the Devil's craftiness and lay imprisoned under his power. Into this situation, Christ came as the Second Adam, rescued humanity from the Devil, broke his power over the imprisoned, and brought them back to safety.⁴⁷ These two views of redemption are fused in Tertullian's view of baptism.

The Covenantal Character of Baptism

For Tertullian, baptism took the form of a bilateral covenant. Christ's victorious overthrow of the Devil paralleled the reception of the sacrament of water. Just as God had descended and rescued a broken and lost humanity, so that same deliverance was mediated to the believer at baptism. Adam's return from willful rebellion, in response to

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem (Against Marcion): I-III*, ed. and translated by Ernest Evens (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), II. 8-10; Tertullian, *Tertullian's Treatise on the*

God's offer of reconciliation, reflected the necessity of repentance as a condition for the efficacy of baptism. Thus, the bilateral makeup of baptism reflected the participation of two parties: God and humanity. On the human side, the baptismal candidate was obligated to repent of past sin and embrace the Christian faith, especially as it was understood in the rule of faith. He was expected to publicly renounce Satan and all of his pomp and to declare allegiance to Christ. On the divine side, God promised to cleanse the candidate of all sin, loose the bonds of death and of the Devil, grant her the new life of the Kingdom of God and bestow the gift of the Holy Spirit. The foundation for the catechumenate lay in his conception of baptism.

The bilateral character of the baptismal covenant is demonstrated by a couple examples. First, on several occasions Tertullian called baptism the "seal of faith."⁴⁸ Waszink pointed out the term 'seal'⁴⁹ is a "juridical term denoting the sealing of a contract, a testament, etc., as a guarantee of authenticity and inviolability."⁵⁰ Thus, from Tertullian's vantage point, faith needed to be sealed by baptism in the same way that a written contract needed to be signed by both parties in order for it to be legitimate. The public renunciation of the Devil, the pledge of allegiance to Christ, and the assent to the

Incarnation, ed. with introduction, translation, and commentary by Ernest Evens (London: SPCK, 1956), 4-5, 10, 12, 17.

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 24.2; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6, 13; Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6; Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 36; Tertullian, *On the Soul*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 10, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minicius Felix: Octavius*, translated by Edwin A. Quain (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950. Reprint, 1977), 41.

⁴⁹ *Obsignare*

⁵⁰ J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. Van Winden, *On Idolatry*, p.213.

“rule of faith” consummated the ‘seal’ from humanity’s side. On the divine side, God fulfilled his promise by delivering the sinner from sin, death, and the Devil in the waters of baptism.

Second, the similarity of the baptismal oath to a military oath pointed to the bilateral character of the baptismal covenant.⁵¹ In contrast to the oath sworn by soldiers in the army, Tertullian wrote, “we were called to service in the army of the living God in the *very moment when we gave response* to the words of the sacramental oath.”⁵² The image of the baptismal candidate making a vow of allegiance similar to a military oath illustrated the human contribution to the sacrament of baptism. It is “in the very moment when we gave response” that the enlistment in to the service of the living God begins. Ratification of the sacrament depended, in part, on the response of the candidate, and, in part, on the faithfulness of God to His promise.

⁵¹ This idea is closely associated with Tertullian’s understanding of the word “sacramentum.” According to Michaelides, in a study of the word, “sacramentum” derives from the ancient Roman practice of litigation. This procedure “provided for an oath and a pledge (or sign) of good faith on the part of litigants. The Christian takes his oath in baptism, pledging faith to God. He acquires thereby a new legal standing with the right to inherit and new responsibilities of fighting in God’s war against the Devil. God, too, has given his signs: prophecies already fulfilled and the rites of baptism and the eucharist.” Thus, the Christian is bound in an oath of allegiance in the “sacramentum.” Robert D. Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian: a Study of Recent Scholarship,” *Second Century*, 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 239-240.

⁵² Tertullian, *The Testimony of the Soul*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 10, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minicius Felix: Octavius*, translated by Rudolph Arbesmann (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950. Reprint, 1977), 3. See also, Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 19.

Baptism as a Means of Grace

If the human contribution to the baptismal covenant was comprehended in repentance, the divine contribution was grasped in the necessity and efficacy of baptism. Baptism was more than a declaration of faith and a pledge of allegiance to Christ, through it God offered grace. In the sacrament, God descended by the Holy Spirit and transferred repentant sinners from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Ultimately, the catechumenate fulfilled its purpose only when it successfully guided converts through the day of their initiation into the Church and into the Kingdom of God.

Baptism was necessary for salvation. Representing Catholic sentiment, Tertullian wrote, “Now there is a standing rule [in the Church] that without baptism no man can obtain salvation.”⁵³ He based this rule primarily on the pronouncement of the Lord, “Except a man be born of water he cannot have life,” and on the Great Commission.⁵⁴ He viewed Jesus’ command that a person must be baptized, as binding for all that wanted to enter the Kingdom. In times past, the patriarchs and matriarchs might have been saved apart from baptism. But now, with the coming and passion of Christ, a “sacrament of faith” has been expanded from the ‘naked faith’ of Abraham to include baptism. Further, this sentiment was reinforced by his conviction concerning the sacramental nature of salvation. Just as the Word became flesh for our redemption, and no salvation could be mediated to us apart from the real, tangible humanity of Jesus, so God continued to use

⁵³ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 12.

⁵⁴ John 3:5; Matthew 28:19; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 12.

the mediation of physical water to bring about the rebirth of sinners.⁵⁵ In like fashion, Tertullian emphasized the unity of the body and the soul, calling the flesh “the hinge of salvation.”⁵⁶ Just as the flesh participated in and carries out the sin that the soul proposed, so the flesh also shared in the healing bestowed on the soul by God; bodily sin required bodily redemption. The underlying principle is that physical, external acts are internally and spiritually efficacious; God uses external means—water, oil, the sign of the cross, the imposition of hands—to effect spiritual changes.⁵⁷ Thus, rejecting the need for water baptism implied a rejection of the incarnation and the holistic, flesh-soul unity of humans.

Baptism conveyed various gifts of grace to the recipient. Tertullian mentioned a number of graces, but four of them stand out. Tertullian summarized the chief benefits of baptism while attacking Marcion. He was critical of Marcion’s inconsistent use of baptism in Marcionite initiation. Marcion believed that the god of Jesus was entirely good, but the creator was the source of evil. Further, he taught that all physical matter was evil. Thus, salvation was a matter of escaping the rule of the creator that bound one to participation in the material world. Given Marcion’s worldview, Tertullian asked:

For to what purpose, in his [Marcion’s good god] sight, is even baptism required? If there is *remission of sins*, how shall one be supposed to remit sins who is supposed not to retain them? He could only retain them by judging them. If there is *loosing of*

⁵⁵ Jack P. Lewis, “Baptismal practices of the 2nd and 3rd century Church,” *Restoration Quarterly*, 26, no. 1 (1983): 2.

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *Tertullian’s Treatise on the Resurrection*, ed., translation, and commentary by Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1960), 8.

⁵⁷ Tertullian, *Tertullian’s Treatise on the Resurrection*, 47; Robert E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian* (London: The Epworth Press, 1924), 149-157.

the bonds of death, how could one let them loose from death who had never kept them in bondage to death? He could only have had them in bondage by having condemned them from the beginning. If there is man's *second birth*, how can one give a second birth who has never given a first birth? The repetition of an act is outside the competence of one who has done no act to begin with. If there is *receiving of the Holy Ghost*, how can one grant the Spirit who has not first supplied a soul?⁵⁸

From Tertullian's standpoint, baptism conveyed the remission of sins, the loosing of the bonds of death, the second birth, and the reception of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹

Tertullian labored to demonstrate the efficacy of baptism. He acknowledged that the cleansing effect of water was not an exclusively Christian idea. The cult of Mithras used a bath for initiation. Also, the pagans ritually purified "their country and town houses, their temples, and whole cities, by carrying water about and sprinkling it."⁶⁰ Further, heretics, such as the Marcionites, employed water as an initiation and purifying agent, and the Jews practiced daily washings.⁶¹ But, Tertullian pointed out that their "waters are barren," because the agent at work was not the True God. Tertullian bluntly concluded, "they cannot have it given them, since they have it not [to give]."⁶²

Notwithstanding pagan, Jewish, and heretical abuses of water in their various ministrations, Tertullian sought to demonstrate the worthiness of water as a means of

⁵⁸ Tertullian, *Against Marcion:I-III*, I. 28 (italics mine).

⁵⁹ Liturgical historians debate whether Tertullian associated the reception of the Spirit with the actual immersion in the bath or if he associated it with the laying on of hands by the bishop. No clear consensus has been determined concerning this question. See Tertullian, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection*, 8; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 6, 8; Tertullian, *Against Marcion:I-III*, I. 28.

⁶⁰ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

grace by pointing out a number of typological associations of water with the works of God in the Old Testament. Water was the resting-place for the Spirit of God in the beginning of creation. “By dividing the waters” and “by gathering the waters,” God accomplished the separation of the heavens and earth from the sea. Further, by “the waters of the Flood...the ancient iniquity was cleansed away,”⁶³ and “by passing through the water” the Israelites escaped the violence of the Egyptian king. To those who doubted that sin could be washed away with a little water, he asked, “is it a marvel that by bathing death is washed away? Because it is a marvel, is that reason for not believing it? Nay rather, it is so much the more to be believed.”⁶⁴ In summary, God uses the foolish and base things of the world to confound the wise and unbelieving; the waters of baptism serve as one example.

The efficacy of baptism was firmly rooted in the birth, baptism, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus, as well as in Pentecost. In a sense, baptism recapitulated and combined all of these biblical events and repeated them in the life of the recipient at the moment of baptism. Tertullian hinted that the nativity of Christ formed the basis for our new birth: “This is the new birth, that man is being born in God, since the day when God was born in man.”⁶⁵ In another place, he suggested that Christ had been baptized not because he needed to repent of sin, since he was sinless, but that his flesh might impart

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁵ Tertullian, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation*, ed. with introduction, translation, and commentary by Ernest Evens (London: SPCK, 1956), 17.

“its own purity to the waters.”⁶⁶ The water was now “pure” by virtue of Christ’s baptism. Christ, however, had to undergo another ‘baptism’, the supreme baptism—death on the cross. Indeed, the efficacy of the washing was not ensured until the passion and resurrection of Jesus, “for neither could our death be annulled except by our Lord’s passion, nor our life restored apart from his resurrection.”⁶⁷ It was the blood of Jesus that cleansed us from sin and in his death, death and the Devil were overcome.⁶⁸ Tertullian points out that the connection between the waters of baptism and the blood of the cross was demonstrated when the water and blood flowed from Jesus’ pierced side.⁶⁹ This same line of reasoning led Tertullian to suggest that the “Passover provides the day of most solemnity for baptism, for then was accomplished our Lord’s passion, and into it we are baptized.”⁷⁰ There was yet another ‘baptism’—Pentecost. Jesus had promised that the disciples were to be baptized with the Spirit, and after Jesus’ ascension, the Spirit came with power and tongues of fire. Thus, Tertullian advocated the season of Pentecost as a “most auspicious period for arranging baptisms” for that was when the “grace of the Holy Spirit” was first given. Finally, Tertullian alluded to yet one more ‘baptism’—the baptism of the final Judgement of the world associated with the return of the Lord. Like the flood,

⁶⁶ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

⁶⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 11.

⁶⁸ Kilain McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996), 168.

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

which had washed away the iniquitous human race,⁷¹ so the baptism of judgement was appointed for the unrepentant and the apostate at the end of time. In summary, a direct line ran between the series of “baptisms” found in Scripture and the baptism of the candidate. In baptism, the catechumen relived the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, baptism of the crucifixion, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In conclusion, God bestowed the grace of remission of sins, new birth, victory over death and the Devil and the gift of the Holy Spirit through the baptismal rite, constituting the Christian’s new life in Christ.⁷² The waters did not save the recipient. Instead, it was the presence of the Holy Spirit, who abides over the waters and sanctifies them, that mediated the accomplishments of Christ’s death and resurrection to the believer. Thus, God Himself acted as the surety of salvation; His promise provided confidence that those “simple waters” indeed conveyed grace to those that entered the font with faith.

Repentance

God’s offer of grace in baptism was grasped by the repentance of the sinner. Repentance needed to be genuine and the candidate had to be firmly established in faith, in constancy of character, and in resolve before entering the cleansing waters. The catechumenate, therefore, served to insure that this came to pass, marking it as a

⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

⁷² Cardman, “Tertullian on Doctrine and the Development of Discipline,” 136.

penitential institution. In order to understand the theological basis for the catechumenate, we must examine Tertullian's understanding of repentance.

The Necessity of Conversion

A genuine conversion to God was necessary in order for baptism to be efficacious. Tertullian wrote, "a true and steadfast faith is baptized with the Spirit unto salvation, but a feigned and feeble faith is baptized with fire unto judgement."⁷³ Again and again, Tertullian reminded the catechumens not to rush into the waters of baptism. Danger lurked in those waters. Likewise, he reminded those "whose function it is" to administer baptism to "give not that which is holy to the dogs."⁷⁴ A "feigned or feeble faith" only received judgement, consigning the applicant to hell. Alternatively, "true and steadfast faith" was more than mere assent to the rule of faith; it required a transformation in character and mode of life. To the unwed, he suggested that they either delay their baptism until marriage, or wait until they were "firmly established in continence," foreclosing the danger of falling into post-baptismal adultery.⁷⁵ It was not enough to talk about one's faith in Christ; one also had to "cease sinning."⁷⁶

⁷³ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 10.

⁷⁴ Matthew 7:6.

⁷⁵ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18.

⁷⁶ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

Repentance was necessary because God commanded it.⁷⁷ Though he cited God's command to repent in the Old Testament prophets to corroborate his contention, the ministry of John the Baptist provided the archetype. Just prior to the ministry of Christ, John the Baptist had proclaimed that God commanded a baptism of repentance, preparing the way for the coming Lord. The Baptist proclaimed, "Begin to repent," because "salvation was nearing the nations."⁷⁸ For Tertullian, it was axiomatic that repentance, typified by the ministry of the Baptist, always preceded grace and the remission of sins, typified by the ministry, passion and resurrection of Jesus.

A true comprehension of the mercy of God always led toward repentance.

Tertullian wrote:

He, who has appointed that chastisement follow upon judgement, has also promised that pardon will follow upon repentance, for He says to the people: *Repent and I will save you*. Again He says: *I live, saith the Lord, and I prefer repentance rather than death*.⁷⁹

The idea that God's kindness and mercy resulted in repentance could be construed as the carrot used by God to lure sinners back to Himself. His mercy served as the bait; the reward to all that turned from sin and embraced God was salvation. So, the hope of being cleansed from sin, of exchanging the corrupt life of paganism for the virtuous life of Christians, and of attaining the resurrection from the dead prodded converts to renounce their old ways. Tertullian expressed it tersely, "He [God] coaxes us to it [repentance] by

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4; Ezekiel 18:3-4, 21-23, 32.

offering salvation as its reward.” In summary, love evokes love, and a genuine grasp of God’s mercy elicits repentance.

Similarly, a true comprehension of the justice and majesty of God provoked repentance. God is the great Lawgiver. Tertullian often described Him as the Judge who “exacts” and “safeguards justice.”⁸⁰ Consequently, he called the gospel the “New Law.” He continually stressed the obligation to renounce the theatrical plays, to comfort the imprisoned and to embrace the practice of fasting, calling it the Christian discipline. He contrasted the orderly conduct of the Church, with its clear lines of demarcation between catechumens, the laity, and the priesthood, with the disorderly behavior of the heretics, with their creed-less, undisciplined, and unsanctioned way of life.⁸¹ Conversion was, in part, embracing “the practice of heavenly virtue,” which inspired “awe” in each pagan that witnessed this moral transformation.⁸² As a Montanist, he deepened this line of thought, declaring that the Holy Spirit came to “exact” a yet more stringent discipline than the one established in the gospel and practiced in the Church hitherto. Conduct once allowed in the Church because of the weakness of the flesh was now set aside. The Holy Spirit came to exact a “New Discipline.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁸¹ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 41.

⁸² Tertullian, *To His Wife*, 7.

⁸³ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, translated by S. Thelwall (New York: Scribner’s, 1902); Tertullian, *Monogamy*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 13, *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, ed. Johannes

Naturally, the threat of God's judgement upon sin served as a motivation for repentance. Only the sinner who presumptuously claimed the grace of God for himself dared approach God without reservation because the guilt incurred for past evil deeds ought to have excited terror. In a like manner, fear galvanized the faithful against returning to sin. They shuddered at the thought of "burdening the mercy of God" a second time.⁸⁴ Further, to those who had fallen into sin after baptism but were too ashamed to publicly acknowledge their sin and do penance, Tertullian suggested that they "meditate ... on hell."⁸⁵ Tertullian summarized his point of view on this matter in this way, "Man's fear is God's glory."⁸⁶

In conclusion, the efficacy of baptism depended on genuine repentance. God had commanded all the nations to repent and promised salvation as its reward. His mercy goaded the bashful sinner to return to her Maker and his justice defied the brazen transgressor that approached the font arrogantly. The only reasonable response to a compassionate, yet righteous God was repentance.

Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, translated by William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman, 1951), 1-4; Tertullian, *On Fasting*, 2.

⁸⁴ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

The Nature of Repentance

Repentance meant sorrow for sin and conversion to the True God and to a new way of life.⁸⁷ Tertullian's view of repentance entailed several assumptions. First, it was entirely a human endeavor. Second, a confrontation with the law of God and the promise of the gospel evoked it. Third, ideas of merit and theological satisfaction tinged Tertullian's understanding of it. Finally, true repentance exhibited external manifestations that were in themselves of propitiatory worth. As a result, genuine repentance cleansed the soul and gained salvation as its reward. We will look at each assumption separately.

A Human Endeavor

Tertullian believed that repentance lay within the domain of human effort. He explicitly stated that repentance "is in a man's power," that it is a "human act."⁸⁸ This, of course, smacks of an unrestrained Pelagianism, to which Tertullian drew perilously close. Repentance took on a seriously anthropocentric appeal; God's grace came as a result of human effort. Again and again, he warned against presumption on the part of the catechumens, reminding them that remission of sins was guaranteed to those who entered the waters, but, he said, "they must make an *effort*...to succeed in getting there."⁸⁹ Repentance was the "price" that the catechumen had to "pay" in exchange for eternal life.

⁸⁷ Le Saint, *Tertullian: Treatises on Penance*, p. 133, n. 10.

⁸⁸ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 10.

⁸⁹ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6 (italics mine).

This emphasis on human responsibility was deepened by Tertullian's belief that fallen humanity retained full use of the faculty of freewill.⁹⁰ So, the doctrines of election, predestination, an eternal security never entered Tertullian's mind. To be sure, pagans, lost in a sea of ignorance, did not know with certainty the will of God and consequently, their choices were narrowed. Still, they retained freedom of will, so that, when confronted with a revelation of the will of God, they were fully capable of choosing to obey either the Lord or the Devil. He even asserted that Cain enjoyed the same freedom that Adam enjoyed prior to the fall. Repentance, then, was Adam's exercise of his freedom to return to God against whom he had rebelled! Tertullian wrote,

He [God] has allowed time for a contest, that the man might cast down his enemy by virtue of that same freedom of choice by which he had fallen before him, thus proving that the blame was not God's but his own, and by gaining the victory might honourably regain salvation. Thus, the devil would suffer more bitter punishment, being overcome by him whom he had previously overthrown: and God would the more evidently be seen to be good, as he waited for the man to return back from [this present] life into paradise, now more glorious [than when driven out], with permission also to take and eat of the tree of life.⁹¹

Responsibility for evil, sin and rebellion lay squarely on the shoulders of Adam. Further, since repentance was located entirely within Adam's resources, the burden to return to God lay with him also.⁹² Tertullian was unwilling to allow Adam to plead "feebleness."

Several factors mitigated freedom of the will in fallen humanity. First, pagan culpability was reduced by attributing to the pagans a degree of "ignorance." To be sure,

⁹⁰ Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167-170.

⁹¹ Tertullian, *Against Marcion: I-III*, II. 10.

⁹² Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 10.

they were free, but they could only choose those things within the scope of their vision. The revelation of the True God in Christ stood outside of natural knowledge.⁹³ Further, the “disordered habits” of pagans, pagan customs, and idolatry occluded an unrestricted knowledge of God, notwithstanding their theoretical freedom.⁹⁴ The plight of pagan ignorance was such that they failed to understand the remedy of God’s grace because they failed to understand the disease of sin.⁹⁵ Second, God did not merely wait for sinners to return to him. His ‘waiting’ was the long suffering of a pursuer seeking after lost sinners, unwilling to give up until He regained them. In this context, repentance had more to do with sinners ceasing to flee from God, then trying to find their way home.⁹⁶ Finally, Tertullian’s doctrine of Original Sin diminished human freedom. Like a light hidden behind an opaque object, humanity was infected with a sickness that covered over its essential goodness. Though still free, the soul inherited a tendency to sin, weakening its ability or willingness to choose the good.⁹⁷ Thus, though pagans were still considered free, that freedom was severely qualified.

⁹³ Osborn points out that the culpability of the pagans increased once they confronted by the evidence of Christian expansion. Their “willful ignorance and chosen intellectual inertia” exposed a hardening of heart against God. Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, 170-171.

⁹⁴ Tertullian, *On Purity*, 9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁷ Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 41; James Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian in the Development of Christian Dogma* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner, 1928), 102.

In conclusion, the bilateral nature of the baptismal covenant took the form of God's grace meeting human repentance. God extended Himself to the sinner and the sinner responded by embracing God and forsaking past sin. The sinners' freedom to respond was real, though conditioned by ignorance and Original Sin. Salvation, mediated through baptism, remained God's activity, but it was *dependent* upon the free response of sinners. In summary, baptism came at a price—repentance, which lay within humanity's power.

The Law, the Gospel, and Repentance

Tertullian donned a two-side vision of grace in relation to repentance. On the one side, grace disclosed the opportunity for repentance when God revealed Himself in Christ. On the other side, it rewarded penance duly undertaken. Thus, grace coaxed, threatened, even rewarded, but it never coerced. Augustine's idea of grace enabling fallen sinners to choose God stood outside of Tertullian's vision at this point. Tertullian wrote:

A point I now insist upon is this, that the penance which has been *revealed* to us by the grace of God, which is *required* of us and which *brings us back to favor* with the Lord, must never, once we have known and embraced it, be violated thereafter by a return to sin.⁹⁸

This statement disclosed three elements in Tertullian's thinking. First, grace "revealed" penance; it did not grant it. Second, repentance was a human obligation resulting from the revelation of a hitherto unknown God. Finally, reconciliation came as a result of repentance on the part of the sinner.

⁹⁸ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 5.

On several occasions, however, Tertullian indicated that faith was a gift. Marveling at the scandal of the incarnation, suffering, and death of the Son of God, Tertullian pointed out that these “manifestations” were the reason why “pagan nations reject the faith.” He went on to declare that for Christians these manifestations of God in the incarnation and cross of Christ “are its rational foundation.” Why? Because they had been granted the gift of faith. Conversion and faith required eyes to see the crucified Jesus *as* the Son of God. The ability to genuinely “see” the significance of the cross passed beyond rational inquiry; the inquirer had to be given the “gift of faith” in order to “see” the crucified God. Tertullian’s mindset is powerfully illustrated by his famous comment, “The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed—because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible—because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain—because it is impossible.” Tertullian stressed the irrationality of faith viewed from the perspective of pagan presuppositions. Faith opposed reason, or better yet, overturned it. It was intrusive, unexpected, and supernatural. If Tertullian appeared to countenance a crude Pelegianism on occasion, his comments here saved him from out and out shipwreck. Repentance, though within human capacity, came about as the result of a double enlightenment. First, the pagan was confronted with the gospel, evaporating his ignorance in the light of truth. But, second, he had to be given “eyes” to see the truth of the gospel in order to truly comprehend its significance. Repentance followed enlightenment.

The Merit of Repentance and Satisfaction of God's Justice

Perhaps the most controversial portion of Tertullian's penitential theology was his employment of the ideas of merit and satisfaction. Morgan pointed out that he is the first ecclesiastic writer to explicitly introduce the term 'satisfaction' into theological language, anticipating the Anselmian doctrine of satisfaction by the superabundant merits of Christ outlined in "Cur Deus Homo."⁹⁹ In brief, Tertullian taught that a person could expiate sin and rekindle salvation by doing acts of repentance, satisfying the injured wrath of God.¹⁰⁰ Under Roman law, injury could be set right either by punishment or by pardon. Pardon, however, could not occur without the payment of a meritorious act. So, one could not expect forgiveness of sins without paying a price. Tertullian wrote:

What folly it is, what perversity, to practice an imperfect penitence and then to expect a pardon for sin! This is to stretch forth one's hand for merchandise and not to pay the price. And the price is this—He offers impunity to be bought in exchange for penitence.¹⁰¹

To approach the font apart from repentance was to insult God. In short, Tertullian never admitted that God might pardon freely.¹⁰²

God is just. This idea formed the bedrock of Tertullian's view of God and was confirmed by his judicial mindset.¹⁰³ So, in as much as He is God, humans owe him due

⁹⁹ Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian*, 41, 68.

¹⁰⁰ Gilles Quispel in his review of *Satisfactio bei Tertullian*, by Gosta Hallonsten, (*Gnomon* 58, no. 2 [1986]: 131-132). In the 11th century, Anselm of Canterbury transferred this concept of satisfaction from a penitential context to Christology.

¹⁰¹ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

¹⁰² Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, 230.

allegiance, love, trust and obedience. When Adam, and all people with him, rejected God's authority and disobeyed His command, he transgressed God's justice, injuring and offending Him.¹⁰⁴ Adam had withheld from God His proper due. Thus, sin was viewed primarily as a debt owed to God that must be paid back. In this instance, Adam's sin was repaid, that is, propitiated, by his death and exile from Paradise.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, "God turned again to His mercy and, in His own person, consecrated repentance from that time on, rescinding the sentence which He passed before in anger and contracting to pardon His handiwork and image."¹⁰⁶ No longer was condemnation to death the only answer to the problem of sin. God opened a new way to rescind the former sentence and to bring about the restoration of Adam's former privileges—repentance.

Merit is a claim to a reward or a payment of a debt.¹⁰⁷ It is giving a person her due. Tertullian made great use of the term, giving it several different nuances. First, he employed it in the sense of "reward." Any time a person chose to do the will of God, he acted "meritoriously."¹⁰⁸ All such actions were accrued to one's credit and were

¹⁰³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, Vol. 1 (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 1970), 150.

¹⁰⁴ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 2; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, II. 8-10; Tertullian, *On fasting*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian*, 41-45.

¹⁰⁸ Tertullian, *An Exhortation to Chastity*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 13, *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt, translated by William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman, 1951), 1-2.

recompensed with an eternal reward, since “every good deed has God as its debtor.”¹⁰⁹ Deeds permitted by God, such as second marriage, but not positively willed by Him, were not meritorious. Instead, they were viewed as neutral.¹¹⁰ Deeds surpassing the express command of God took on a supererogatory stature. These acts were viewed as sacrifices to God, because they went beyond what was necessary. Examples of supererogatory “sacrifices” included fasting, practicing continence after being widowed, and foregoing nuptial rights within marriage.¹¹¹ Similarly, repentance deserved a “great reward.” God had commanded it, and promised life in return for it. To those who undertook it with sincerity, it availed to “rescind the sentence” imposed on Adam, constituting the price that God exacted to satisfy his anger, and it received the “merchandise” of eternal life. From this standpoint, repentance not only canceled the liability to punishment for sin, but also *established a claim* to pardon based on God’s own promise. In short, repentance was meritorious.¹¹²

Second, merit bordered on the idea of a substituted punishment. Any transgression of God’s law demanded justice, which could be accomplished by exacting the punishment threatened upon those who transgressed the command. In Adam’s case, his death and exile from Paradise accounted for this. Also, payment for the crime could be taken care of by exchanging a substitute punishment for the one threatened, if the

¹⁰⁹ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Tertullian, *An Exhortation to Chastity*, 1.

¹¹¹ Tertullian, *On Fasting*, 2; Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 6-8.

¹¹² Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 2.

injured accepted it.¹¹³ Thus, Tertullian argued that the remorseful offender could “exchange sin for suffering.” By substituting voluntary self-condemnation in place of God’s wrath, temporal suffering replaced eternal torment.

Therefore, in humbling a man it [repentance] exalts him. When it defiles him, he is cleansed. In accusing, it excuses. In condemning, it absolves. In proportion as you have had no mercy on yourself, believe me, in just this same measure God will have mercy upon you.¹¹⁴

Just as in the Old Testament, sacrifices propitiated sin, so now the “sacrifices” of repentance, especially in the form of ascetic practices, repaid the debt of sin and regained favor with God.

Satisfaction is the discharge of an obligation by some other means than its strict fulfillment. It is compensation made to God for a debt incurred by sin.¹¹⁵ Adam had sinned against God, incurring a moral debt that deserved condemnation, death and expulsion from Paradise. God, in his mercy, contracted to allow an alternative payment of ‘repentance’ to be made to compensate for the debt of sin. This idea is akin to “what a modern lawyer calls ‘civil damages’ as distinguished from the endurance of criminal punishment.”¹¹⁶ The offender offered to the injured God the proposed and agreed to compensation, relieving the moral debt and bringing about satisfaction. Justice was fulfilled and both parties were once again reconciled; a fair transaction had taken place.

¹¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁵ Le Saint, *Tertullian: Treatises on Penance*, p. 155, n. 77.

¹¹⁶ Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian*, 66.

Thus, God was compensated either by the merit gained as a result of genuine repentance or by the deliberate self-affliction of the offender.

In conclusion, a legal understanding of justice stood at the substratum of Tertullian's view of God. God's law had been transgressed by Adam and by all subsequent people. Thus, humankind owed God a debt for sin. His anger could be satisfied either by exacting the punishment due for sin, by offering a punishment as a substitute for it, or by undergoing sacrifice to merit God's pardon. Repentance acted both as a substitute and as a sacrifice. Thus, by doing penance the contrite sinner could secure God favor.

Acts of Mortification

Tertullian did not view repentance merely as an internal sense of contrition and a desire to return to God. Instead, it also expressed itself outwardly through bodily acts of mortification that included wearing drab dress, eating meager rations and plain food, drinking only water, and fasting in sackcloth and ashes.¹¹⁷ He questioned any supposed repentance that was not evidenced in some sort of outward expression. "It [repentance] must be tested," he declared. Just as repentance had two sides, so also did these "external acts." On one side, true repentance was associated with sorrow for sin and contrition, and on the other, it was associated with turning from sin and embracing the will of God.

¹¹⁷ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 11; Tertullian, *Prayer*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 40, *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, translated by Emily Joseph Daly (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959. Reprint, 1977), 13; Tertullian, *On Purity*, 13.

Likewise, sorrow for sin culminated in acts of mortification whereas turning from sin and embracing the will of God found expression in accepting the Christian discipline. Since, the body and the soul were partners in sinning, both shared “a common guilt and a common judge,” and both must undertake penance.¹¹⁸ To be sure, the soul was the primary actor and the body was its servant. Yet, why should the accomplice, that is, the body, be exempted from punishment?¹¹⁹ Each must fulfill its part in repentance, the soul pleading with God, feeling sorrow for its sin, and committing to a new way of life, and the body suffering from acts of mortification.

Fasting provides a good illustration of Tertullian’s comprehension of the acts of mortification. Adam, Tertullian contended, transgressed the mandate not to taste of the “tree of recognition of good and evil,” by yielding “more readily to his belly than to God,” by heeding “the meat rather than the mandate,” and by selling “salvation for his gullet!” Thus, that “murderous gullet deserved to be *punished* with the torments and penalties of hunger.” By so doing, the “primordial sin might now be *expiated*, in order that man may make God *satisfaction*.”¹²⁰ Not only repentance taken as a whole, but also its individual constituent expressions could propitiate sin. Nevertheless, fasting propitiated sin by virtue of its relation to repentance in its totality. Thus, ascetic practices

¹¹⁸ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Tertullian’s conviction of the close relation of body and soul in connection to its performance of sin, in connection with the sacraments and in connection with the ultimate resurrection of the body threads many of his works. See Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 3; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 7; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*: I-III, I. 28-29; Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, 8.

¹²⁰ Tertullian, *On Fasting*, 3 (italics mine).

such as fasting and every sort of neglect and deliberate harsh treatment of the body¹²¹ had value in expiating sin to the degree that they were genuine acts of repentance.

Mortification was most explicitly connected with Penance. Penance, known as ‘exomologesis’ by Tertullian, was a process that combined interior repentance with an ecclesiastical judicial procedure for those who committed grave sins following baptism. In this rite, the bishop determined the type of voluntary suffering that best corresponded to the degree of guilt for the sin.¹²² The goal of exomologesis was reconciliation of the sinner with both the Church, from which he has been excommunicated, and God. It was required especially of those who committed “mortal” sins such as idolatry, murder, adultery, fraud and false witness.¹²³ The process of exomologesis called for confession by *deed*. It included prostration in sackcloth and ashes, neglect of cleanliness, severe fasting, weeping and prayer and beseeching on bent knee the assistance of the faithful. Finally, it culminated with self-accusation before the entire congregation, a humiliating prospect, judging from Tertullian’s exhortations. Following intercession by the faithful, the bishop offered absolution, reconciling the penitent with the Church and, indirectly, with God. Tertullian justified the practice by claiming that the prayer of the church *is* the prayer of Christ, who both pleads before the Father and who pronounces forgiveness of sin. Thus,

¹²¹ Tertullian, *On Purity*, 13.

¹²² Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 9.

¹²³ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 4; Tertullian, *Apology*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 10, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minicius Felix: Octavius*, translated by Emily Joseph Daly (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950. Reprint, 1977), 2, 11; Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 3; Tertullian, *On Purity*, 19.

because Christ's prayers never go unheard, the Church may confidently grant forgiveness to a sinner.¹²⁴

Acts of mortification were also associated with the catechumenate.¹²⁵ Tertullian counseled a group of catechumens who were preparing for baptism "to pray, with frequent prayers, fastings, bendings of the knee, and all-night vigils, along with the confession of all their former sins." Then, he added that by confession, "we at once *make amends* for things past *by afflictions of the flesh and spirit*, and build up defenses against the temptations that are to follow."¹²⁶ Thus, Tertullian viewed these pre-baptismal acts of mortification as satisfying God in some manner. Merit, in this passage, shaded more in the direction of voluntary suffering that canceled God's punishment, than in the direction of earning the reward of remission of sins.

The nature of acts of mortification associated with the catechumenate and exomologesis differed. Tertullian pointed out that the "second and last penitence [exomologesis] is so serious a matter, it must be tested in a way which is proportionately laborious."¹²⁷ Both the catechumenate and exomologesis consisted in outward expressions of repentance. The severity of affliction, however, differed "proportionately" to the seriousness of the offence. The catechumens had sinned as pagans, out of ignorance; the faithful had committed willful transgression. Pagans had an excuse; the

¹²⁴ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 10; Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, translated by and rev. Francis Courtney (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 44-49.

¹²⁵ Wagner, *After the Apostles*, 196.

¹²⁶ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20 (italics mine).

faithful did not. Thus, the severity of the acts of mortification practiced was proportionate to the degree of culpability.

In conclusion, the entire penitential process, either in the catechumenate or in exomologesis satisfied God's anger.¹²⁸ Tertullian summed up his doctrine on the subject this way, "by penitence God is appeased."¹²⁹ Repentance found its expression in acts of mortification, which propitiated sin to the degree that they were genuine. The severity of the acts of mortification increased with the degree of culpability on the part of the guilty party. Consequently, catechumens faced a less brutal asceticism than the penitent faithful did.

Repentance in Relation to the Catechumenate

Tertullian viewed the catechumenate as a penitential rite. If baptism was understood as a bilateral covenant in which humans perform a necessary role, then the repentance associated with the catechumenate was the human contribution to that covenant. Unwillingness to repent, demonstrated by a change in direction of life and by the performance of acts of mortification, rendered a candidate unfit to receive baptism; he had not paid the necessary price for the merchandise of salvation. The catechumenate as a penitential institution may be demonstrated by a couple of analogies.

¹²⁷ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 9.

¹²⁸ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 2, translated from 3d German ed. by Neil Buchanan (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 132.

¹²⁹ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 9.

First, the catechumenate was the practical application of Tertullian's theoretical assumption that "repentance comes first, and remission follows."¹³⁰ He held that John the Baptist's ministry was intended to be "a kind of applicant for the remission and sanctification that in Christ was soon to follow."

Having promised the grace with which in the latter days He intended to illumine the whole world through His spirit, He commanded that there should first be a Baptism of penance, so by it He might prepare, in the pledge of penance, those whom He would call through grace to the promise determined for the seed of Abraham.¹³¹

The "Baptism of penance," that is, the ministry of John the Baptist, had prepared those who were called to the promise to receive it. Thus, repentance became the "pledge" that furnished a disposition of the heart necessary to secure grace. It swept away the defilement of the heart resulting from the "ancient error," and made it ready "as a clean dwelling place for the coming visitation of the Holy Spirit."¹³²

Tertullian explicitly described the ministry of John the Baptist as a model for the catechumenate.

Those who are at the point of entering upon baptism ought to pray, with frequent prayers, fastings, bendings of the knee, and all-night vigils, along with the confession of their former sins, so as to *make a copy* of the baptism of John.¹³³

The catechumenate held the same relation to baptism that the ministry of John the Baptist had to the ministry of Christ. It was a penitential rite that found its completion in baptism, just as the ministry of John the Baptist found its termination in the ministry of Christ.

¹³⁰ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 10.

¹³¹ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 2.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 2

¹³³ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20 (italics mine).

Second, Tertullian viewed the catechumenate and exomologesis as parallel penitential rites. For those who either were exchanging the life of paganism for Christianity or had committed serious sin following baptism, an intentional repentance process needed to be invoked. For the first group, it was the catechumenate, and for the second, it was exomologesis. Tertullian described the two institutions as the “two planks of salvation.” He wrote, “lay hold on it [repentance] and grip it fast, as one who is shipwrecked holds to a plank of salvation. It will buoy you up when you are plunged into a sea of sin and bear you safely to the haven of divine mercy.”¹³⁴ For the catechumenate, the “haven of divine mercy” which he referred to in his discussion of repentance was baptism. For exomologesis, the “haven of divine mercy” was the official absolution announced by the bishop at the end of the rite.¹³⁵ Thus, Tertullian viewed the entire catechumenate, which culminated in baptism, as the “first plank of salvation.”

Evidence against the Penitential Character of the Catechumenate

Tertullian’s Catholic peers may not have shared his outlook concerning the penitential bent of the catechumenate. Occasionally, he hinted that his theological position diverged from the general Catholic position. For example, in his Montanist period, Tertullian stated:

Our opponents [the North African Catholics] still insist that ‘the preaching of penitence is not meant for the heathen because the sins of the heathen, being imputable to ignorance, are not its proper subject matter, since it is only from nature

¹³⁴ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 4.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

that ignorance has its culpability in the sight of God. Moreover, the pagans fail to understand the remedies since they fail to understand the diseases. The reason for penance, however, is clearly appreciated when sin is committed knowingly and willingly, and when there is an awareness of what sin and grace both mean.¹³⁶

To sum up the Catholic position, only the faithful could devote themselves to genuine repentance.

Passages such as this are hard to interpret. First, Tertullian placed these words on the lips of Catholics in the heat of conflict. In controversy, Tertullian often attacked his opponents with unrelenting fury. Thus, the question could be asked, “Did Tertullian fairly represent his opponents?” Did they really believe that pagans do not need to repent, nor was Tertullian forcing this proposition upon them because, in his zeal to win the argument, he was unable to adequately appraise their stance? Second, Tertullian’s accusation concerning the Catholic position was not consistent with what he had written as a Catholic. Indeed, he had expended great energy exhorting catechumens to repentance, the very thing that he later claimed that the Catholics opposed.¹³⁷ It is hard to imagine that Tertullian, acting as an approved Catholic catechist, diverging so widely from his Catholic colleagues on the subject.

Several possible solutions present themselves. First, Tertullian’s view of the catechumenate as a penitential rite may have been entirely his own, both during his Catholic years and his New Prophecy years. Second, his Catholic opponents may have viewed the catechumenate as a penitential rite, but Tertullian had misrepresented their position. Third, both Tertullian and his Catholic colleagues may have viewed the

¹³⁶ Tertullian, *On Purity*, 10.

catechumenate as a penitential rite during Tertullian's Catholic years, but the Catholics moved away from this posture in reaction to the increased rigorism of the New Prophecy movement. Finally, his Catholic opponents may have viewed the catechumenate as a penitential rite, but Tertullian's growing moral and ascetic rigor compelled him to exaggerate the penitential nature of the catechumenate such that he eclipsed the penitential teaching of his Catholic opponents. At any rate, Tertullian consistently held that the catechumenate was a penitential rite both during his Catholic and New Prophecy periods. Though it is possible that he diverged from the general Catholic position, it is unlikely. Both viewed the catechumenate as a penitential rite. The difference lay in the severity of penitence expected of the catechumens by the Catholics in contrast to the Montanists.

In conclusion, the penitential quality of the catechumenate was clearly demonstrated by Tertullian's use of the ministry of John the Baptist as a model for it and the parallels he drew between the catechumenate and exomologesis. Both examples disclosed the keynote of his perception of the catechumenate—repentance. John the Baptist called for it and exomologesis demanded it. Tertullian, during his Montanist period, required a harsh penitence for catechumens, which finally erupted into a dispute between he and his Catholic opponents. Nevertheless, both as a Catholic and as a Montanist, Tertullian's theological justification for the catechumenate was firmly rooted in his theology of repentance.

¹³⁷ Compare Tertullian, *On Penitence* 1-7 with Tertullian, *On Purity* 10.

Conclusion: Implications of Tertullian's Theory of Baptism and Theory of Repentance for the Catechumenate

The catechumenate connoted the human contribution in the bilateral covenant between God and humanity in baptism. Just as repentance was a necessary condition for baptism, so the catechumenate was the practical solution for insuring that repentance was birthed, instilled and completed in new converts. Several implications follow from Tertullian's understanding of the catechumenate in relation to baptism and repentance. First, the catechumenate assumed an initial conversion. Entrance into it required a confession of faith together with a moral commitment to make amends and to accept the Christian discipline. Second, the catechumenate instilled a grasp of the mercy and justice of God. Third, the catechumenate sought to engender genuine repentance. Fourth, the catechumenate encouraged ascetic exercises. It was axiomatic that external works of self-affliction were necessary expressions of internal repentance. Repentance that did not include "works" of repentance was defective. Fifth, the catechumenate culminated in baptism. In corporation into the Church through baptism was the objective of the journey for catechumens.¹³⁸ Consequently, indefinite participation abused the institution. Finally, the catechumenate guarded against a mechanical view of the sacrament of baptism. The demand for repentance as a condition for meriting the grace of baptism countered any tendency to brazenly approach the baptismal font.

¹³⁸ Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate*, 2-4.

CHAPTER 3

TERTULLIAN'S PASTORAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CATECHUMENATE

Tertullian advocated the use of the catechumenate for particular, concrete ends because theology cannot exist in a vacuum. His convictions concerning repentance and baptism had to be introduced into practice, and the catechumenate provided the logical place to do this. It had to ensure that a genuine repentance took place, and it had to guard against presumption. A new way of life was to be introduced, and formation of character was given priority. Finally, though Tertullian's theological suppositions provided a foundation for the catechumenate, its unique shape depended, in part, on the cultural circumstances surrounding the Church. Society's social mores, philosophical suppositions, and religious practices forced the Church to respond. Its answer was felt most sharply in the catechumenate.

The Liminal Character of the Catechumenate

The history of the North African Church began with martyrdom. In July 17, 180, Vigellius Saturninus executed a group of Christians;¹³⁹ persecution ensued intermittently

¹³⁹ Tertullian, *To Scapula*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 10, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minicius Felix: Octavius*, translated by Rudolph Arbesmann (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950. Reprint, 1977), 3.

thereafter.¹⁴⁰ The Christians proclaimed a god who had risen from the dead, and they obstinately refused to offer a sacrifice to the genius of the emperor,¹⁴¹ causing the State to brand them as dangerous subversives. Worse yet, rumors circulated that they committed heinous crimes such as cannibalism, infanticide, orgies and incest, detestable offenses in the eyes of conscientious pagans.¹⁴² Further, the general population hated Christians for disregarding their cherished customs and traditions, and the immoral despised Christians for their virtue. Tertullian quipped, “A wife, now become chaste, is cast out by her husband, a son, now docile, is disowned by a father, a servant, now trustworthy, is banished from the sight of a master.”¹⁴³

In response, the North African Church adopted what H. Richard Niebuhr called a “Christ against culture” paradigm.¹⁴⁴ Timothy Barnes summed up its attitude: “the dominant motif of African Christianity” was an “uncompromising rejection of an alien world.”¹⁴⁵ The Church envisioned itself as a “shadow empire” with an exclusive claim on truth.¹⁴⁶ In making its claim to know the truth, it categorically rejected not only

¹⁴⁰ Probably in the years 197, 203, and 211. See Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 212.

¹⁴¹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 32.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Types of Spirituality,” *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 592-596. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), chap. 2. Tertullian is the prototype ‘Christ against culture’ representative for Niebuhr.

¹⁴⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 62.

¹⁴⁶ Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian,” 253.

paganism, but also pagan cultural supports. Thus, embracing the Christian faith meant renouncing one's former lifestyle and accepting a way of life that ran counter to pagan norms. On the one hand, the convert no longer frequented idolatrous temples, festivals or spectacles. On the other hand, the Church, countenancing its own government, creed, and morality, initiated him into a new life and into a new community. Since the gulf between the two societies was immense, conversion was costly and the transition painful. Thus, in response to the gap created by the two opposing societies, the Church created the catechumenate.

The catechumenate provided a ritual transition between two worlds—the Church and pagan society. This is the “liminal” character of the catechumenate. Liminality describes the situation where the convert finds himself “betwixt and between;” he was neither in society, nor in the Church.¹⁴⁷ He had renounced society, having already begun to embrace the new faith, and he belonged to the community in some manner, yet without all of the privileges. Full membership was withheld until he learned more about the faith and was well formed in the Christian discipline. Practically, even the most zealous convert needed time and guidance to make the transition. Having suffered rejection by friends and family, time was needed for recovery. Attachments to pleasures were not easily cast off. The tenets of the faith had to seep in slowly since they required the convert to make an intellectual leap from one worldview to another. Further, because

¹⁴⁷ Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate*, 4; Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, xv-xvii.

virtue is not inborn, the conduct that mirrored those convictions had to be instilled. The catechumenate provided the necessary time and means to make the transition.

Tertullian's vision of the catechumenate as a liminal institution is illustrated by a controversy he had with a group of Catholic peers. Apparently, some of the baptized had not entirely renounced all commerce associated with idolatry. Tertullian, in his zeal to cleanse the Church, exhorted them to leave behind those handicrafts and businesses for the Lord's sake. In response, they complained that by acting on his advice, they endangered their livelihood. Tertullian retorted:

This excuse comes too late. One should have considered the matter beforehand, imitating the most prudent builder, who first calculates the costs of the work and the means at his disposal, lest, when he had begun, he should have to give up later and be ashamed.¹⁴⁸

Life after baptism was not the time to consider the sacrifices required for following Christ. Instead, the catechumenate provided the convert the opportunity to “count the cost” before making his baptismal commitment. Certainly, a preliminary commitment was demanded of the catechumens. Nevertheless, they were not yet under obligation to live fully the Christian discipline because they were not yet bound by baptism. Rather, the period of the catechumenate was a season for catechumens to clothe themselves with innocence of their own “free will.”¹⁴⁹ Enrollment in the catechumenate provided the environment for the catechumenate to consider if he was wanted to undertake the commitment required of the baptized.

¹⁴⁸ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

In conclusion, the liminal quality of the catechumenate provided an environment for the postulant to make the transition from one society to another. The Church and pagan society stood diametrically opposed to one another. Pagans viewed Christians as vile traitors. Christians viewed pagans as idolatrous enemies of God; neither had any room for the other. Thus, the catechumenate allowed the convert room to contemplate the cost of conversion, and adapt to Christian faith and conduct.

The Catechumenate as a Preparation for Baptism

The catechumenate was created within the crucible of tensions between the North African Church and pagan society. Conversion meant repenting of an entire way of life, including one's ultimate convictions, previous associations, habits, social obligations and even profession. These people knew nothing of the dualistic separation, which plagues modern Christianity, between one's private convictions and piety and one's public life and duties. Conversion entailed the whole person and could not be limited to personal, emotional or spiritual realms. Thus, the catechumenate had to address the whole person. Consequently, it sought to accomplish two goals. First, it had to ensure that the catechumens embraced a genuine repentance in order to be "worthy" of the grace offered at the font. Second, it had to shape their character in such a way that they kept their baptismal vows. From his standpoint, a well-constructed catechumenate was the Church's primary hedge against subsequent apostasy.

Conversion: a Matter of the Heart

Tertullian insisted that catechumens genuinely repent, but true repentance was always a matter of the heart, that center of human hopes, affections, and allegiances. Thus, repentance could not be reduced to fulfilling exterior demands, no matter how important they may be. Instead, it had to be an authentic response to an encounter with the Living God that resulted first in fear, then in hope, or it was nothing at all. Imposters and freeloaders always lurked about, and the abuse of grace troubled the Church as much then as it has in subsequent history. The catechumenate countered with a call for converts to stake their lives on Christ, once for all.

Initial conversion was concerned with the direction of one's heart. At its root, it entailed turning away from sin and turning to God, resulting in a change of allegiance.¹⁵⁰ It came from a genuine encounter with God, which in turn, caused fear. For the pagan sinner, God first appeared as an angry Judge, whose wrath he justly deserved. God held his destiny in His hands, and he threatened to judge him at the end of the age. This existential fear both resulted from belief and effected belief. On the one hand, the experience of God's wrath flowed from a belief that God really exists; faith begot fear. On the other hand, the weight of condemnation drove the trembling sinner to seek God's mercy; fear begot faith. Tertullian summed up this dialectic in a brief survey of the reason why many pagans remain unconverted: "There are many, you see, who do not believe in the Lord because for so long a time they have no *experience* of His wrath [directed]

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

against the world.”¹⁵¹ Tertullian believed that a genuine encounter of the sinner with the just God led to the “experience” of His wrath. His heart heavy with sorrow, he was driven by fear to forsake his sin and seek the remedy of baptism. Tertullian understood this experience as initial conversion.

Tertullian *assumed* that the catechumens had already experienced initial conversion before entering the catechumenate because they had already begun to renounce the past. They were not agnostic inquirers that doubted the verity of the Christian gospel. Instead, they had enrolled in the catechumenate precisely because of their convictions concerning the threat of God’s punishment and promise of grace. Thus, the catechumenate was designed for converts who had experienced initial conversion.

The catechumenate sought to deepen the initial conversion, not initiate it. The primary goal was to establish a faith that was just now taking root and bring repentance to fruition. To this end, Tertullian sought to exhort the catechumens to greater fear of and reverence for God. He envisioned these twin attitudes as the basis for the entire economy of Christian existence:

Where the fear of God is, there is seriousness, an honourable and yet thoughtful diligence, as well as an anxious carefulness and a well-considered admission [to the sacred ministry] and a safely-guarded communion, and promotion after good service and a scrupulous submission [to authority], and a devout attendance, and a modest gait, and a united church, and God in all things.¹⁵²

Tertullian desired to instill this vision of reverence in the catechumens because he believed that it was the foundation for leading a sinless life. Out of reverence for God, the

¹⁵¹ Tertullian, *Patience*, 2.

¹⁵² Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 43.

catechumen ought to desire to merit baptism. His zeal to make reparation to God for past sin and his desire to forever forsake sin ought to be so great that he was unwilling to simply receive the benefits of the font freely. “The forgiveness of sins, is absolutely assured to those who will enter the water,” Tertullian conceded, but the catechumen ought to be unwilling to enter the font without first ridding himself of sin.

The greatest obstacle to reverence for God was presumption. Not all of the catechumens had wholeheartedly renounced their previous life. Tertullian complained, “They do begin to do penance, yet they fail to bring it to completion.”¹⁵³ Some were using their enrollment in the catechumenate as an “interlude for sin, rather than for learning not to sin,” claiming that there was time enough to cease sinning after baptism. Tertullian attributed their audacious attitude to “a rash confidence in the efficacy of Baptism.” Baptism had become a superstitious talisman in the minds of these pseudo-converts; by virtue of entering the water, they were assured grace, no matter how they lived or what direction their hearts inclined. In short, they wanted the merchandise, but were not willing to pay the price. Tertullian asked, “who can promise himself that what He [God] grants unwillingly will endure? For are there not many who later fall away?”¹⁵⁴ Tertullian exposed the faulty line of logic employed by these hucksters. They might be able to force God’s hand, making him honor his promise of grace to all who enter the font, but how could they assure themselves that they could face temptation unprepared

¹⁵³ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

and come out unscathed? God will not be mocked. These reckless catechumens were laying the foundation of their spiritual lives on sand, not rock.

In summary, those enrolled in the catechumenate were converts. Having encountered the God of the Christians and having experienced fear, they made a start at repentance. The primary attitude that he wanted to inculcate through the catechumenate was reverence for God and an unwillingness to take advantage of His grace.

Alternatively, he exposed the irreverence of those who presumptuously approached the font, expecting to receive the grace of God without a change of heart. God demanded genuine repentance as the “price” for the pardon of sin, and the root of repentance was a humble heart.

The Shape of Repentance

In keeping with the “Christ against culture” posture of the North African Church, the catechumenate majored on the theme of renunciation. Specifically, renunciation meant separating from everything that smacked of paganism. Of course, the line between what was “of the Devil” and what was a neutral cultural expression was often blurred. In the history of the Church the line of demarcation between things created by God and things perverted by the Devil has never been exactly clear. What, in the North African situation, did the catechists expect the new converts to renounce and separate from?

First, the catechumen was called to separate from sin. Tertullian distinguished between two types of sins—sins of the body and sins of the spirit. “Corporeal” sins were sins of deed, such as adultery, murder, lying, and theft, whereas “spiritual” sins were sins of the mind, such as lust, idolatry, greed, and pride. Thus, an adulterer was not only the

man who violated the marriage of another by sexual intercourse, but also any man that contaminated marriage by a lustful look. Tertullian believed that both types were equally culpable before God and worthy of condemnation, though both were not equally visible to the eye of the beholder. Further, both types of sins were to be “avoided and purged by penance” during the period of the catechumenate. In practice, Tertullian seldom distinguished between the two types of sin since “their association and partnership is so close.”¹⁵⁵

Second, separation from sin went hand in hand with separation from the world. From Tertullian’s perspective, “the world” lay within the Devil’s domain: “The world is God’s, but the things of the world are the Devil’s.”¹⁵⁶ Adam had given the Devil possession of it in the Fall and was now held captive by his machinations. Pagan religious practices and convictions perpetuated sinful contamination, pagan social mores, with its lax morality, held people fast in sinful practices, and pagan cultural activities elevated godlessness.¹⁵⁷ In response, Tertullian believed that for the catechumen to break free from the sins of idolatry, lust, rage and greed, he had to separate herself from these pagan religious practices, social mores and cultural activities. Tertullian marked out and attacked several important sins, with their attendant cultural expressions.

Tertullian was deeply concerned with idolatry, abhorring it more than other sins because it transgressed the first commandment. To commit idolatry was to commit

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵⁶ Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 15.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 2; Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 39-41.

apostasy, and desert to the camp of the enemy.¹⁵⁸ Idolatry was connected to all sorts of activities that permeated pagan society. He accused the spectacles of idolatrous origin and of demonic influence.¹⁵⁹ The professions of idol-maker, astrologer, and schoolmaster were tainted with idolatry. Pagan festivals and holidays, and the practice of decorating the door of one's home with laurel-wreaths were all condemned. Military service and public offices were permeated with idolatrous practices. Even common expressions such as calling upon the gods were considered idolatry.¹⁶⁰ Participation in any of these activities had to be discontinued.

Lust also preoccupied Tertullian, especially in the forms of gluttony and lasciviousness.¹⁶¹ For the catechumens, he advocated voluntarily becoming eunuchs for the kingdom of God.¹⁶² Thus, at baptism, some took a vow of virginity. Couples, by mutual consent, chose to abstain from the use of marriage.¹⁶³ Widows, for the sake of chastity, chose to remain virgins for the rest of their lives.¹⁶⁴ The ideal was to lead a life of continence. Similarly, Tertullian endorsed other ascetic practices to root out concupiscence. Fasting from food played a part in renouncing the lust of the belly.¹⁶⁵ By fasting, the catechumens learned to bridle gluttony and to destroy "a desire to feed on

¹⁵⁸ Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 24.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶⁰ See Tertullian, *On Idolatry*.

¹⁶¹ Tertullian, *On Fasting*, 1.

¹⁶² Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 9.

¹⁶³ Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 6.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 1. 8.

delicacies.”¹⁶⁶ Elsewhere, he counseled women to dress modestly in order to not excite concupiscence in men.¹⁶⁷ For him, the Christian had to take up a life of asceticism in order to wage war on the concupiscence of the flesh, rooting out the vices of gluttony, drunkenness, adultery, and fornication.

Tertullian also attacked greed because desire for money and things of the world were contrary to the Christian discipline. Christians ought to be indifferent towards money, and should disdain wealth. What need is there of wealth when the Lord did not seek it? How can one preserve treasure in heaven if he is unwilling to relinquish earthly goods? How can one joyfully share with another in need when he is unwilling to endure loss of his goods? The difference, Tertullian contended, between pagans and Christians was that “it befits us to give up not our life for money but money for our life, either by voluntary charity or by the patient endurance of loss.”¹⁶⁸ In practice, Tertullian admonished wealthy Christian women to marry a Christian husband “in moderate circumstances.” Alternatively, wealthy Christian husbands were advised not to spend his money supplying their wives “sedans,” “mules,” and “outlandishly tall slaves ... to dress their hair.”¹⁶⁹ To women, he counseled simplicity. To those who wore rouge, dyed their hair, and lengthened their eyebrows, he asked, “What profit, again, do you derive for your

¹⁶⁵ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20.

¹⁶⁶ Tertullian, *Against Marcion: I-III*, II. 18.

¹⁶⁷ Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Tertullian, *Patience*, 7.

¹⁶⁹ Tertullian, *To His Wife*, II. 8.

salvation from all your labor spent in arranging your hair?”¹⁷⁰ In contrast, catechumens were to be moderate, simple, and generous.

Finally, separating from sins and the world was not enough, he also counseled the catechumens to separate from the company of those who continue in sin:

It is not enough to refrain from such acts [that run counter the Christian discipline], unless we also *shun* those who commit them. ‘If thou didst see a thief,’ says Holy Scripture, ‘thou didst run with him.’ Would that we did not live in the world with them! Still, we are separated from them in the things of the world.¹⁷¹

Tertullian argued that shunning meant not accompanying others to the spectacles.

Similarly, he took it for granted that a Christian did not frequent taverns and clubs.¹⁷² The obligation to separate was so strong that it even challenged the bonds of marriage. Only the injunction of the Apostle Paul derailed his radical proposal: “Otherwise such a convert might think that he is under *obligation of separating* from the woman who is now become a stranger to him and, in a manner of speaking, no longer truly his wife.”¹⁷³ Of course, mixed marriage was absolutely forbidden.¹⁷⁴ The principle was simple, extended contact with pagans undermined the Christian commitment to moral purity.

Tertullian’s doctrine of double separation did have exceptions—Christians traded with pagans in the marketplace; family ties were sustained whenever it was feasible; and

¹⁷⁰ Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 7.

¹⁷¹ Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 15 (italics mine).

¹⁷² Tertullian, *To His Wife*, II. 6.

¹⁷³ Ibid., II. 2 (italics mine).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., II. 3.

Christian slaves continued to serve their masters.¹⁷⁵ In pagan households, family-festivals untainted with idolatry, such as weddings, still attracted the participation of their Christian kin. Finally, Tertullian mentioned that, on occasion, Christian women were “required to go out because of friendship or duty to some Gentile.”¹⁷⁶ Obviously, total separation from pagan friends could not have allowed such activity. In summary, Tertullian suggested that converts break off their fraternization with pagan friends whenever that relationship meant jeopardizing their commitment to Christ. Ties with pagans in business, in marriages, in families, and in friendships remained as long as sin was avoided.

In conclusion, separation and renunciation underscored the spirit of the North African catechumenate. Genuine repentance was strongly purgative. Converts not only put aside such private vices as idolatry, lust and greed, but also those activities that contributed to them. Thus, it was not enough to renounce lust, the catechumen also had to forego the brothel, the theater, and sensual attire. Repudiation of greed meant not only countenancing an indifferent attitude toward money, but also a willingness to give it away, or to marry below one’s class. Renouncing sin and the world even meant breaking off old associations that might entice a person to fall back into a life of sin. Although many of the baptized still had not completely cast off sin, as Tertullian’s protestations against the conduct of some of his Catholic colleagues betrayed, ideally these vices were overcome in the course of the catechumenate.

¹⁷⁵ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 11.

The Catechumenate as a Preparation to Live out the Obligations of Baptism

“All who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement,” asserted Tertullian.¹⁷⁷ The “burden of baptism” referred to the post-baptismal obligation to lead a sinless life. At baptism, the Christian took an oath of allegiance to Christ, officially enlisting in God’s army.¹⁷⁸ The Church underlined the seriousness of this oath by allowing only one baptism: “Once only are our sins washed away, because these ought not to be committed a second time.”¹⁷⁹ No compulsion, whether persecution, the inclinations of the flesh or even martyrdom excused Christians from sin. To suggest otherwise destroyed the very essence of their sacramental oath, since it loosened the fetters for voluntary sins.¹⁸⁰ Though the resources given in baptism—the forgiveness of sin, regeneration and the presence of the Holy Spirit—compensated for the dangers faced by the baptized, faithfulness to the baptismal oath required vigilance and perseverance. Thus, Tertullian sought to ensure that candidates arranging to enroll in the catechumenate understood their impending commitment:

It [the Christian discipline] must be held up to those who are joining the faith and must be inculcated in those who enter the faith, in order that they consider it when

¹⁷⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18.

¹⁷⁸ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 15.

¹⁸⁰ Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, 11.

they join, persevere in observing, and renounce themselves, when they do not observe it.¹⁸¹

Embracing a radically counter-cultural life did not happen in a haphazard fashion. Instead, like an apprentice, the catechumen was trained in the tenets, laws, customs, and piety required of a servant of God. This was accomplished in two ways. First, the catechumens embraced and learned the Christian discipline. Second, they were encouraged to grow in character and to acquire virtue.

Embracing the Christian Discipline

Perseverance in salvation rested on the rock of discipline.¹⁸² The “Christian discipline” had wide connotations. It included the moral obligations associated with the “new law” established by Christ, the right ordering of the Church with its hierarchy, structure, traditions and customs, and the confession of faith summed up in the “rule of faith.”¹⁸³ Faith, individual piety, and corporate practices were all one piece because true faith found its expression in well-ordered discipline.¹⁸⁴ On this point, Tertullian assailed the heretics: “In their discipline we have an index of their doctrine. They say that God is not to be feared; therefore all things are in their view free and unchecked.” Therefore, they were “motherless, houseless, creedless” and “outcasts.” In contrast, Tertullian

¹⁸¹ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 24.

¹⁸² Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church*, 34.

¹⁸³ Tertullian, *Monogamy*, 14; Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, 3-4; Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 36, 41-44.

pointed out that the Church celebrated a “stricter discipline...an additional proof of truth, from which no man can safely turn aside.”¹⁸⁵ Entry into the Church meant embracing its discipline. Conversion to Christ was at the same time, conversion to the visible Church.

The catechumenate bore the responsibility of engendering a *sound faith*, free from heresy. Tertullian complained that the heretics made it their business “not to convert the heathen, but to subvert” those in the ranks of the Catholic Church.¹⁸⁶ Apparently, the efforts of the heretics to attract converts from the Church were occasionally successful.¹⁸⁷ In spite of Tertullian’s fiery attack on their poor discipline, they must have offered something that was attractive to the Catholic faithful and the catechumens. Tertullian hinted that even some bishops, priests, deacons, doctors, and martyrs fell victim.¹⁸⁸ In light of the dangers that beset both catechumens and baptized, clear instruction in the tenets of the faith was mandatory. If Tertullian’s treatises, “On Baptism,” and “On Prayer” are fair samples of the type of teaching that the catechumens received, then their intellectual formation must have been of high caliber. On the other hand, few catechists were Tertullian’s equals, since he was part of an urban church and an intellectual giant. Instruction in the country parishes may have looked very different. Nevertheless, Tertullian indicated that the “rule of faith” was “sealed” in baptism, suggesting that

¹⁸⁴ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 1; Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, 244.

¹⁸⁵ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 41-44.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1.

¹⁸⁸ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 3.

candidates had to have a basic grasp of Christian theology, if they were intelligently to assent to it.¹⁸⁹

Embracing the Christian discipline meant keeping the commandments of Christ. The gospel entailed a new, more stringent moral law, and the Christian life was summed up in the term “obedience.”¹⁹⁰ Though the old law was, in some respects abrogated by the new, especially concerning its sacrificial system, it was deepened in other respects. Whereas, the Decalogue proscribed adultery, the New Testament prohibited casting a lustful glance. On this, Tertullian was utterly serious, proposing a rigorous moral ethic. He saw in the command, “if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also,” a prohibition against murder and every kind of violence and rage.¹⁹¹ To those considering military service, he asked, “Will a Christian, taught to turn the other cheek when struck unjustly, guard prisoners in chains, and administer torture and capital punishment?”¹⁹² Likewise, to those Christians who attended the spectacles, and viewed the “punches and kicks and blows” of the athletes and gladiators in the stadium, Tertullian asked, “Why...should we be permitted to see that which is sinful to do?”¹⁹³ Obedience to Christ’s commands was to be executed in every part of life. Inculcation of a deep sense of moral earnestness in the catechumens took primacy.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 13, 36.

¹⁹⁰ Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God*, 66-94.

¹⁹¹ Matthew 5:39; Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 16.

¹⁹² Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, 11.

¹⁹³ Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 17.

¹⁹⁴ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 24.

The Christian discipline extended to the observance of ecclesiastical customs and traditions. These customs ranged from corporate activities observed by the laity such as observing Station days, to acts of personal piety such as crossing one's forehead or saying the Lord's prayer. Tertullian did not tell us how these customs were passed on. Were the "sponsors" mentioned in "On Baptism" responsible to see that these things were learned?¹⁹⁵ He did not indicate that adult catechumens even had sponsors, only infants. We know that the catechumens were under supervision.¹⁹⁶ Those "in charge" of administering the sacrament had some knowledge of the life and conduct of the catechumens in order to judge the worthiness of each candidate for baptism. Tertullian, however, did not indicate the nature their supervision.

Judging from the treatises that Tertullian addressed to the catechumens, many of the customs were handed on through homiletic instruction. For example, he endorsed several honorable customs relating to prayer, such as "the outward observance of certain hours" for prayer, and the practice of adding an "Alleluia" or a psalm to the end of one's petitions.¹⁹⁷ Alternatively, he stressed that many of the customs encountered by the pagans should not be imitated. Washing one's hands just prior to praying, laying aside one's cloak during prayer or sitting down after prayer were roundly discouraged because these religious observances were without scriptural precept and an imitation of pagan

¹⁹⁵ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18.

¹⁹⁶ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 6.

¹⁹⁷ Tertullian, *Prayer*, 25, 27.

religious practices.¹⁹⁸ Throughout his discourse, he assumed that the catechumens had already encountered both the honorable customs and the superstitious practices of Catholics, suggesting that the catechumens were already being integrated into the normal life of the Christian community, learning the customs by cultural immersion. In summary, though Tertullian did not tell us how the catechumens assimilated ecclesiastical traditions and pious customs, his interaction with the catechumens indicated that the catechumenate did address these issues to some extent.

Finally, the Christian discipline enjoined a life of asceticism.¹⁹⁹ These practices were advocated for multiple reasons. First, he believed that acts of mortification satisfied God's wrath and merited his favor. Thus, mortification of the flesh was a part of the catechumen's efforts to "merit" the grace of baptism. Second, acts of asceticism, such as fasting and abstinence from sexual activity, were part of the spiritual artillery used to root out and destroy concupiscence. Third, asceticism prepared the catechumens to face the attacks of the Devil. In this respect, Tertullian likened it to peacetime training in the military or physical training of the athlete:

In the time of peace, soldiers are toughened to warfare by toils and hardships: by marching in arms, by practicing swift maneuvers in the field, by digging a trench, by joining closely together to form a tortoise-shield. Everything is set in sweating toil, lest bodies and minds be frightened at having to pass from shade to sunshine, from sunshine to icy cold, from the tunic to the breastplate, from hushed silence to the warcry, from rest to the din of battle. In like manner, ...athletes, too, are set apart for more rigid training that they may apply themselves to the building up of their physical strength. They are kept from lavish living, from more tempting dishes, from more pleasurable drinks. They are urged on, they are subjected to torturing toils, they

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 13-16.

¹⁹⁹ Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, 233.

are worn out; the more strenuously they have exerted themselves, the greater is their hope of victory.²⁰⁰

Tertullian summed up his doctrine with this dictum, “strength is built up by austerity, but destroyed by softness.”²⁰¹ Thus, the Christian life was to bear the mark of austerity.

Catechumens and baptized alike had to be ready for battle with the Devil, and rigorous fasting prepared Christians to endure the torture inflicted in prisons and the arena.²⁰² For those who gained victory, an imperishable crown awaited.

In conclusion, Tertullian equated embracing Catholic Christian discipline with taking up one’s cross and following after Jesus; a true disciple of Christ submitted to the Catholic Church, in contrast to the manifold “Christian” heretical groups permeating the Mediterranean Basin. The disciple accepted the Church’s creed, its traditions and customs, and its devotion and ascetic practices. Above all, he learned to keep the commandments of Christ. The catechumenate ensured that new converts were fully initiated into the Christian discipline.

Moral Formation: Engendering Growth in Character and Acquisition of Virtue

Although it was necessary for the catechumens to experience a heartfelt conversion and to learn the Christian discipline—with its creeds, customs, devotional practices, and new moral rule—perseverance required one more element; character. Without this, many converts might passionately take up the Christian discipline, and be

²⁰⁰ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 3.

²⁰¹ Ibid.; See also Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 13.

baptized, yet fall into apostasy later. Following Jesus also demanded character: “No one is a Christian but he who perseveres even to the end.”²⁰³ Since no one stood beyond the pale of temptations and trials, Tertullian concluded that it should come as no surprise that some men and women forsook the Church.²⁰⁴ Well-developed character in catechumens most effectively countered Post-baptismal apostasy.

Christians could be assured that they would face the temptation to sin or apostatize:

He [the Devil] grieves that that sinner, the servant of Christ, is to judge him and his angels. Therefore, he watches, he attacks, he lays siege, in hope that by some means or other he may be able to strike at his eyes with concupiscence of the flesh or entangle his soul in worldly delights or destroy his faith through a fear of the civil authorities or bring him to deviate from the right way by perverted doctrines. Never is he at a loss for stumbling blocks or temptations.²⁰⁵

Tertullian highlighted four types of temptations awaiting catechumens. First, there existed lusts and desires that well up from within a person, leading him to sin, known as “concupiscence of the flesh.” Concupiscence took many forms: inclinations toward gluttony, drunkenness, fornication and adultery were a few. A second type of temptation was “worldly delights.” These “delights” were those sins condoned by society: the spectacles, brothels, and revelry. Tertullian warned the catechumens that the appeal of pleasure associated with worldly delights was so strong that it often brought about a prolongation of ignorance. Prolonged ignorance created a facility for sin, or a perversion

²⁰² Tertullian, *On Fasting*, 12, 17.

²⁰³ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 3.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰⁵ Tertullian, *On Penitence*, 7.

of conscience, that led to self-deception in catechumens.²⁰⁶ If the catechumen did not renounce worldly delights once for all, he set himself up to be entangled in them another day, potentially forfeiting salvation. Third, Christians faced the danger of deception. Heresy was an obnoxious temptation because it made a false claim to truth. Faithful adherence to the rule of truth and the communion of the apostolic churches proved to be the best means of defending against it. Persecution and martyrdom presented the final and greatest temptation to apostasy. No Christian had to face martyrdom unless he chose to do so because Roman policy tried to force a *denial* of his confession. Thus, the accused had to stand by his confession willingly, even under duress, in order to be martyred.²⁰⁷ Given the severity of the consequences for being a Christian, the accused needed an unbending character to stand by his confession courageously.

Tertullian expected catechumens to be established in character before baptism. Thus, he advocated deferment of baptism “in accordance with a person’s character and attitude, and even age.” Children should not be baptized until it was clear that an “evil disposition” was not going to form in them. Similarly, the unmarrieds were exhorted to delay baptism either until they were married, or until they were “firmly established in continence.”²⁰⁸ To those who administered the sacrament, he charged them not to baptize a “renegade to penitence;” catechumens first had to forsake sin before they could expect

²⁰⁶ Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 1.

²⁰⁷ Tertullian, *Apology*, 49.

²⁰⁸ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18.

to enter the font. Thus, character, transformation of life, and firmness in conviction were expected of catechumens.

Though Tertullian did not describe how he envisioned the catechuminate engendering growth in character, he did indicate that the pursuit of virtue and the practice of asceticism usually resulted in a concomitant improvement in character. Of the virtues, Tertullian emphasized modesty and patience, and of the ascetic practices, he accented fasting and continence.

Tertullian exhorted the catechumens to practice modesty. Modesty was simplicity and humility in appearance, speech and conduct. Thus, gaudy clothes, the vain pursuit of beauty, and anxious desire to please others were to be abandoned. By doing so, the catechumens were forever freed from “slavery to beauty,” aiding in their rejection of the world. Similarly, it helped them joyfully offer their necks to the executioner’s sword since they no longer rejoiced in strings of pearls and emeralds. Modesty stood as a remedy to all the temptations that the Devil could muster, enabling the catechumens to resist his wiles. It was a virtue worth its weight in gold.²⁰⁹

Likewise, Tertullian praised patience.²¹⁰ Patience, at its root, was the ability to endure injury, pain, and loss peacefully. No one braved loss of property indifferently, bore harm without retaliating, or forgave his brother repeatedly, apart from it. The

²⁰⁹ Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 1-13.

²¹⁰ This follows on the assumption that “On Patience” was addressed to catechumens, the opinion of the translators of the treatise. *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 40, translated by Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quin (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1959. Reprint, 1977), 194.

theological virtues, faith, hope and love, depended on it. Like modesty, it provided a remedy against all the Enemy's wiles. The reminder, "be patient, the Lord will give you your reward in its due time," was an effective defense against concupiscence. Moreover, "worldly delights" lost their luster when the soul was reminded patiently to await the glories of the coming Kingdom of God. Most of all, martyrs, enduring the scourges of their torturers, had to exercise patience in order to gain the crown of victory. Thus, cultivation of patience formed a steady character that preserved the soul unto eternal life.²¹¹

If a catechumen's character was largely determined by her constancy in the virtuous life, then fasting and continence provided practical means for augmenting her constancy. Increase in character and virtue came about as a result of human exertion:

Some things...come to us from the divine bounty, and others we have of our own efforts. Those, which are bestowed upon us by the Lord, are governed by His generosity; those, which are achieved by man, are won at the cost of personal endeavor.²¹²

Therefore, Tertullian believed that fasting, continence, and other austerities trained catechumens to face hardships without wavering; their resolve, ability to endure, and willingness to suffer disciplined them. The ascetic practices set them on guard against temptation, whether it came in the form of concupiscence, worldly delights, heresy, or martyrdom, and they prepared them to remain loyal to Christ, faithfully observing the Christian discipline.

²¹¹ Tertullian, *Patience*, 1-16.

²¹² Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 8.

In conclusion, the catechumenate was charged with the responsibility of developing character in converts. Temptations abounded, and the Christian life was treacherous. The Devil sought to ensnare Christians, using the bait of concupiscence, worldly delights, heresy, and persecution. In response, catechumens prepared for the contest. They cultivated the virtues of modesty and patience as a powerful remedy to temptation. Like soldiers and athletes, who do not enter the battlefield or the games without undergoing a regiment of disciplined austerities, catechumens strengthened their resolve and endurance by fasting and practicing continence. Steadfast character laid the foundation for receiving the crown of victory at the end of the race.

CONCLUSION

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. The days of immediate baptism following initial conversion had long since passed away. The Church faced new circumstances requiring an innovative response. Pagan cultural norms pressed Christians to compromise; persecution coerced them into apostasy; and heresy enticed them to defect. Further, the theological climate had changed—the Church was settling in for a longer stay than originally expected; bishops were now the undisputed leaders; and Christians were beginning to permeate society.

Tertullian opted for a delay in baptism, and the development of the catechumenate. He did this for several reasons. First, baptism was regarded as a bilateral covenant between God and humanity. On one side, humans pledged fidelity to Christ and renounced the Devil and all his pomp forever. On the other side, God promised to grant the remission of sins, rebirth, and the Holy Spirit. The catechumenate laid the foundation for Christians to take their oath intelligently. Second, the necessity of repentance for baptism demanded pre-baptismal examination. Repentance required the whole person to turn; a change had to occur not only in the heart, but also in one's conduct. Since only a genuine repentance merited the grace of baptism, catechumens needed to be reminded of their responsibility to repent. Finally, the catechumenate provided the convert an environment for making the transition from pagan society to the Church. Separation from the world and breaking old habits required time and resolve. Similarly, apprenticeship in the Christian discipline and establishment in character needed pastoral oversight and care. The catechumenate met this need.

Tertullian's vision for the catechumenate hinged on his emphasis of human responsibility. Sin was the sole result of human rebellion, and the will was the culprit. Although the Fall had obscured the image of God in humanity, Tertullian contended that it had not destroyed the will's freedom. Adam had chosen to rebel against God in Paradise, and now it was his responsibility to return to God. Thus, repentance, sorrow for sin, fasting, separation from all idolatry, and embracing the Church with its creeds and discipline were necessary to merit the grace of baptism. He knew nothing of the Augustinian ideas of predestination, total depravity and irresistible grace. Grace really *depended* on human response, and the catechumenate sought to ensure that it happened.

In addition, Tertullian's radical Christ-against-culture understanding of the Church colored his perception of the catechumenate. The Church was hostile to everything that pagan society stood for. Pagan religious practices, holidays and festivals, entertainment, and social mores were all rejected. Conversely, The Church espoused an alternative way of living that necessitated an extended period of initiation. The catechumenate was the logical place for this to happen. Further, given the hostility of pagan society to Christian belief and conduct, the Church had to rely entirely on internal resources to carry out the task of Christian formation. Unlike later generations, Christian leaders could not look to the Christian prince for support, and this forced the Church to establish its own system for the inculcation of convictions and conduct. Lastly, because of the danger of martyrdom, austerity marked the North African catechumenate. Fasting, continence, and all-night prayer vigils proliferated from a desire to valiantly face the beasts in the arena. Thus, the counter-cultural, ascetic tenor of the catechumenate was largely a product of an oppressed Church facing potential persecution.

Finally, Tertullian's preoccupation with the holiness of the Church left its imprint on the catechumenate. Christians were obligated to live faithful, sinless lives after baptism. Indeed, no one would see the Kingdom of God without it. Thus, a return to mortal sin amounted to apostasy, and the loss of baptismal grace. In response to Tertullian's ethical concerns, the catechumenate was marked with a sense of seriousness. Earnest pursuit of holiness immediately ensued upon enrollment, and culminated in an oath of faithfulness at baptism. The catechumenate was not to be a period of leisure and joy, but of toil, hardship and rigorous training. Catechumens must be holy.

To conclude, this study raises the question of how theologians in other regions and eras justified the catechumenate. As we have seen, Tertullian's justification for the catechumenate proceeded from his understanding of grace and anthropology, baptism and repentance, the nature of the Church, and the relationship of the Church to culture. How might Origen and Clement of Alexandria, with their warm regard for Greek philosophy, have viewed the catechumenate? How might Augustine, with his emphasis on the priority of grace over human responsibility, have understood the catechumenate? These questions disclose the need for further research into the theological foundations for the catechumenate to gain a comprehensive picture of this institution.

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